

The Buddha's Encounters with Mara the Tempter

Their Representation in Literature and Art

by

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I.

Introduction

In his Dictionary of Paali Proper Names Professor G.P. Malalasekera introduces Maara as "the personification of Death, the Evil One, the Tempter (the Buddhist counterpart of the Devil or Principle of Destruction)." He continues: "The legends concerning Maara are, in the books, very involved and defy any attempts at unraveling them."1

Analyzing a series of allusions to Maara in the commentarial literature, he further elaborates on his definition with the following observations:

- i. "In the latest accounts, mention is made of five Maaras — Khandhamaara, Kilesamaara, Abhisa"nkhaaramaara, Maccumaara, and Devaputtamaara. Elsewhere Maara is spoken of as one, three, or four."2
- ii. "The term Maara, in the older books, is applied to the whole of the worldly existence, the five khandhas, or the realm of rebirth, as opposed to Nibbaana."3
- iii. Commentaries speaking of three Maaras specify them as

Devaputtamaara, Maccumaara, and Kilesamaara. When four Maaras are referred to, they appear to be the five Maaras mentioned in (i) above less Devaputta Maara.

Malalasekera proceeds to attempt "a theory of Maara in Buddhism," which he formulates in the following manner:

"The commonest use of the word was evidently in the sense of Death. From this it was extended to mean 'the world under the sway of death' (also called Maaradheyya, e.g. AN IV 228) and the beings therein. Thence, the kilesas (defilements) also came to be called Maara in that they were instruments of Death, the causes enabling Death to hold sway over the world. All temptations brought about by the kilesas were likewise regarded as the work of Death. There was also evidently a legend of a devaputta of the Vasavatti world called Maara, who considered himself the head of the Kaamaavacara-world [the sensual realm] and who recognized any attempt to curb the enjoyment of sensual pleasures as a direct challenge to himself and to his authority. As time went on these different conceptions of the word became confused one with the other, but this confusion is not always difficult to unravel."4

What follows from this statement, even though Malalasekera did not elucidate enough, is that the term Maara, when it occurs in Buddhist literature, could signify any one of the following four:

- i. An anthropomorphic deity ruling over a heaven in the sensual sphere (kaamaavacara-devaloka), namely, Paranimmita-Vasavatti. He is meant when Maara is called kaamadhaa-turaaja (the king of the sensual realm). In this position, he is as important and prestigious as Sakka and Mahaabrahma in whose company he is often mentioned in the canonical literature. This Maara, or Maaradevaputta, is not only a very powerful deity but is also bent on making life difficult for holy persons.
- ii. The Canon also speaks of (a) Maaras in the plural as a

class of potent deities (e.g. in the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta) and (b) of previous — hence, logically future — Maaras (e.g. in the Maaratajjaniya Sutta). According to Tibetan texts, the Ascetic Siddhartha could have, with the instructions given by AAraa.dakaalaama, become a Sakra, a Brahmaa, or a Maara.⁵

iii. A personification of Death is called also the lord of death (Maccuraaja), the exterminator (Antaka), the great king (mahaaraaja), and the inescapable (Namuci). The preoccupation of the Buddhist quest for deliverance is consistently stressed as escaping the phenomenon of death, which presupposes rebirth. The entire range of existence falls within the realm of Maara (Maaradheyya) on account of the ineluctable presence of death. (Cf. Schopenhauer's concept of "Morture."⁶) All states of existence, including the six heavenly worlds of the sensual sphere, are said to return to the power of Maara, which means into the power of death.⁷

iv. Maara can also be seen as an allegorization, with almost immediate personification, of the power of temptation, the tendency towards evil, moral conflict, and the influence of such factors as indolence, negligence, and niggardliness. Similar to Satan in Judeo-Christian and Islamic thinking and Ahriman in Avestan thought, though in no way identical, this Maara is described as Paapimaa (i.e. the Evil One, or simply the Evil),⁸ Pamattabandhu (Kinsman of Dalliance), Pisu.na (Calumnious or Malicious), and Ka.nha (the Black). Grimm calls this Maara "the prince and bestower of all worldly lust" and distinguishes him from Lucifer of the Bible on the ground that this personification "always remains apparent."⁹

In this paper, where the Buddha's encounters with Maara are analyzed as they are presented in literature and art, the main concern will be with Maara as a personification of temptation (i.e. with (iv)

above), but we will also briefly examine how the other concepts are sometimes subsumed under this, and how the literary description or the artistic representation of Maara is conditioned by the merger of three separate concepts as well as by the general body of Indian mythology. It has to be noted that Maara is another name for the Indian God of Love, known also as Kaama or Kaamadeva (Lust, or God of Lust), Manmatha (Tormentor of Minds), Ana"nga (Bodyless), Kusumaayudha (Flower-weaponed), Pañcabaa.na (Of Five Arrows), and Makaradhvaja (Dragon-flagged).

II.

Maara Legends in Canonical Texts

The Paali Canon includes several accounts attributed to the Buddha himself on his quest for deliverance and these have obviously provided the raw material for the reconstruction of his biography. Among them, the most comprehensive as regards the details of the discipline and training which the Buddha followed is the Mahaasaccaka Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaaya (No. 36). It elaborates the circumstances leading to the renunciation, the Great Departure, as the term Abhinikkhamana is usually translated; the period of studentship under AA.laara Kaalaama and Uddaka Raamaputta; the austerities he practiced for six years; the process of meditation and contemplation and the progressive spiritual attainments; and the final achievement of Enlightenment. The entire statement has a ring of authenticity — a purposeful recollection of the highlights of his life and career. But, as E.J. Thomas has pointed out, "the most remarkable feature in this recital is the entire absence of any temptation by Maara."[10](#)

The same comment would also apply to the Bhayabherava Sutta (No. 4 of the Majjhima Nikaaya), where the Buddha recounts the

doubts and fears which he encountered in the days of his austerities in the forest. Nor does the Dvedhaavitakka Sutta (No. 19) of the same Nikaaya, which analyzes the Buddha's thought process prior to the Enlightenment and how it led to his Enlightenment, digress from the philosophical treatment of the theme to refer to temptations by Maara. Thomas's explanation is "that later authorities put additional events in different places."[11](#) But a more reasonable explanation, to my mind, is that poetical imagery or allegorization is more the domain of poetry and hence not to be expected in prose sermons. That is precisely why almost all the accounts of Maara's temptations in the Paali Canon are in verse, fully or partially, and the conversations with Maara invariably are recorded in verse.

