ABSTRACT

MALLEABLE MāRA: THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF A BUDDHIST SYMBOL OF EVIL

by Michael David Nichols

Despite its importance to the legend of the Buddha’s enlightenment and numerous Buddhist texts, a longitudinal, diachronic analysis of the symbol of Māra has never been done. This thesis aims to fill that gap by tracing the Evil One’s development in three spheres. Chapter one deals with Māra in the Nikāya texts, in which the deity is portrayed as a malign being diametrically opposed to the Buddha and his teachings. Chapter two discusses how that representation changes to ambivalence in certain Mahāyāna sūtras due to increased emphasis on the philosophical concepts of emptiness and non-duality. Finally, chapter three charts the results of a collision between the two differing representations of Māra in Southeast Asia. The concludes that the figure of Māra is malleable and reflects changes in doctrinal and sociological situations.
Malleable Māra: The Transformations of a Buddhist Symbol of Evil

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Introduction

“The eye is mine, ascetic, forms are mine… The ear is mine, ascetic, sounds are mine… The nose is mine, ascetic, odors are mine… The tongue is mine, ascetic, tastes are mine… The body is mine, ascetic, tactile objects are mine… The mind is mine, ascetic, mental phenomenon are mine… Where can you go, ascetic, to escape from me?”

The deity responsible for these chilling lines has many names. He is Antaka (the Destroyer), Kanha (the Dark One), Pāpimā (Lord of Death), Namuci (the Binder), the Tempter, the Hunter, Endmaker, and the Evil One, to list a few. Most formally, he is known as Māra, the symbol of evil and destruction in Buddhism. Nearly as numerous as his titles are Māra’s reputed powers. A massive army of unquestioningly loyal demons serves at his command, the weak and unsuspecting of mind are subject to his possession, no shape or form is beyond his assumption, and even the forces of nature cannot resist his manipulation. Stalking the Buddha and his followers throughout Buddhist scriptures, Māra the Evil One comprises a potent and menacing figure of malevolence.

From the first moment I cracked open a book of Buddhist legends the symbol of Māra, in all his seething malignance, has enchanted and fascinated me. The tension between the Buddha and Māra in each of these stories is positively electric, crackling and brimming with an energy evocative of so many other visceral, mythical struggles between light and dark, good and evil. Through the years, as I read and learned more about Buddhism and discovered the diversity of schools of thought and doctrines within that tradition, my fondness for its mythology only intensified and I began to wonder what effect such a diversity might have on the myths I enjoyed so tremendously.

These thoughts were very much in my mind when, one lonely evening, I came across the following passage in the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa, a Mahāyāna sūtra:

“Mañjuśrī, you ask me why I am without servants, but all Māras and opponents are my servants. Why? The Māras advocate this life of birth and death and the bodhisattva does not avoid life. The heterodox opponents advocate convictions, and the bodhisattva is not troubled by convictions. Therefore, all Māras and opponents are my servants.”

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1 Samyutta Nikāya I 115, pg. 208
2 The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti. Trans. Robert A. F. Thurman, pg. 44.
Having possessed the conception of Māra as the ever-plotting, pernicious enemy of Buddhism, as the earlier quote from the Mārasamyutta portrays him, Vimalakīrti’s words came as a considerable surprise. Māra in the service of Buddhism? How could this be? What might account for such a change? Knowing that the Mārasamyutta representation of Māra comes from the Samyutta Nikāya, a member of the Pāli Canon of Buddhist texts while the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa arose later amidst the growing dissemination of Mahāyāna Buddhism, I wondered if philosophical and doctrinal differences between the two schools might account for such a dramatic change. The very question that had stewed in my mind for so long thus confronted me: have differing philosophical doctrines between Buddhist schools resulted in new utilizations and expressions of the Māra mythology?

This thesis aims to investigate and answer that question. I intend to argue that, as is suggested above, the symbol of Māra has undergone a transformation in meaning and expression from the Nikāyas of the Pāli Canon to the sūtras of the Mahāyāna. The primary catalysts for this change were the new philosophical doctrines particular to the Mahāyāna, principally an emphasis on the bodhisattva path, skilful means, emptiness, and non-duality. Their effect, I will demonstrate, was to convert what is a univalent symbol of decadence in the Nikāyas into an ambivalent symbol in the Mahāyāna, where “evil” deeds are only apparently so.

Up to this point, and for different reasons, other works devoted to Māra have been in a poor position to assess the deity’s morphology of representation. Many, such as Boyd’s Satan and Māra: Christian and Buddhist Symbols of Evil and Wickramagamage’s “Māra as Evil in Buddhism,” are broadly comparative in nature and generalize about Māra’s role throughout Buddhism, paying no attention to textual and doctrinal differences between schools. On the other end of Māra scholarship are works such as Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil by Trevor Ling which discuss the appearance of the Evil One in a particular text or body of texts (the Pāli Canon in Ling’s case), but are unequipped to track the evolution of the Māra symbol throughout Buddhism. Precious little work has been done in the middle of these two extremes where one would expect to find a longitudinal study of the development of the figure of Māra from one Buddhist
school to another. This thesis shall fill that gap by pursuing just such a longitudinal approach to the transformations of the symbol of Māra.

As this project depends upon the interpretation of the stories contained within certain primary texts, I should say a few words about the hermeneutics I intend to employ. When interpreting mythology some giants in the field (such as Doniger and Levi-Strauss) have focused ceaselessly on the often quite latent commonalities between texts and stories. Such a method relies heavily on the hermeneutics of suspicion to reveal what the myth “really means,” delving often into its unconscious motivations. An unfortunate side effect of this “read-between-the-lines” approach is that it obscures not only the cultural context and sociological significance from which the myths emerge but also the surface meaning of the story. To avoid blurring these contexts and meanings, my approach differs from Doniger and Levi-Strauss and will concentrate on the actual lines of the stories, rather than what might exist between, beneath, or beyond them. Thus, this thesis will deal with the Māra mythology in a manner that gives prominence to the surface meaning of the various texts and is sensitive to their sociological intent and impact, as well as their cultural and doctrinal contexts.

Those contexts, admittedly, are quite vast and in the interests of time and space, this thesis must be selective in the material it discusses. Chapter one deals with the role Māra plays in Nikāya Buddhism. Since the thrust of my argument lies in the delineation of Māra representations between Nikāya and Mahāyāna Buddhisms, the chief concern in this chapter is to investigate texts that are clearly pre-Mahāyāna. Of the Nikāyas, then, I will discuss Māra in the four earliest, as they fit the pre-Mahāyāna condition. As no discussion of Māra would be complete without including an account of the confrontation at Bodh-Gāyā, this chapter will also present the Buddhacarita version of that episode, primarily as a model of the portrayal of Māra that emerges from the Nikāyas.