The most important among them is the Padhaana Sutta in the Suttanipata (vv. 425 ff.) of the Khuddaka Nikaaya. Here, Maara is presented as Namuci and described as a person who approached the striving Bodhisatta speaking kind words (*karu.na.m vaaca.m bhaasamaano*). The words attributed to him are as follows:

"O you are thin and you are pale,
And you are in death's presence too;
A thousand parts are pledged to death,
But life still holds one part of you.
Live, Sir! Life is the better way;
You can gain merit if you live,
Come, live the Holy Life and pour
Libations on the holy fires,
And thus a world of merit gain.
What can you do by struggling now?
The path of struggling too is rough
And difficult and hard to bear."[12](#)

The reply which the Buddha gave Maara has the makings of the entire concept of the allegorization or personification of temptation

and psychological conflict. We find here all the ingredients which, in course of time, fired the imagination of countless writers, poets, painters, and sculptors all over Asia for over two millennia.[13](#)

The Buddha recognizes the speaker of these "kind" words and is conscious of Maara's hidden agenda. So he rebukes him as Pamattabandhu (the Friend of Heedlessness), Paapimaa (the Evil One), and Ka.nha (the Black One). The hosts of Maara are also identified:

"Your first squadron is Sense-Desires,
Your second is called Boredom, then
Hunger and Thirst compose the third,
And Craving is the fourth in rank,
The fifth is Sloth and Torpor
While Cowardice lines up as sixth,
Uncertainty is seventh, the eighth
Is Malice paired with Obstinacy;
Gain, Honor and Renown, besides,
And ill-won Notoriety,
Self-praise and Denigrating Others:
These are your squadrons, Namuci."[14](#)

Although the numbering of the "hosts" stops at eight, two more sets are identifiable. Thus the concept of ten "hosts" has also been established. Similarly conceived is Maara riding an elephant (savaahana), which could, of course, mean any ride — elephant, horse, or chariot — and arrayed for war with an army all around (samantaa dhajini.m disvaa).

The Buddha himself announces his readiness to give battle:

"None but the brave will conquer them
To gain bliss by the victory..."

Better I die in battle now
Than choose to live on in defeat...

I sally forth to fight, that I
May not be driven forth from my post." [15](#)

The Buddha's squadrons, however, are not named; but earlier, in listing the psychological defenses he possessed against Maara's "kind" persuasive words, the Buddha had said:

"For I have faith (saddhaa) and energy (viriya)
And I have wisdom (pañña) too."

Further to underline the psychological dimension of the battle, as conceived in this context, the Buddha proceeds to tell Maara:

"Your serried squadrons, which the world
With all its gods cannot defeat,
I shall now break with wisdom
As with a stone a clay pot." [16](#)

One element, however, is still not evident: Maara does not claim the seat on which the Bodhisatta is seated, and hence the need to call as witness the earth (or the earth-goddess, as the later versions have it) has not arisen. It may, nevertheless, be noted that the Buddha's reply assumes an effort on the part of Maara and his hosts to dislodge him from his position:

"I sally forth to fight, that I
May not be driven from my post
(Maa ma.m .thaanaa acaavayi)."

On the other hand, a further reason is given for the Buddha's determination to fight:

"From land to land I shall wander,

Training disciples far and wide."

This implies a further element in the legends of Maara's temptations, which are found in canonical texts as well as elsewhere relating to the obstacles he had tried to place on the Buddha's advent into his mission as a teacher.

Another pointer in the Padhaana Sutta to other legends is contained in the last three verses, which speak of a later encounter of Maara with the Buddha. Though Chalmers interprets this passage as a statement addressed to the Buddha,¹⁷ the accusative case Gotama.m in verse 24 indicates that it need not be so construed. Here, Maara says:

"For seven years I pursued the Buddha at every step
Yet with the wakeful Buddha I got no chance.
As a crow that hopped around a fat-colored stone
Thinking 'we may find a tender delicacy'
Flies away in disappointment
In disgust I give up Gotama."¹⁸

The final verse of the sutta, which tradition assigns to the Buddha but which appears from the contents to be of much later origin than verses 1-20, shows the degree to which the personification of Maara had developed. Here, he is called 'dummano yakkho,' a "disappointed sprite" (N.B. not Vasavatti-Maara, the devaputta) and is said to be so frustrated that his lute drops from his armpit. We shall return later to the implications of this reference to Maara as yakkha.

Altogether absent from the Padhaana Sutta is the episode with the daughters of Maara, who are elsewhere represented as tempting the Buddha with their charms after their father with all his hosts had failed. This story (SN 1 124ff.), along with several others, occurs in the Maara-sa.myutta of the Sa.myutta Nikaaya. The majority of these

episodes do not fall within the category of temptations by Maara. They reflect mostly the hostility which Maara had to the Buddha's mission and consist largely of disturbances he had created in different guises — making noises, breaking things, disrupting sermons. It is Maara preventing the people from getting out of his clutches in the sense of escaping from Maaradheyya. These, therefore, do not come in the category of temptations, the topic of this paper.

The Maara-sa.myutta, comprising twenty-five suttas, does contain a number of temptations in which the Buddha or a disciple is involved. Sutta No. 1 (SN I 103) speaks of a moment when Maara became aware of a thought of the Buddha as regards his attainment of Enlightenment and approached him saying:

"You have forsaken the ascetic path
By means of which men purify themselves;
You are not pure, you fancy you are pure,
The path of purity is far from you." [19](#)

In another sutta (No. 13, SN I 110), when the Buddha was in pain on account of a foot injury, Maara addressed him in verse:

"What, are you stupefied, that you lie down?
Or else entranced by some poetic flight?
Are there not many aims you still must serve?
Why do you dream away intent on sleep
Alone in your secluded dwelling place?" [20](#)

Again, Sutta No. 20 (SN I 116) records an instance when the Buddha was debating in his mind whether it was possible to govern without killing and ordering execution, without confiscating and sequestering, without sorrowing and inflicting sorrow, in other words, righteously. Maara is said to have approached the Buddha and persuaded him to govern righteously. Apparently, the temptation

here was for the Buddha to revert to lay life and resume a royal career so as to rescue those suffering from the cruelty of rulers.[21](#)

In each of these cases, the Buddha gives an apt reply, which convinces Maara that he has been recognized. Each discovery is concluded with the statement, "Sad and disappointed, Maara vanished."

The Bhikkhu.nii-sa.myutta (SN I 128ff.), in particular, gives ten similar accounts of temptations which bhikkhuniis had experienced in lonely places. Here, too, the statements, attributed to Maara or the bhikkhunii concerned, and often both, are in verse. For example, it was Kisaagotamii who was addressed thus by Maara:

"How now? Do you sit alone with tearful face
As mother stricken by the loss of child?
You who have plunged into the woods alone,
Is it a man that you have come to seek?"[22](#)

She gives a reply. Maara knows that he has been found out and — as in the case of all similar episodes — vanishes from the place, unhappy and despondent. (Therigaathaa 182ff., 189, 196ff. contain similar dialogues with Maara.)

Into this same pattern falls the episode narrated in the Mahaavagga of the Vinaya Pi.taka (Vin I 20f.). When the Buddha was alone after he had sent out the first sixty disciples on missions to propagate the doctrine, Maara approached him saying:

"Bound art thou by all the snares,
Both those of devas and of men,
In great bondage art thou bound,
Recluse, you won't be freed from me."

The Buddha bluntly contradicts him and Maara disappears.

The recurring idea behind all these episodes is that doubts, anxieties,

and longings which arise in the lonely mind of the Buddha or a disciple are personified as Maara. With a firm resolve, they vanish, and that is what Maara's disappearance signifies.

Very different from all these suttas is the Maaradhiitu Sutta (SN I 124ff.; No. 25), which starts with the story of the Padhaana Sutta and continues to describe how the vanquished Maara "sat down cross-legged on the ground not too far from the Blessed One, silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum, with nothing to say, scraping the ground with a reed." The way the story is connected with the preceding sutta gives the impression that this incident takes place seven years after the Enlightenment, when all the efforts of Maara to discover the Buddha heedless had failed. The daughters of Maara inquire about their father's despondency and receive the reply:

"An Arahant sublime is in the world;
And when a man escapes from Maara's sphere
There are no wiles to lure him back again
By lust, and that is why I grieve so much."

What follows is pure allegory. The three daughters have apt names: Ta.nhaa (Craving), Arati (Boredom), and Ragaa (Lechery). They conspire and, on the principle that "men's tastes vary," assume forms ranging from those of virgins to mature women. They display wiles by which any ordinary man's "heart would have burst or hot blood would have gushed from his mouth, or he would have gone mad or crazy or he would have shriveled, dried up, and withered like a cut green rush." Unmoved by all their charms and wiles, the Buddha rejects them with a series of well-chosen similes:

"Fools, you have tried to split a rock
By poking it with lily stems;
To dig a hill out with your nails;
To chew up iron with your teeth;

To find a footing on a cliff
With a great stone upon your head;
To push a tree down with your chest."23

What all these Maara legends in the canonical texts establish beyond any doubt is that the allegorization of temptations had commenced very early in Buddhist circles. The imagery of a personified Maara accompanied by a tenfold army and supported by three daughters could even have originated with the Buddha himself. As suggestive imagery, it must have epitomized what most of the Buddha's disciples and followers had subjectively experienced "with wavering faith" when "the sweet delights of home and love, the charms of wealth and power, began to show themselves with attractive colors."24 While they were perpetuated in poetry, no one took them literally. As Malalasekera says with reference to the Buddha's victory over Maara, "That this account of Buddha's struggle with Maara is literally true, none but the most ignorant of the Buddhists believe, even at the present day."25

But that does not mean there had been no confusion. With the four concepts of Maara, outlined in the introduction to this paper, such confusions were quite commonplace. For example, even Buddhaghosa could not distinguish between the allegorical Maara and the Maaradevaputta. With regard to the seven year surveillance of the Buddha by Maara in No. 24 of the Maara-samyutta, he says that Maaradevaputta, having failed to see any lapse on the part of the Buddha over this period, came to him and worshipped him. Despite the lack of clarity, Maara was already a full-fledged concept by the time the Paali Canon was completed in its present form.

III.

Temptations by Maara in Non-canonical Buddhist Literature

As the biography of the Buddha came to be presented systematically, temptations by Maara began to figure as a major element in relation to several decisive steps taken by the Buddha. A number of such occasions representing critical points in the career before and immediately after the Enlightenment had been identified by the time the introduction to the Jaataka Commentary was composed.