In chapter two, I demonstrate how representations and depictions of Māra change in the Mahāyāna sūtras due to new philosophical doctrines, such as emptiness and non-

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3 For example, Levi-Strauss argued that the meaning of the Oedipus myth was the reconciliation of a belief in humanity’s autochthonous origin with the reality of being born from other human beings. The Structural Study of Myth, pg. 191. For her part, Doniger argues on a wide, cross-cultural level, seeking out thematic and narrative resemblances between often disparate sources, such as the Bhagavad-Gītā, the Book of Job, and Schindler’s List (see The Implied Spider, pgs. 14-19).

4 The Dīgha, Anguttara, Majjhima, and Samyutta Nikāyas.
duality. First, I shall provide a brief explanation of the nature of the Mahāyāna and the characteristics that distinguish it from other schools. In regards to texts, the same issue of space presents itself due to the immense number of Mahāyāna sūtras. From their number I shall deal with the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras, in 8,000 and 100,000 lines, the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa and Sūramgamasamāddhi sūtras. These texts prove to be an appropriate sample as the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras represent the earliest known Mahāyāna writings and show the earliest influence of the doctrines of emptiness and non-duality, while the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa and Sūramgamasamāddhi sūtras are extant from a later date when those doctrines had been more widely disseminated.

In chapter three, I will explore the interplay between the different conceptions of Māra that have arisen in the specific cultural and geographical context of Southeast Asia. This region, due to its rich history of contact between different schools of Buddhism, serves as an excellent paradigm for observing the effect of changing philosophical doctrines on the symbol of Māra. Chapter three, though it focuses on certain texts crucial to the representation of Māra in the region (namely the Aśokāvadāna and Lokapaññatti), also constitutes somewhat of a departure from its companions as it draws on additional evidence in the form of wider cultural behavior, such as ritual and political and social rhetoric.

Through this method and division of subjects, I intend to reveal the reasoning behind the varied manifestations of Māra, the Evil One. Another, less academic goal of this thesis is to present and discuss this symbol in a manner that might enable the reader to feel at least an echo, if not a full tremor, of the gravity the stories of Māra have exerted upon me time and time again. The “what,” “why,” and “how” of what I intend to do should be fairly clear at this point, and I shall not draw out this preamble, for within the remainder of these pages the Destroyer, the Hunter, the Evil One awaits.
Chapter One:

Māra of the Myriad Menaces
It had been a long journey for Gautama the bodhisattva, the Buddha-to-be.\textsuperscript{5} Six years of abortive ascetic practice, rigorous meditation and contemplation had led him to the base of a Bodhi tree near Gāyā. Finally, he felt himself on the brink of a spiritual breakthrough, of achieving awakening and freedom from the world of senses and desires. The birds and other animals of the forest watched in rapt silence, the wind stirred not at all, and the entire world filled with the joy of impending emancipation.

Elsewhere, a great figure sensed Gautama’s impending accomplishment and trembled not in happiness, but in rage. This figure was none other than the monarch of the activities of the passions, the bringer of death, the hunter of humanity, and the enemy of liberation.\textsuperscript{6} It was Māra, the Evil One, ruler of the world of sense desires. Immediately Māra, the King of Death, decided to use drastic means to deal with the bodhisattva and stop him at all costs, lest he reveal the path to others and render the Evil One’s dominion empty.\textsuperscript{7}

Māra appeared near the silent, meditating figure and proceeded to offer an ultimatum: relinquish the quest for Dharma and return to the pursuit of sensual pleasures or face the consequences.\textsuperscript{8} Gautama paid his challenger no attention and Māra followed through on his threat, stringing his bow with an arrow specially selected for the likes of a bodhisattva.\textsuperscript{9} The projectile flew into the air, finding its mark and piercing Gautama, but to the Evil One’s dismay, the meditating sage felt no effect and continued his concentration. For a moment, the King of Death was taken aback: never had there been one who could resist his power. This uncertainty did not last long, however, and in a bellow reverberating with reinvigorated rage and hatred, Māra summoned the voluminous legions of his fearsome army. “He merits threats, revilings, and blows at the hands of my troops of awe-inspiring spirits,” Māra growled, marching his horrific minions toward the recalcitrant bodhisattva.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{5} The following account of the confrontation at Bodh-Gāyā comes from the Buddhacarita, or Acts of the Buddha, trans. E.H. Johnston. Canto XIII, verses 1-72. pgs. 188-201.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., verse 2, pg. 188.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., verse 5, pg. 189.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, verse 13, pg. 190.
\textsuperscript{9} Māra brags that this “ever-destructive arrow” has caused others of similarly stout concentration and disposition to fall into a frenzied loss of self-control.
\textsuperscript{10} Buddhacarita, verse 17, pg. 190. The members of the army are described as quite hideous, having the faces and limbs of various animals, such as lions, tigers, bears, and elephants. Others are completely misshapen, with missing, contorted or misplaced faces or limbs.
Night fell, the earth and oceans quaked, the wind howled, and the stars and moon hid from sight as Māra’s army launched its assault. Trees were uprooted and rocks procured for use as implements of war, but when the Evil One’s monsters came within range of their target, they found themselves unable to throw the lethal payloads, their strength magically evaporating. Those that succeeded in unleashing axes, arrows, or other weapons at Gautama saw them transformed into a harmless shower of lotus petals.\textsuperscript{11} Overhead, storm clouds had gathered and furiously dropped rain and forked tongues of lightning. These likewise became a flurry of flowers upon the bodhisattva. Frustrated members of the army rushed the meditating figure but upon reaching Gautama became frozen in place, transfixed and powerless to visit any harm upon him.

Such was the power of the bodhisattva that Māra’s attack utterly failed and his servants lay stretched out across the earth in total, abject defeat. Amid the din a voice called out to Māra, admonishing him for his aggression and urging him to cease the futile war. The bodhisattva had earned his position through copious acquisition of merit during past lives.\textsuperscript{12} Māra was left with no recourse but to sulk away and admit defeat…at least for the moment.

The preceding story of the struggle at Bodh-Gāyā, ultimately resulting in the awakening of the Buddha, exists in several different versions and is the most famous appearance of Māra, the Evil One. It has spawned a variety of versions that add, subtract, expand, and contract various elements. The unifying characteristic of the story, in all its permutations, is the portrayal of Māra as a vivid, powerful presence in the world and one with which a person must deal if he/she is to duplicate the Buddha’s accomplishment. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the particular ways the four earliest Nikāyas of the Pāli Canon portray the vivid, powerful presence of Māra and generate categories into which those portrayals can be placed.

As the account of the Buddhacarita is the version of the Bodh-Gāyā events deemed authoritative by adherents to the Pāli Canon, it appears a most appropriate starting point. In his analysis, Lowell Bloss has cogently characterized the battle at Bodh-

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., verse 42, pg. 196.
\textsuperscript{12} This mysterious voice, which may come from the god Śakra or the earth itself, states that this moment “is the appointed time for the ripening of those deeds which he [Gautama] has done in the past for the sake of illumination.” Verse 67, pg. 200.
Gāyā as a contest between opposing rulers or kings. Bloss asserts that the meditative posture of the bodhisattva and the Bodhi tree itself symbolize a kind of throne that Gautama has claimed for himself. We can thus interpret the primary aim of Māra’s efforts to disrupt Gautama’s meditation and remove him from underneath the tree as an attempt to reclaim the throne and reassert his grip on the world.

What Bloss’ conclusions hint at form the basis for the first category into which we can place the Nikāya portrayals of Māra, namely those representations that create a clear distinction between the realm of the Buddha and the realm of Māra. Another scholar, Trevor Ling, in his work Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil, has discussed this dichotomic relationship. Ling writes that, “Māra is the mythological symbol to which may be conveniently related various factors of the human situation: the contingent ills of life.” Thus, Māra is an extremely broadly conceived deity, meant to symbolize all that is contingent or opposed to the teachings of the Buddha. Furthermore, Ling comments, “Māra symbolizes the entire existence of unenlightened humanity.” All of Samsāra is thus unified in the figure of Māra, against whom the Eightfold Path and Nirvāṇa are contrasted.

The four Nikāyas offer no shortage of evidence in support of this interpretation. In the Majjhima Nikāya, for instance, the Cūlagopālaka Sutta contains the parable of a cowherder leading his herd across a stream. Unfortunately, the Buddha explains, the cowherder did not investigate his undertaking properly and his entire herd drowned due to the lack of a proper ford. The nearer side of the shore and the turbulent waters stand for Māra’s realm, while the farther side of the shore represents the region beyond Māra’s realm, or Nirvāṇa. The territories of Māra and the Buddha are thus distinct and divided and passing from the former to the latter is a perilous journey that can only be accomplished with a proper understanding of the Path, or “ford.”

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14 Ibid., 161.
15 While Ling makes occasionally insightful comments, his work as a whole is handicapped by substantial miscalculations. The chronology upon which his argument depends is problematic, as is his insistence on separating “pure” Buddhism from “animism” and mythology.
16 Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil. pg. 67.
17 Ibid. pg. 58
18 Majjhima Nikāya I 225-227 pgs. 319-321.
Similarly using parable to cleave apart the realms of Māra and the Buddha are several instances from the *Samyutta Nikāya*. The first deals with a quail who, when captured by a hawk, convinces the overconfident predator to a rematch on the quail’s home turf of freshly plowed soil. Thinking quickly, the quail burrows inside the soft dirt and the diving hawk, out of its element, crashes painfully to the ground. The moral, according to the Buddha, is that this is what happens when “one strays outside one’s own resort into the domain of others.” In other words, when *bhikkus* deviate from the “ancestral domain” of the Path, they enter Māra’s realm and the Evil One “will get a hold on them.”

A second parable from the *Samyutta Nikāya* tells of bands of monkeys living in the Himalayas who, normally, are clever enough to recognize that the mountain paths are divided into regions both humans and monkeys can traverse and those that are accessible only to monkeys. Those monkeys, the Buddha explains, who remain in the latter will be safe, while those who venture into the zone inhabited by humans will be trapped and bound. The relationship between *bhikkus* and Māra operates in the same way: those who remain on the Path will be safe, but those who venture into Māra’s realm of sensual, worldly desires will be trapped and bound by the Destroyer.

Two other stories from the *Samyutta Nikāya*, strikingly similar to one another, also definitively illustrate the conception of Māra and the Buddha as “worlds apart.” Both involve a follower of the Buddha, Godhika in the *Mārasamyutta* and Vakkali in the *Khandhasamyutta*, who experiences difficulty in practice due to persistent illness. Godhika and Vakkali eventually overcome this obstacle and realize liberation through the act of “using the knife,” or committing suicide. The events most relevant to my argument come at the end of each story, when the Buddha and his disciples visit the bodies of the deceased. Both instances describe how “a cloud of smoke flows from west to north; in all directions the swirl of Darkness goes.” The cloud, the Buddha clarifies, is Māra in his black manifestation searching for the consciousness of Godhika and, in the other story,

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19 *Samyutta* V 146-148, pg. 1632.
20 Ibid. 148-150, pgs. 1633-34
Vakkali. In neither case is the Evil One able to locate them for, due to their attainment, they have passed to a place far removed and separated from his realm.  

These two stories acquire another layer of meaning once read in terms of a passage in the *Anguttara Nikāya*, which further serves to delineate between two opposing realms. Drawing upon Indian mythology, it speaks of the wars between the *Devas* and *Asuras* and how the tide of battle turned alternately between the combatants. Eventually each side realized they could avert perpetual war if they retired to respective refuges that their enemy could not access. According to the Buddha, monks must in this same way be “aloof from sense desires” and “have no dealings with Māra,” abiding in their own inaccessible realm. Confronted with such a development Māra will think, “now that the monk has gone to the refuge for the fearful, he will dwell by himself and have no dealings with me.” A monk who accomplishes this feat will “put a darkness about Māra and Māra’s vision, being blotted out, is without range; and he has become invisible to the Evil One.” These lines, while perhaps not a direct comment on the Godhika and Vakkali stories, do seem to have a great deal of applicability to those incidents. In vain pursuit of the consciousnesses of Godhika and Vakkali, Māra’s vision has been “blotted out” and, since they have entered an entirely separate realm, the two bhikkus are now “invisible” to the Evil One’s eyes. A question can be raised at this point: does one have to die and enter *parinirvāna* in order to slip out of Māra’s realm and cross to the other shore to which the Evil One has no reach? If so, has the Buddha abdicated this world to Māra?

Answering this question will round out how the dichotomic relationship, as I have termed it, between the domains of Māra and the Buddha should be understood. Before determining the definition of the Buddha’s half of the equation – whether that equals *parinirvāna* or something else -- we must explore exactly how the Nikāyas interpreted the composition of Māra’s realm. The Āneñjasappayasutta of the *Majjhima Nikāya* expresses that “sensual pleasures here and now and sensual pleasures in lives to come, sensual perceptions here and now and sensual perceptions in lives to come – both alike are Māra’s realm, Māra’s domain, Māra’s bait, Māra’s hunting ground.”