This introduction, which contains perhaps the oldest continuous life story of the Buddha, mentions six such occasions:

- i. At the time of the renunciation, when Maara is represented as trying to persuade the future Buddha to return home on the ground that he would, in seven days, become a universal monarch (cakkavatti mahaaraaja).
- ii. During the period of austerity, when the future Buddha was in a very weak condition and Maara approached urging him to give up the struggle.
- iii. On the eve of the attainment of Buddhahood, when Maara is said to have come with his hosts and challenged the future Buddha's right to his seat. This is the occasion of the great victory over Maara symbolizing the Enlightenment.
- iv. During the fourth week after the Enlightenment, when Maara is presented discouraging the Buddha from preaching: "If you have realized the safe path to immortality, go your way alone by yourself. Why do you want to admonish others?" It is when Maara failed in this effort that his three daughters, Ta.nhaa, Arati, and Ragaa stepped in.[26](#)
- v. Just after the first sixty disciples were sent out on missions, when Maara is shown trying to convince the Buddha that he had really not attained liberation.
- vi. Just before the Buddha met the thirty Bhaddavaggiya

young men, when Maara is presented again as challenging the Buddha's Enlightenment.

It should be noted that other encounters individually described in the Maara-samyutta are not included in this list, possibly because they were not connected with any important event or decision in the life of the Buddha. Also to be stressed is the fact that the list is at variance with the information given elsewhere in the Paali Canon.

Not all biographies of the Buddha agree with this list, or with the timing of the encounters, or with the words or actions attributed to Maara. The Lalitavistara, though a later Buddhist Sanskrit work, appears to have been based either on the introduction to the Jaataka Commentary or on an earlier source. As such, the divergences other than in regard to poetic exaggerations and greater emphasis on the supernatural aspects are minimal. One important variation in the Lalitavistara is that "Maara, the wicked one, closely followed the Bodhisattva for six years as he was practicing austerities seeking and pursuing an entrance." Such a long period of surveillance suggests the function of Maaradevaputta (i.e. a living being such as a deity) rather than an encounter explainable in allegorical terms. Another departure is that the daughters of Maara try to tempt the Buddha under the Bodhi-tree, and their names are Rati, Arati, and Tis.naa.²⁷ Whereas the Paali sources say that the vanquished Maara drew lines on the ground with a stick or a reed, the Lalitavistara states that Maara wrote the words "the ascetic Gotama will escape from my realm."

The version which reveals some very significant departures is the life of the Buddha recorded in the Tibetan texts. As far as Rockhill's selective translation of the relevant material in the Dulva shows, five points have to be noted:

- i. Maara has made no effort to dissuade the future Buddha at the time of his renunciation.

- ii. As the hour of Enlightenment approached, Maara went to the future Buddha saying, "Devadatta has subdued Kapilavastu; he has seized the palace and has crushed the Saakyas." He had also caused apparitions of Yasodharaa, Migajaa,[28](#) Gopaa, Devadatta, and other Saakyas to appear. What followed was only an argument in which Maara failed to convince the future Buddha. Apparently, the imagery of a great war ending with victory over Maara does not figure in this account.
- iii. When Maara failed to prevail, his daughters, who are differently named as Desire, Pleasure, and Delight, tried all their allurements in vain.
- iv. When the Enlightenment was attained, Maara's bow and standard fell from his grasp and all his cohorts, a million and thirty-six thousand in number, fled, filled with dismay.
- v. When the Buddha was suffering from a colic after partaking of the honey offered by the two merchants, Maara informs the Buddha that it was time to die. But the Buddha indicates his intention to live until the faith is well founded.[29](#)

The Chinese Abhiniskrama.na Suutra has a few more variations. For instance, it says that Maara brought a bundle of official notices purporting to be from Saakya princes to dissuade the future Buddha from continuing with his quest for deliverance.[30](#)

Whether as a conscious effort in rationalizing this diversity of information or as a result of concentrating on the most dramatic instances when the Buddha encountered temptations, three events gained in popularity: namely, the Renunciation or Great Departure; the Victory over Maara, described either as Maaravijaya or Maarayuddha (Vanquishing of Maara, or the Battle with Maara); and the Temptation by Maara's daughters. Each incident acquired embellishments at the hands of poets and creative writers until by about the first century B.C. a number of elements had firmly taken root:

- i. Renunciation: Maara appears in the air and talks of the imminent receipt by the future Buddha of the gem-set wheel of Universal Monarchy. When rejected, Maara disappears vowing to keep an eye on him like an omnipresent shadow. When the future Buddha wishes to turn back and see his city, the earth obliges by turning itself around like a potter's wheel.
- ii. Victory over Maara: Maara rides the elephant called Girimekhalaa and assaults the future Buddha along with ten squadrons or "hosts"; Maara assumes a fearsome guise with a thousand arms; his army too assumes fearsome forms and makes eerie noises to generate fear; rain, hail, showers of fire, thunder, and an earthquake are also used in the process; his final weapon is his disc which fails to harm the future Buddha; Maara's last step is to challenge the future Buddha's right to the seat on which he is seated; the earth is summoned as a witness; the earth quakes and Maara and his hosts run in disarray. Maara is dejected and begins to draw lines or scribble on the ground.
- iii. Temptation by Maara's daughters: They are three in number; they seek to lure the Buddha some time after his Enlightenment; they use dance, song, music, and sweet talk as their arsenal to generate lust in the Buddha's mind; the Buddha shows not the slightest interest; they fail.

These basic elements are observable both in literature and art. The second and the third have, of course, become more popular as themes for graphic description in prose or verse as well as for imaginative representation in sculpture and painting.