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22 *Anguttara* IV viii (39) pg. 290-291.
23 Ibid., pg. 291.
24 *Majjhima* II 262 pg. 869.
characterization and equivalence of Māra’s realm with the domain of sense experience and desire is also found in the *Samyutta Nikāya*. Here, though, what is meant by sense perception is specified and categorized into the aggregates of existence. According to the *Khandhasamyutta*, “In clinging to form one is bound by Māra; by not clinging to it, one is freed from the Evil One. In clinging to feeling one is bound by Māra; by not clinging to it, one is freed from the Evil One,” and so on regarding also “perception,” “volitional formations” and “consciousness.”

On another occasion, recounted in the *Salāyatanasamyutta*, the monk Samiddhi approached the Buddha and asked, “Venerable Sir, it is said, ‘Māra, Māra.’ In what way, Venerable Sir, might there be Māra or the description of Māra?” The Buddha responds, “Where there is eye, Samiddhi, where there are forms…there exists Māra. Where there is the ear, where there is sound…there exists Māra,” and so on regarding “mind” and “mental consciousness.” The Buddha then goes on to add that where there is no eye, ear, form, mind, or consciousness, there is no Māra, once again drawing a stark line between the dominions of the Evil and Enlightened Ones. The foregoing passages also provide an answer as to whether or not *parinirvāna* is the only safe refuge from Māra. The Buddha seems clearly to assert the possibility of living one’s life in a realm divorced from Māra’s influence, provided that he/she can avoid clinging to the senses and abide where the aggregates have no impact. These quite plainly are the qualities of the arhats, who have not yet passed into *parinirvāna*.

Before moving on, the dichotomic category must be qualified. While Māra cannot enter *parinirvāna* or affect the still-living Buddha or disciplined arhat, the Buddha or arhat *can and necessarily does* enter Māra’s realm. Since Māra possesses dominion over Samsāra, in which all beings dwell, the establishment of a Dharma that will be accessible to those beings necessitates a penetration of Māra’s realm. The door between realms, it would seem, does open but swings only one way. The most important point to remember, though, is that without exception the Nikāyas portray Māra as desperately opposed to the entrance of the Dharma into his realm. He strives at all times to bar that door and create an atmosphere in Samsāra that is inimical to the Dharma.

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25 *Samyutta* III 74 pg. 906.
26 *Samyutta* IV 39 pgs. 1152-53.
Returning to the significance of equating Māra’s realm with the aggregates, it is evident that Māra is implicated in the deception that takes place when beings mistakenly perceive those aggregates as permanent selves. Moreover, the processes that serve as the basis for all epistemologies fall under Māra’s dominion. A human’s experience of the world, at the most basic level, is therefore tainted, colored, and ultimately controlled by Māra and turned against him/her as a snare of the Evil One. Our sense and mental processes are not only tools of Māra, they are manifestations of the Evil One himself!

These are the implications of the equivalence of Māra with internal properties of sensory and mental operation. As we continue to investigate the Nikāya literature, though, it becomes clear that Māra’s realm, however sprawling it might seem when covering the aggregates, also holds sway over certain external phenomena as well. Some, such as Wickramagamage, Bucknell and Stuart-Fox, have argued that the symbol of Māra represents only the internal qualities of a human being and is a personification of the psychological weaknesses and temptations of the individual. I contend that such an interpretation, while valid toward some occurrences of Māra in the texts, is insufficient to account for all the manifestations of Māra in the Nikāyas. I can demonstrate convincingly that in many instances the presence of Māra is best interpreted as an external force in the world opposing itself to the Buddha’s teachings.

Let us take the Vanigisasamyutta of the Samyutta Nikāya as an example. The bhikku Vanigisa, who is described as newly ordained, encounters a “number of women, beautifully adorned” and “lust infests his mind.” Vanigisa chastises himself and vows to dispel these impure feelings, these “Impudent thoughts from the Dark One [Māra].” Finally he resolves through verse that “if women were to come here / still more numerous than this, / they would never make me tremble / for I stand firm in the Dharma.”

It could be argued -- despite Vanigisa’s clear assertion that Māra has interceded from without and through the female forms to plant thoughts in his mind -- that this is still an example of Māra as the psychological projection of the individual due to its focus on the arousal of lustful feelings in the young bhikku. In that case, an analogous discourse

27 Bucknell, R.S. and Martin Stuart-Fox. The Twilight Language. Pg. 11.
Wickramagamage, Chandra. “Māra as Evil in Buddhism” in Evil and the Response of World Religions. pg. 114.
28 Samyutta I 185-186, pgs 280-281.
in the *Anguttara Nikāya* is even clearer in its assertion of an external Māra. The Buddha has just been informed that a nun and monk, mother and son, have engaged in an incestuous relationship, and in response he expounds that there is nothing so enticing, so binding, so desirable, and so dangerous as “a woman’s form, touch, perfume, sound, taste.” In fact, in all cases, “a woman…will stop to ensnare the heart of a man” and the power behind that ability to ensnare should not be mistaken, for “It is wholly a snare of Māra – verily speaking rightly, one may say of womanhood: it is wholly a snare of Māra.” 29 Certainly the text could have characterized the feelings aroused in a bhikku by the sight of women as the snares of Māra, as we would expect it to if the Māra symbol were meant to be understood as purely internal, but it is telling that the portrayal we find consists of the exact opposite. Instead, it describes these female forms as pitfalls and traps set out by Māra existing externally in the world and forming a danger for the bhikku who is not mindful in navigating them. Admittedly, both these examples have their internal components, namely the lustful feelings of the bhikkus, but those elements are at all times contingent on the external presence of female forms which, once understood as a lure of the Evil One, attributes an equally external nature to Māra.

Even less ambiguously external are several manifestations of Māra in the *Mārasamyutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*. In attempts to arouse fear, unsettlement, and confusion in the Buddha and others, Māra is alternately described as assuming the form of a giant elephant,30 a giant serpent,31 an ox who interrupts the assembly by threatening to break the alms bowls,32 and a mass of shifting, colorful and lustrous shapes, both hideous and delightful.33 On Vulture Peak, the shattering and avalanche of boulders is even ascribed to the work of Māra,34 as is a painful splinter in the Buddha’s foot.35 On two other occasions, one during an assembly led by the Buddha and the other a private meditation by the bhikku Samiddhi, a “loud noise, frightful and terrifying, as though the earth were splitting open” is attributed to the deeds of Māra and his ceaseless desire to

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29 *Anguttara Nikāya* III V (55) pg. 55-57.
30 *Samyutta* I 104 pg. 196.
31 ibid. 106 pg. 199.
32 ibid. 112 pg. 205.
33 ibid. 104-105 pg. 196-197.
35 ibid. 110-111 pg. 203.
obstruct the teaching and practice of the Dharma. From my vantage, the incidents described above render it impossible to interpret the symbol of Māra as entirely internal or psychological. Rather than extrapolating possible internal and psychological explanations behind falling boulders and runaway oxen, it seems far more plausible and true to the text to reason that Buddhists encountered such external difficulties and obstacles to the propagation of their teachings and referred to the symbol of Māra as their explanation.