Among the earliest poems on these themes is Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita* (circa 2nd century A.C.), which devotes two chapters to the Victory over Maara (Chapter 13) and the Temptation by Maara's daughters (Chapter 15). Already new elements had begun to appear. Maara comes not only with three daughters (named here Rati, Priiti, and Tis.naa) but also with three sons — Vibrama

(Confusion), Harsa (Gaiety), and Darpa (Pride). Of course, Maara himself is represented as an enemy of the perfect Dharma (Saddharmaripu) and is actually called Kaamadeva, the God of Love:

"He whom they call in the world Kaamadeva, the owner of the various weapons, the flower-arrowed, the lord of the course of desire — it is he whom they also style Maara, the enemy of liberation."[31](#)

In the typical style of this Indian Cupid, the first weapons used are the five flower-arrows. When they fail, Maara thinks: "He is not worthy of my flowershaft nor my arrow 'gladdener,' nor the sending of my daughter Rati (to tempt him); he deserves the alarms and rebukes and blows from all the gathered hosts of demons." Thus he summoned his army of animal-faced and hideous monsters, which Asvaghosha describes conjuring many a grotesque appearance. Their collective assault on the future Buddha finds lively description in as many as twenty-three verses. The reaction of the future Buddha is his resolute steadfastness and an admonition to Maara to desist from his futile effort:

"Give not way, then, to grief but put on calm, let not your greatness, O Maara, be mixed with pride; it is not well to be confident — fortune is unstable — why do you accept a position on a tottering base?"[32](#)

The description of the encounter ends with the following four verses:

70. Having listened to his words, and having seen the unshaken firmness of the great saint, Maara departed dispirited and broken in purpose with those very arrows by which, O world, you are smitten in your heart;

71. With their triumph at an end, their labor all fruitless, and all their stones, straw, and trees thrown away, that host of his fled in all directions, like some hostile army when its camp has been destroyed by the enemy.

72. When the flower-armed god thus fled away vanquished with his hostile forces and the passionless sage remained victorious, having conquered all the power of darkness, the heavens shone out with the moon like a maiden with a smile, and a sweet-smelling shower of flowers fell down wet with dew.

73. When the wicked one thus fled vanquished, the different regions of the sky grew clear, the moon shone forth, showers of flowers fell down from the sky upon the earth and the night gleamed out like a spotless maiden.[33](#)

There is no reference to either the ten squadrons of Maara or the matching armies, in the form of the recollection of the Ten Perfections (Paaramitaa) by the future Buddha. Nor is the question of the right to the seat raised or the earth summoned as a witness.

As writer after writer vied with one another to present the momentous struggle of the Buddha in his endeavor to attain Enlightenment, new details were added and new imagery created. Right down to the modern writers and poets in Buddhist countries, particularly Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand, the process has continued. The license which they continue to exercise is an indication, by itself, that what is elaborated is an allegory, a symbolic representation of an inner conflict and crisis, and not an historical event. The writers or the artists are not meddling with facts and misrepresenting history but are sharpening their own conception and appreciation of the most critical experience of a man who transcended himself.

Asvaghosha takes up the episode of Maara's daughters in Chapter 15. The Buddha has passed four weeks since the Enlightenment and Maara comes to him saying, "O holy one, be pleased to enter Nirvaana, your desires are accomplished." The Buddha's response being negative, Maara becomes despondent and the daughters take upon themselves the task of luring the Buddha. What follows, in

contrast to the Victory over Maara, is a tame dialogue between the Buddha and each of the daughters. The whole theme is disposed of in twelve verses and the girls end up by professing to be the Buddha's disciples.

This episode, too, underwent embellishment and elaboration. Earlier Paali sources as well as the Lalitavistara had given an indication of the potential which the theme has both in descriptive poetry and graphic art. Poets in several languages have succeeded in conjuring up scenes of singing and dancing of three damsels in seductive postures.

According to the tenets of Oriental poetry, a great poem has to evoke a range of emotions among which heroism and eroticism have been especially sought after. The Victory over Maara and the Temptation by Maara's daughters provided the basis for many a creative effort, in rendering a more balanced character, in terms of the tenets of ornate poetry, to poems on the Buddha which could otherwise be humdrum or deeply philosophical. Whether this was permissible had been a question which the Buddhist writers had grappled with from the days of Asvaghosha. But the fact that the themes have been widely, if not entirely, viewed as symbolic and allegorical have all alone ensured a very high degree of liberty in artistic expression. This is what the far-flung representations of these themes in sculpture and painting demonstrate even more convincingly.

IV.

Maara Episodes in Asian Buddhist Art

Even before the Buddha came to be represented in human form, the Great Departure and Victory over Maara had become popular themes depicted at both Sanchi and Amaravati.

Sculptures on the gateways of the Great Stupa at Sanchi (first

century B.C.) include a scene of the Great Departure³⁴ and two scenes of Maara's Assault (north gateway) and Defeat (west gateway).³⁵ A riderless horse (repeated four times) represents the future Buddha (symbolized by the royal parasol) leaving the city in the company of countless gods in a mood of jubilation. None of the figures can, however, be identified as Maara. Apparently, the panel does not represent Maara's temptation. But, as described in the *Lalitavistara* and Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita*, the horse is borne on the hands of yaksas or deities.

In the panels depicting the assault and defeat of Maara, the future Buddha is represented by an empty seat under the Bodhi-tree. Maara himself is shown in one as a stately figure, a veritable god, reflecting Asvaghosa's identification of Maara as Kaamadeva, the Indian God of Love. This figure is characteristically handsome, whereas his hosts in both panels are grotesque in size and appearance.

In the assault scene, they make hideous faces and are apparently jeering and shouting. In the defeat scene they are despondent and retreating in disarray. As Maara's hosts retreat on the right-hand half of the panel, the rejoicing deities are shown approaching the Bodhi-tree from the left. Apparently, it is Maara who, with bow in hand, rides the elephant. In neither is there any overt depiction of the temptation by Maara's daughters, unless the two female figures at the left-hand corner of the assault scene are meant to suggest it; but this appears most unlikely.

Among the Amaravati sculptures of the second century A.C. are two scenes depicting the Great Departure³⁶ and Maara's Assault.³⁷ In the first, a riderless horse, above whom is held the royal insignia of a parasol, is carried on the hands of squatting dwarf figures. Here, again, the encounter with Maara is not represented. With the characteristic phenomenon of *horror vacui* in the sculptures of this period, the panel is crowded with rejoicing deities, one of them in a

dancing pose. Even in the damaged state, the panel on Maara's Assault gives the impression of the dynamism that the sculptor had intended to convey. The hosts of Maara are depicted with various weapons raised ready to attack, while Maara himself appears to be the seated figure to the left of the empty seat under the Bodhi-tree. Here too Maara is a handsome god in princely attire. This panel seems to combine synoptically three events: the Assault, the Defeat of Maara, and the Temptation by Maara's daughters: note the dancing figure on the right.

It is in Gandhara art that we notice a further development of the two themes and the emergence of the scene depicting the Temptation by Maara's daughters. A sculpture in the Lahore Museum³⁸ shows the future Buddha riding a horse. Around him are depicted two of the four sights which prompted the renunciation: namely, old age and death. A princely figure with a halo, standing in the left corner of the panel, could be Maara, and the wheel-like object at the right upper corner could be the symbol of Universal Monarchy, of which Maara apprised the future Buddha. The scene includes symbolically a third element, the role of the earth, represented as a female figure emerging from the ground, in enabling the future Buddha to take a last look at his city without turning back. Not only do we see here the story of the Great Departure in all its traditional details, but also the continuing representation of Maara as a devaputta. The halo here is particularly suggestive. Another fragment of a Gandhara sculpture appears to be a Great Departure panel.³⁹ Here, again, the earth-goddess emerges from the ground and bears upon her shoulders the feet of the horse. The two standing figures have been identified by Grunwedel as guards. But there is also the likelihood that the one in front with the bow in hand is Maara. Hence this panel, too, might be a representation of this encounter.

The representation of Maara in Gandhara sculpture has been discussed at length by Grunwedel. He says: "Maara rarely if ever

appears in Buddhist sculptures except in the representations of the temptation scene... Though different sculptors may have taken their own ways of representing Maara, still there was a fixed type also for this deva. He appears, at a later date, in full festal attire, youthful in figure, with bow and arrow... His attributes, bow and arrow and Makara, suggest that there is some connection with Greek Eros."[40](#)

He had further attempted to identify as Maara a figure, earlier considered to be Devadatta, in a sculpture depicting the Kaasyapa legend, which is now in the Lahore Museum.[41](#) This figure occurs in another sculpture in the Lahore Museum, which depicts the hosts of Maara.[42](#) An Indianized version of the figure appears in the relief from Loriyan Tangai in the Calcutta Museum.[43](#)

Two Gandhara sculptures of Maara's Assault show further developments in the treatment of the subject. In the Mardan sculpture (now in the Peshawar Museum)[44](#) the characteristic posture of touching the earth in summoning it to witness (i.e. *bhumi-sparsa-mudra*) has already come into existence and the defeat of Maara's host is symbolized by a crouching and a wailing figure (reduced in scale) in front of the future Buddha. The sculpture at the Boston Fine Arts Museum[45](#) depicts in great detail the symbolic crouching and falling figures.

The exact composition and details of Gandhara art, with pronouncedly Indian countenances, are to be found in the later sculptures of Amaravati and Nagarjunikonda. But the temptation scene of Maara's daughters gradually asserts a prominence in artistic representation. The defeated hosts of Maara depicted in reduced scale crouching in front of the Buddha's seat[46](#) are overshadowed by the dancing female figures in the seductive "half bent" pose (*ardhabha*"nga). (See the upper frieze of the slab depicting the stupa at Amaravati.[47](#))

The finest combination of the attack by the hideous hosts of Maara

and the temptation by Maara's daughters is to be found in Ajanta (c. 600 A.C.), both in a painting in Cave 1 and in a sculptured version in Cave 26.[48](#) Apart from their artistic merits the composition has demonstrated how this could be extended to massive dimensions. Examples come from far-flung places like Tun-huang in China[49](#) and Dambulla[50](#) and Hindagala[51](#) in Sri Lanka. At Dambulla the entire ceiling of the largest cave is devoted to the theme of Maara's Assault, bringing together many characteristics that had been progressively incorporated in the artistic representation of this event.

A curiously interesting piece of art comes from Qyzyl in Chinese Turkistan.[52](#) A fresco depicting how the death of the Buddha was announced to King Ajaatasattu shows a painting on cloth of major events in the Buddha's life. On the left upper corner is Maara's Assault, represented in miniature with tremendous economy of space and figures but with a telling effect. In a tenth century fresco of Tun-huang[53](#) is a highly Sinocized version of Maara's Assault, but Maara's hosts have been represented as described in literature. The two fully dressed Chinese damsels standing by the seat of the future Buddha could be two of Maara's daughters. If they are in the process of luring the ascetic, they seem to be doing so only by song! The imposing figure of a Chinese warlord, standing behind them, could be Maara himself.

In Borobudur,[54](#) we see the continuation of the Indian tradition of sculpture, and the panels depicting Maara's Assault and the Temptation by Maara's daughters reflect the Lalitavistara accounts most faithfully. Of special interest is the representation of Maara with his thousand arms, wielding a bow. The theme persists in Southeast Asia. From Angkor Thom[55](#) comes a relief which depicts not an attack on the person of the future Buddha as elsewhere, but a war between two armies: the hosts of Maara pitted against the army of paaramitaas of the Buddha. A book cover[56](#) from Nepal depicts the daughters of Maara in demure poses and a wood carving of the

16th century⁵⁷ shows the future Buddha in the bhuumi-sparsa-mudraa, the earth-touching posture, surrounded by the hosts of Maara.