What we can conclude from the internal and external nature of Māra and the multiplicity of forms and deeds that are attributed to him is that the Nikāyas understood and interpreted Māra as an eminently expansive force and presence: he could be anything, anyone, anywhere, at any time. Another, perhaps even more accurate description is that Māra is characterized as a shape-shifter, and an especially devious and ingenious one at that. This is precisely what can be expected of a deity that, as I argued at the beginning of the chapter, is the embodiment of all that is Samsāra. As Samsāra is the vastness of life, death and rebirth, Māra encapsulates an immense amount of territory. The multitude of forms and appellations given to Māra, each highlighting a different facet of his personality and abilities, is a natural consequence of bearing the symbolic load of all Samsāra. (The expansive or shape-shifting nature of the figure of Māra should not be construed as diffusion of the symbol, however; the Evil One’s univalent character of absolute opposition to the Dharma is not compromised. It is only due to the fact that since Samsāra has the potential for a multiplicity of manifestations, Māra does as well and simply exhibits that univalent character in a variety of forms.) Seen in this way, as a staggeringly expansive deity who can be anything, anyone, anywhere, at any time, it is easier to understand what the Buddha means when he professes, “Monks, I do not consider any power so hard to conquer as the power of Māra.”

36 ibid. 113 pg. 206, and ibid. 119-120 pgs. 211-212. The wording of the occurrences is identical. 37 Kamitsuka Yoshiko has argued convincingly that the existence of both internal and external representations of Māra is quite important for understanding the demonology that results from contact between Buddhism and Six Dynasties Taoism in China. Such a topic is beyond the scope of this inquiry but those interested in the issue may consult the article. Yoshiko, Kamitsuka. “The Concept of Māra and the Idea of Expelling Demons.” Taoist Resources. Vol. 6 no. 2. Aug. 1996. pgs. 30-50. 38 See Introduction, pg. 1. 39 Dīgha III 78 pg. 405.
This elastic nature permits another utilization of the symbol of Māra, which forms, after dichotomic and expansive, a third category into which the Evil One’s appearances can be placed. This utilization, described briefly by Kongaswela Piyaranta\textsuperscript{40} and much more in depth by Trevor Ling, serves the ends of pedagogy, employing Māra as a didactic figure. In all his appearances in the Nikāyas, Māra is inevitably defeated in his designs and, in Trevor Ling’s words, “the means by which he is conquered are precisely the means of liberation which are emphasized in Buddhism.”\textsuperscript{41} On this point, I believe Ling has a convincing argument. I would also contend that in many Nikāya stories Māra seems to serve the role of a straw man whose purpose is to portray the wrong views that, by virtue of contrast, will reinforce and glorify the Buddhist path and doctrine.

Stories that easily lend themselves to the didactic interpretation also, quite logically, fit the dichotomic relationship category, such as the following parables from the Majjhima Nikāya. The stories are similar in structure, dealing with deer herds and the perils they encounter. The first relates the plots of a hunter (Māra) who constructs a decoy path for a deer herd through marshy lands (the sense realm) leading into his waiting, ruinous clutches. Another person (the Buddha) reopens the true path away from the danger of the marshes, to a place where the hunter cannot go. This safe path is an allegory for none other than the Eightfold Path, which is asserted as truth in contradistinction to the sense desires of Māra’s world.\textsuperscript{42}

The second parable of the deer is even more explicit in using Māra as a means of expressing what constitutes legitimate practice of the Buddha’s teachings. The irreconcilable division between realms can also be seen, as the Buddha speaks of three deer herds who succumb to a trapper’s bait while a fourth learns from the others’ mistakes and retreats to an area beyond the trapper’s reach.\textsuperscript{43} The deer who successfully escape are likened to those bhikkus who correctly achieve the jhānas, or meditative states of calm which allow one to rise above sense pleasures, perceptions, etc.\textsuperscript{44} A bhikku who accomplishes this task and masters all four jhānas mentioned is described as blindfolding

\textsuperscript{40} “The Concept of Evil in Buddhism.” \textit{Dialogue and Alliance}. pgs. 3-11.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil}. pg. 63; cf. pg. 64.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Majjhima I} 117.26 pg. 210.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Majjhima I} 1154-155 pg. 248.
\textsuperscript{44} Here I am utilizing Peter Harvey’s definition of \textit{jhāna}. \textit{An Introduction to Buddhism}. pg. 70.
Māra, of robbing the Evil One of any opportunity to assail him.45 Successful Buddhist practice is thus equated with and imparted by the imagery of defeating Māra.

One finds the same tendency in the Anguttara Nikāya, in one instance during an exhortation to develop the “four right efforts.”46 Monks who are adept enough to cultivate these four right efforts possess the impressive distinction of having “conquered Māra’s realm / Freed, they have passed beyond the fear of birth and death.”47 In another section of the Anguttara Nikāya, the seven defenses of a citadel are allegorically linked to the seven good things a disciple can possess that make him/her invincible to the assault of Māra.48 A bhikku can measure accomplishment along the Path, therefore, in terms of the defeat of Māra.