In a gradual process to abstract representation of Maara's Assault, the bhuumi-sparsa-mudraa becomes a short-hand way of recalling the event. From Pagan⁵⁸ comes an example where the additional element of the Temptation by Maara's daughters is portrayed discreetly on the pedestal with three dancing girls and two playing musical instruments. Perhaps the same interpretation would apply to the Naalandaa sculpture in which three female figures on the pedestal have grotesque faces, possibly suggesting the association of Maara as a yaksa or demon.⁵⁹ But the three female figures do not appear in all cases. The Buddha statue in the earth-touching posture (as in the case of the one from Bihar of the 8th or 9th century)⁶⁰ ultimately becomes identified as one of the Dhyani Buddhas of the Mahaayaana tradition with the specific name Aksobhya, meaning imperturbable — an instance where the quality of steadfastness which the temptations of Maara brought out in the Buddha becomes personified as a separate entity.⁶¹

Just as the mode of presentation of the Temptation scenes underwent change over the centuries, the concept of Maara too changed in the eyes of the people. As late as the eleventh century, Sri Lankan Buddhists — as seen from a representation of vanquished and retreating Maara in the murals of the Mahiyangana Stupa relic chamber — seemed to have considered Maara to be a devaputta, a god.⁶² But as time went on, he came to be depicted exactly like his hideous-looking hosts and his god-like appearance was replaced by what was traditionally ascribed to a yaksa or demon.⁶³ This change is further seen on the cover of an ola book which depicts Maara not in a temptation scene but in a Jaataka.⁶⁴ The prevalence of this concept is further attested by examples from Thailand where a picture of the Great Departure drawn in the eighteenth century

represents Maara as a demon.⁶⁵ The final evolution of Maara's transformation may perhaps be seen in the Tibetan Yamaantaka, who is iconographically represented as a fierce looking demon with multiple arms.⁶⁶

Chapter Conclusion

V

This examination reveals that the temptations of Maara as allegorical representations of the mental torment, conflict, and crisis experienced by the Buddha as well as his disciples are as old as Buddhism itself and the imagery could have originated in the Buddha's own graphic poetical expressions. The early compilers of the life of the Buddha did not make a conscious effort to deal systematically with individually recorded instances of such temptations. As such, there is a fair amount of confusion as regards the nature and the timing of the related events. Eventually, however, the Great Departure, the Victory over Maara, and the Temptation by Maara's daughters came to be singled out for detailed treatment in literature and art. Embellishments and variations were freely allowed according to the writer's or artist's conception of the situation, as the allegorical aspect was considered the more significant. The historical or factual aspect of the related events was secondary and the diversity of presentation made a definite contribution to the enrichment of both literary and artistic creativity.

What both literature and art show very clearly is that Maara's personality as conceived by Buddhist writers and artists underwent a marked change with the spread of Buddhist culture. In India, in earlier times, Maara was yet a devaputta, in fact the handsome God of Love with all his traditional characteristics. Later on, closer to modern times, in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and

Indonesia, he becomes more and more pronouncedly demonic.

This analysis has been limited to those of Maara's encounters with the Buddha which have a predominant character of temptation, i.e. where Maara is allegorized and personified. Other aspects of Maara as a devaputta and a personification of death await similar analysis. An effort made in this direction could be invaluable especially to answer the many questions which Malalasekera had raised in his article in the Dictionary of Paali Proper Names.[67](#)

Notes

[1.](#) G.P. Malalasekera, Dictionary of Pali Proper Names (1937: reprint Luzac, London, 1960), 2:611.

[2.](#) Ibid. The five terms mean: Maara as the five aggregates, Maara as the defilements, Maara as kammic constructions, Maara as Death, and Maara as a young deity. (Ed.)

[3.](#) Malalasekera., 2:612.

[4.](#) Ibid., 2:613.

[5.](#) W.W. Rockhill, The Life of the Buddha and the Early History of His Order — derived from the Tibetan Works in Bkash-hgyur and Bstan-hgyur (1884: reprint Orientalia Indica, Delhi, 1972), p.27.

[6.](#) George Grimm, The Doctrine of the Buddha: The Religion of Reason and Meditation (Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1958), p.98.

[7.](#) Bhikkhunii-sa.myutta, No. 7 (SN I 133).

[8.](#) Grimm, p.331.

[9.](#) Ibid.

[10.](#) E.J. Thomas, The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 3rd ed., 1949), p.68. See too MN Suttas No. 26 (Ariyapariyesana), No. 85 (Bodhiraajakumaara),

and No. 100 (Sa"ngaarava).

11. Ibid., p.68.

12. Bhikkhu Ñaa.namoli, The Life of the Buddha (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1972), p.19.

13. Malalasekera, 2:615: "Hence we have practically all the elements in the later elaborated versions."

14. Ñaa.namoli, p.20. (In line 5, "Sloth and Accidy" has been amended by me to "Sloth and Torpor.")

15. Ibid., p.20.

16. Ibid., p.21. I read the third line, ta.m te paññaaya bhecchaami. The reading gacchaami is preferred by Helmer Smith, who also suggests vechchaami (from the root vyadh).

17. Lord Chalmers, Buddha's Teachings being the Sutta Nipaata or Discourse Collection (Harvard Oriental Series, Cambridge, 1932), pp.104-105.

18. Ibid., p.105.

19. Ñaa.namoli, p.36.

20. Ibid., p.263.

21. Malalasekera, 2:617.

22. Maurice Winternitz, A History of Indian Literature, Vol. II (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1983), p.56.

23. Ñaa.namoli, p.64.

24. From Rhys Davids' article on Buddha in Encyclopaedia Britannica, quoted in Malalasekera, 2:615.

25. Ibid., 2:614.

26. Compare with Maara-sa.myutta Nos. 24-25 where this event is said to have taken place seven years after the Enlightenment. Asvaghosa in his Buddha-carita (Chap. XV) dates it in the fourth

week, as does the Aviduure Nidaana of the Jaataka.

27. Spence Hardy and Bigandet, basing their works on Sinhala and Burmese traditions, have these names as Ta.nhaa, Rati, and Ra"nga; Rockhill, p.31.

28. Migajaa is the name in Sanskrit sources for Kisaagotamii of the Paali sources. It is she who uttered the lines 'Nibbutaa nuuna saa maataa'.

29. Rockhill, pp.27-34.

30. Samuel Beal, The Romantic Legend of Sakya Buddha (London, 1875), p.207.

31. E.B. Cowell (tr.), The Buddhacarita or Life of Buddha by Asvaghosa (Cosmo, New Delhi, 1977) p.137.

32. Ibid., p.146.

33. Ibid., p.147.

34. Anil de Silva-Vigier, The Life of the Buddha retold from Ancient Sources (Phaidon, London, 1955), plate 69. The riderless horses (four moving towards the right and one moving in the opposite direction) represent action as is usual in the synoptic technique of storytelling in ancient Buddhist sculpture. The horses going to the right are represented as carrying the Bodhisatta, whose presence is symbolized by a royal parasol held above them. The returning horse is led by a sorrowing Channa.

35. Heinrich Zimmer, The Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformation (Bollingen Series No. 29; Pantheon, New York, 1955), plate 12, north gate rear view central architrave; Anil de Silva-Vigier, plate 69. The majestic seated figure (slightly off the centre to the left) could be that of Maara, conceived, as Asvaghosa did, as the Indian God of Love. This panel depicts the Assault and is dated by some art critics to the early first century B.C. The scene of Maara's Defeat is found on the west gateway. Sir John Marshall, The

Buddhist Art of Gandhaara (Department of Archaeology of Pakistan, Cambridge, 1960), fig. 7. Maara could be the figure on the elephant holding a bow — again symbolizing the God of Love by his traditional weapon.

36. Zimmer, plate 89.

37. Ibid., plate 88.

38. A. Grunwedel, *Buddhist Art in India* (London, 1901), p.98; illustration 50.

39. Ibid., p.99; illustration 51.

40. Ibid., pp.92, 94.

41. Ibid., p.88; fig. 5 in illustration 42.

42. Ibid., p.96; illustration 48.

43. Ibid., p.101; illustration 53.

44. Marshall, plate 43; fig. 67.

45. Ibid., plate 44; fig. 68.

46. Zimmer, plate 92 (b). Note the lower square represents the Great Departure. See also *The Way of the Buddha* (Government of India, Delhi, 1955), plate 52 (Nagarjunikonda).

47. Ibid., plate 96. In both examples from Amaravati, the Buddha is depicted with the abhaya-mudraa rather than with the bhumi-sparsa-mudraa.

48. Anil de Silva-Vigier, plates 71 and 72. No figure is readily identifiable as that of Maara, though he may be the imposing figure holding a sword, to the Buddha's right, or the one to the left with a swaying mace in hand.

49. Basil Gray, *Buddhist Cave Paintings at Tun-Huang* (Faber and Faber, London, 1959), plate 19, which gives a detail from a mural in Cave 254 (dated 475-500 A.C.). Maara is represented as an imposing

personage, i.e. a devaputta with a halo, to the left of the Buddha.

50. The ceiling painting at Dambulla is of such dimensions as to preclude the possibility of a photographic reproduction. The current efforts under the Sri Lanka UNESCO Cultural Triangle Programme to document the cave paintings of Dambulla are expected to enable this important painting to be reproduced for wider appreciation.

51. Jean Boisselier, *Ceylon (Archaeologia Mundi, Nagel, Geneva)*, plate 78. Maara is depicted as a demon with many arms, riding a multitusked elephant.

52. Zimmer, plate 612.

53. Anil de Silva-Vigier, plate 73.

54. *Ibid.*, plate 68, and Zimmer, plate 486 (b).

55. David L. Snellgrove (ed.), *The Image of the Buddha (Vikas/Unesco, New Delhi, 1978)*, p.329; plate 252.

56. W. Zwalf, *Buddhism: Art and Faith (British Museum, London, 1985)* p.119, plate 172.

57. Snellgrove, p.347, plate 272.

58. Zimmer, plate 471 (d).

59. *Ibid.*, plate 380.

60. *Ibid.*, plate 381.

61. Snellgrove: "Thus often only an inscription or a still living Buddhist tradition in the places where archaeological pieces are found can distinguish ... a Saakyamuni in his victory over Maara (Maaravijaya) from Aksobhya." See plates 206, 207, 208, and 210 (pp. 278-280). Plate 206 is significant in that the Buddha is crowned to distinguish him as the supreme Buddha.

62. D.B. Dhanapala: *The Story of Sinhalese Painting (Saman, Maharagama, undated)*, p.23 (explanation on p.18).

63. Siri Gunasinghe, *An Album of Buddhist Paintings from Sri Lanka (Ceylon) — Kandyan Period* (National Museum, Colombo, 1978), plate 39. Also see Boisselier, plate 78.

64. Zwalf, plate 217, p.155.

65. Grunwedel, p.102; illustration 54.

66. Zimmer, plates 603 and 605.

67. See in particular Malalasekera, 2:615, 618, and 619.

Source: *The Wheel* Publication No. 419 (Kandy: [Buddhist Publication Society](#), 1997). Transcribed from a file provided by the BPS, with minor revisions in accordance with the ATI style sheet. Pali diacritics are represented using the Velthuis convention.

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