The clear tone of the Nikāyas, as the Devatatāsamutta of the Samyutta Nikāya declares, is that “Good is the word you speak of them / of those who have abandoned Māra’s snares.”49 The Māra symbol serves as a convenient means of heaping praise upon those who are practicing the Buddha’s teachings according to orthodoxy and disparaging those who fail. The Salāyatanaavaggasamutta, for example, goes so far as to use the word “corrupted” for a bhikku who persists in attending to form or the senses and thus proves accessible to Māra, and “incorruptible” for a bhikku immune to the senses and Māra.50

On the issue of orthodoxy, we can also see clear instances of the Māra symbol employed as a means of defining the standards of accepted belief. In the first chapter of the Mārasamutta, the Buddha reflects upon how the Middle Way he has discovered means freedom from the self-mortifying tendencies of asceticism. Māra takes this as a cue to appear and admonishes the Buddha in verse: “Having deviated from the austere practice / By which men purify themselves, / Being Impure, you think you are pure: /

45 Majjhima I 159-160 pgs. 251-252.
46 Anguttara II iii (13) pg. 15. The four right efforts are: desire for non-arising of evil states not yet come to pass, abandoning of evil that currently exists, desire for profitable states not yet come to pass, and desire for the persistence of currently existing profitable states.
47 Ibid.
48 Anguttara IV iii (63) pgs. 69-75. The immovable foundation of the citadel corresponds to the unshakable faith of a devote disciple, the moat to the mindfulness the disciple cultivates as a barrier to unrighteous ways, etc.
49 Samyutta I 35 pg. 125.
50 Samyutta IV 183-188 pgs. 1244-48.
You have missed the path to purity.”\textsuperscript{51} The Buddha responds, “Having known as useless any austerity / aimed at the immortal state / that all such penances are futile / like oars and rudders on dry land / By developing the path to enlightenment - / virtue, concentration, and wisdom - / I have attained supreme purity: / You are defeated, End-maker!”\textsuperscript{52}

These few lines, then, reaffirm the Middle Way at the expense of extreme asceticism, which is linked to the evil power and influence of Māra. The symbol of Māra thus proves to be exceptionally well suited for association with anti-Dharma forces, whatever those may be. This ability literally to “demonize” the opposition creates the intriguing possibility of utilizing the Māra symbol as a tool against heterodoxy and those philosophical and religious doctrines with which Nikāya Buddhism competed. To further support the plausibility of this assertion and set up the argument that will follow below, I reiterate a point from the introduction. One of Māra’s main powers is the ability to shape-shift, to assume any form of his choosing. In the preceding pages there have been copious examples presented, as the Evil One has been said to manifest as an elephant, a snake, an ox, and so on. The capability to represent all of Samsāra hinges on Māra’s power to assume nearly any form imaginable; the former would not be convincing without the latter. Therefore, the composers of the Nikāyas had an almost infinite range of options available for their portrayal of Māra’s form, rendering the manifestations they ultimately chose highly deliberate and meaningful. It is all the more crucial, I would thus argue, for interpreters of Māra legends to give close attention to those forms and the possible rationale behind them. Proceeding as I suggest, it becomes obvious that since Māra can be anything and anyone, examining who the guise that “anyone” assumes proves especially interesting and provides the basis for a fourth category of appearances by the Evil One.\textsuperscript{53}

Before engaging the Nikāya literature on this point, by backtracking to the \textit{Buddhacarita}, with which this chapter began, we can observe an example of what I am

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Samyutta} I 103 pg. 195. At first, it might seem incongruent for Māra, the Lord of Sensual Pleasures, to be arguing in favor of asceticism, but it must be remembered that any excessive contemplation of the body, even negatively, leads back into the realm of the senses, and thus Māra’s clutches.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. pg. 196
\textsuperscript{53} James Boyd in \textit{Satan and Māra: Christian and Buddhist Symbols of Evil}, takes note of Māra’s human forms, but frustratingly remains oblivious to their implications, pg. 80. Trevor Ling also notes these human forms in his treatment of the Nikāyas but is equally lax in discussing the consequences, pg. 102.
contending. In the vivid and detailed descriptions of the warriors composing Māra’s army, three verses stand out in light of the current inquiry:

Ashen-gray in color, tricked out with red spots, carrying ascetics’ staves, with hair smoke-colored like a monkey’s, hung round with garlands, with pendent ears like elephants, clad in skins or entirely naked; With half their countenances white or half their bodies green; some also copper-colored, snake-colored, tawny or black; some too with arms having an overgarment of snakes, or with rows of jangling bells at their girdles…With disheveled hair, or with topknots and half-shaven polls, clothed red and disordered headdresses, with bristling faces and frowning visages…54

The translator’s note to the beginning of these passages elaborates that many of the details attributed to these fiends of Māra’s army – the red spots, decoration of hair, girdle of bells, for instance – are consistent with the dress and appearance of Brahmanical ascetics, particularly those devoted to Śiva.55 The discussion of the first chapter of the Mārasamyutta has already demonstrated that the Buddhist Middle Way was largely opposed to the asceticism espoused by Brahmins. One can argue with a fair amount of certainty that the attitude of Brahmanical ascetics during the same period was reciprocally antagonistic. Nikāya Buddhism would naturally have been searching for a means to distinguish itself from doctrinal opponents and also erect a defense against criticisms. Assimilating these critics, who were also competitors for converts, into the retinue of Māra the Evil One effectively accomplishes both tasks.

This technique of demonizing doctrinal adversaries is even more apparent in the Samyutta Nikāya. In the Devatāsamyutta, a number of young Devas approach the Buddha and recite the teachings of local spiritual instructors. The first several agree with the Dharma and the Buddha approves, but Māra possesses the last one, who consequently utters a verse in support of austerity and delight in the world of forms. The Buddha immediately recognizes the architect behind this display and offers a stinging rebuke, to which Māra has no recourse but to flee.56 The target, once again, is asceticism, but more specifically, as the story explains, the ascetic teachings of a local practitioner that conflict

54 Buddhacarita, Canto XIII v. 21-22, 24. pg. 193.
with the Buddha’s teaching. This is yet another instance of the symbol of Māra simultaneously categorizing and retaliating against such opposition.

Three stories in close proximity to one another in the Mārasamyutta further illustrate the point. In the first, the Buddha has gone asking for alms and, seeking to humiliate him, Māra moves one step ahead, taking possession of all the Brahmin householders. Not one householder consequently contributes any alms to the Buddha and he is forced to leave empty-handed.  

A simple interpretation of the story is that invariably a Buddhist alms-seeker will have a bad day in which the Brahmins he/she encounters, for doctrinal reasons or possibly not, will refuse to provide handouts. This story offers Māra’s activities as a convenient explanation, meanwhile characterizing the stingy Brahmins as either dupes or active agents of the Evil One.

The second and third stories involve not possessions by Māra, but actual incarnations of the malign deity. On one occasion, the Buddha was giving a discourse to bhikkus and Māra, always looking to interrupt, assumed the form of a farmer, with disheveled and dirty appearance. Approaching the assembly, the transformed Evil One asks if they have seen oxen, which in Pāli can serve as a codeword for the senses. This marks the farmer as Māra in disguise and after the Evil One professes his domination over the sensual and mental faculties, the Buddha offers the appropriate rejoinder, namely that where these faculties do not exist, Māra cannot follow. One can read this story as more proof of the dichotomic relationship between realms, but in so doing the possible meaning of Māra’s transformation into a common farmer should not be overlooked. The use of the oxen metaphor might provide an explanation for this particular apparition of Māra, as a farmer logically would be the appropriate form in which to deliver such a line. I would contend the further possibility that the story might have another meaning. It makes sense that in their travels the Buddha and his followers might encounter individuals looking very much as the farmer is described. These individuals might also assert the primacy of sense experience against the Buddha's teaching, as the disguised

57 Ibid. 114-115 pg. 207-208.
58 Ibid. pg. 418 n. 296.
59 Ibid. 115-117, pg. 208-209. Māra’s declaration serves as the opening lines of the introduction to this thesis, see pg. 1.
Māra does. This story offers a means of explaining this kind of random encounter and resistance: it is Māra incarnate.

The third story is even clearer in its doctrinal significance. Several bhikkus are studying on their own when it is said that Māra, assuming the form of a Brahmin, approached them and declared, “You, sirs, have gone forth while young, lads with black hair, endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life without having dallied with sensual pleasures. Enjoy human sensual pleasures, sirs; do not abandon what is directly visible in order to pursue what takes time.”60 The bhikkus reject the Brahmin’s suggestion that they leave the Path and when the incident is reported to the Buddha, he reveals that the Brahmin was none other than Māra.61 We can assume that it was not an uncommon occurrence for a Brahmin, or other religious leader for that matter, to approach groups of Buddhist monks and admonish their activities while encouraging them to abandon the Path. Since Māra’s message to the bhikkus boils down essentially to “you youngsters should live it up,” there are a myriad of vehicles or forms through which this could be articulated. When put into the mouth of a Brahmin, however, the message becomes an instance of doctrinal antagonism, of sectarian competitiveness. Attributing this antagonism and competition to the vile tricks and machinations of the Evil One, as was said before, not only retaliates against those who would solicit defections, but also heightens a monk or nun’s wariness about entertaining such solicitations. A Brahmin’s argument to leave the Path might always have some appeal, but stories such as these would insure an increased reticence in Buddhists to follow through if there is the possibility Māra is the true culprit.

By way of summary, I have shown that the portrayal of Māra in the Nikāyas can be placed into four broadly overlapping categories. First, Māra has the salient characteristic of complete and total opposition to the Buddha’s teaching: there are two diametrically opposed realms, the Evil One’s Samsāra and the Buddha’s Dharma and Nirvāṇa. Second, because he represents all Samsāra, Māra assumes an expansive or shape-shifting quality, manifesting as an extremely wide and diverse range of forms and phenomena, both internal and external to the individual. Third, this expansiveness

60 Ibid. 117 pg. 211.
61 Ibid. 118.
combined with complete opposition to Buddhist teaching has given Māra a didactic utility, creating a convenient symbolic foil by which those same teachings can be advanced and dissenting opinions denigrated. Fourth, and along these same lines, several stories have been discussed in which Māra appears as the force behind or even the incarnation of critics and opponents of Buddhism, literally demonizing those opponents.

I should also note that these categories operate in pairs. The first coupling, the dichotomic and expansive/shape-shifting, may be deemed the abstract and philosophical group, as they are expressions and consequences of Buddhist teachings about the nature of reality. The second coupling, the didactic and demonizing, represent a more functional utilization of the symbol of Māra, specifically to the ends of conveying and reinforcing Buddhist teachings. Admittedly, there is some overlap between these four categories, their pairings, and these descriptions, but the division into abstract and philosophical on the one hand and functional on the other will be of great use in chapter two.

Having summed up the main points thus far, I mean to conclude this first chapter with a final story that features several of the aforementioned categories and alludes to the next chapter. One day the monk Moggallana was traversing the countryside when Māra entered his stomach and produced a distressing bellyache. Moggallana recognized the presence of Māra and proceeded to relate a tale from a time long past, when the Buddha Kakusandha was in the world. During that time Moggallana was himself a Māra named Dūṣī62 and sought to disrupt Kakusandha’s teaching of the Dharma. Dūṣī possessed a group of Brahmin householders and formed a mob from them to harass and abuse this Buddha and his followers, verbally and physically. When the monks did not react, Māra Dūṣī thought to arouse pride in the Buddhist assembly and incited the Brahmins to revere them, but this also produced no effect. At the height of frustration, Māra Dūṣī possessed a boy and through his body struck a bhikku in the head with a stone. Māra Dūṣī was immediately consigned to hell for a great length of time, the agony of which Moggallana described in detail, having lived it. Informed now of the folly of physically assailing a member of the Sangha, Māra fled Moggallana’s belly.63

62 The Nikāyas explain that Māra, like Brahma or even the Buddha, is a rotating position based on accumulated karma. Cf. Majjhima III 66.15 pg.929.
63 Majjhima I 332-338 pgs. 431-438.
Some aspects of this story, after my arguments presented above, are no doubt familiar. Māra is clearly demonstrating an expansive quality, appearing as the most mundane occurrence of a stomachache. That the harassing Brahmins are characterized as possessed by Māra serves as a further example of the demonization of doctrinal adversaries. What sets this story apart from other accounts of Māra in the Nikāyas is the notion that a being who was once a Māra has been reincarnated as a bhikku and follower of the Buddha’s Path. The ramifications, of this idea are neither discussed nor elaborated upon in this or any other Nikāya text. To do so would require a renegotiation of the dichotomic relationship between Māra and the Buddha, Samsāra and Nirvāṇa. Such a renegotiation would most likely necessitate the development of new philosophical doctrines. With this thought in mind, I turn next to Māra in the Mahāyāna….
Chapter Two:

Māra’s Metamorphosis
The Buddhism of Northern India between 250 BCE and the 1st and 2nd centuries of the Common Era was of a diverse sort. A variety of schools with differing tenets and claims to authority formed a melting pot, a bubbling stew of contending, jockeying points of view. Amidst this milieu of contact and debate, Puggalavādins, Sarvāstivādins, Vibhajjavādins, Mahāsāṃghikas, and others simultaneously feuded and cross-pollinated. From the latter sect, the Mahāsāṃghikas, eventually emerged groups amenable to and even constituent of a new movement in Buddhism. Over time, the new movement came to be known as the Great or Large Vehicle, the Mahāyāna.

The tremendous amount of interaction and contact between the schools of the aforementioned period occludes the ability to delineate with absolute certainty between solely Nikāya Buddhist and proto-Mahāyānist schools. Rather than bog this investigation down in the sticky details of the Mahāyāna’s early development, I will instead highlight key concepts that clearly differentiate the Mahāyāna from its antecedents and contemporaries. Of these concepts, I shall concentrate on four: the bodhisattva path, provisional versus ultimate truth, skilful means, and emptiness, with its corollary, non-duality.

Emphasis on the bodhisattva path is so central to the Mahāyāna that for a time the movement was called the “bodhisattvayāna.” Defined in Donald Mitchell’s terms, a bodhisattva is a being who has achieved a degree of awakening but makes a vow to forestall parinirvāṇa for the sake of helping other beings come to knowledge of the Dharma. To be precise, the idea of the bodhisattva was in no way alien to other Buddhist schools. As Rupert Gethin explains, treading the bodhisattva path was always an option to earlier Buddhists, but only for the heroic; the normal route to awakening in the earlier tradition was the path to arhatship. Those who were exceptionally adept and devoted may select the bodhisattva path, which entails undergoing rebirth after rebirth and ascending through various levels of attainment. It is this very process that Siddhartha Gautama underwent through numerous past lives before becoming the Buddha, raising the important point that the bodhisattva path is commensurate with the path to

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64 Harvey, Introduction to Buddhism, pg. 85; Ramanan, Nāgārjuna’s Philosophy, pg. 67.
65 Harvey, pgs. 89-90.
66 Mitchell, Buddhism, pg. 96.
Buddhahood. Due to the immense duration and difficulty of this path, however, Nikāya Buddhists instead encouraged their practitioners to attain the status of arhat. The Mahāyāna differed by advancing the bodhisattva path over and above all others, to the point of deriding competing paths as inferior. Arhats, Mahāyānists argued, were entirely absorbed in their own liberation and overlooked the suffering of other beings.68 Gautama’s awakening, therefore, was considered superior to that of his disciples.69 Mahāyānists reasoned that Buddhas are of far more help to suffering beings than arhats and the new movement strongly asserted both the possibility and necessity that practitioners who assumed the bodhisattva path also become Buddhas in future lives.

A second distinguishing idea the Mahāyāna emphasized is the concept of emptiness. Building on the idea of dependent origination – the contention that all phenomena arise due to or in conjunction with other phenomena – Mahāyānists argued that all that exists is “empty of own-being” and cannot and does not exist independently.70 The concept of emptiness fostered its own school, the Śūnyatāvāda, or Way of Emptiness, later renamed Mādhyamaka.71 Although renamed, emptiness remained the focus of the budding Mahāyānist school and the concept was expanded as its logical consequences were pursued. If all things are empty, it was argued, then Samsāra and Nirvāṇa must both be empty and thus no longer opposed: “the world is itself Nirvāṇa when rightly seen.”72 The Mādhyamaka and other allied Mahāyāna-leaning schools further promulgated that “Samsāra is nothing essentially different from Nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is nothing essentially different from Samsāra. The limits of one are the limits of the other. Between the two there is no difference.”73

Arguments of this kind led to two corollary concepts. First, if all existence is empty and even seemingly opposed aspects such as Samsāra and Nirvāṇa are equivalent, the nature of reality must be non-dual. Since it is incontrovertible that humans observe and experience opposites and differentiation in reality, the tenability of such non-duality rests upon a second corollary, the bifurcation of truth into two aspects, the mundane and

68 Harvey, pg. 92.
69 Gethin, pg. 224.
70 Mitchell, pg. 98.
71 Harvey, pg. 95.
72 Ibid. pg. 103; Ramanan, pg. 66 (quote); Cooper, “Emptiness: Interpretation and Metaphor.” pg. 8.
73 Harris, The Continuity of Mādhyamaka and Yogācara in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. pg. 112.
trans-mundane, the provisional and ultimate. At the mundane or provisional level, humans may observe what appears to be differentiation or duality in hot/cold or good/evil, but the truth of emptiness operates at the trans-mundane or ultimate level, rendering hot/cold, good/evil actually unified as equal manifestations of emptiness. Those who are learned enough and possess Prajñāpāramitā (Perfected Wisdom) will, according to these Mahāyānists, recognize emptiness, non-duality, and the ultimate truth behind the provisional.

This understanding illustrates another key Mahāyāna concept, namely the notion of skilful means, or upāya-kauśalya. Mahāyānists applied the concept to the Nikāyas by arguing that the Buddha employed skilful means by tailoring his initial teaching of the Dharma to the capacity of his audience to understand it. Historically two points have been drawn from this premise. First, based on this point of view, the presentation of the Dharma in the Nikāyas could be seen as the foundation but not the totality of what the Buddha taught. Mahāyānists thus promoted their reinterpretations and shifts in emphasis as a “Second Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma” that represented the completion of the Buddha’s teachings. The Buddha, they claimed, realized that his followers were not ready during his lifetime to comprehend the bodhisattva path, the full implications of the concept of emptiness, or the relationship between provisional and ultimate truths. After a time had passed, however, and a receptive audience lay in await, the sūtras expounding these ideas could safely emerge. Not incidentally, the first recognizably Mahāyānist texts are named “the Perfection of Wisdom” and contain a well-defined conception of emptiness, non-duality, and the two levels of truth.

A second conclusion drawn from the concept of skilful means is partly based on the first. If the Buddha utilized skilful means as a pedagogical and salvific technique, bodhisattvas, as Buddhas-to-be, are justified in doing the same. There is a tradition, therefore, in the Mahāyāna that a bodhisattva’s efforts to bring the Dharma to suffering beings should be cloaked in whatever guises will most easily facilitate the awakening of those beings.

74 Harvey, pg. 90. Mahāyānists argue that the new sūtras were hidden, for example, by Nāga kings or inspired by visions of the Buddha in meditative trances.
The preceding thus represents the key ideas that characterize the Mahāyāna and differentiate it from other schools. Importantly, both the groups that would eventually become the Theravādins on the one side and the Mahāyānists on the other believed they were carrying on orthodoxy and correctly interpreting the Nikāyas. The stage was thus established for a long history of doctrinal combat and strife.75 From their vantage, the proto-Theravādins argued that these new teachings virtually obliterated the Buddha’s teaching (by equating Nirvāṇa with Samsāra, for instance) and, moreover, were based on invented texts which could not legitimately be called the word of the Buddha.76 Mahāyānists responded by deriding the Hīnayāna (or “smaller vehicle,” a derogatory catchall term Mahāyānists employed against their sundry opponents) as possessors of a lower and over-simplified version and understanding of the Buddha’s teaching.77 Hīnayānists are thus characterized as being trapped in the provisional realm of truth, lacking full comprehension of the Dharma.

Having passed through this rudimentary explanation of the background and rise of the Mahāyāna and its particular philosophical concepts, the main thrust of the inquiry can be resumed. With the advent of a new movement in Buddhism and its attendant reinterpretations of the relationship between Samsāra and Nirvāṇa, what becomes of Māra? What changes can we notice in depictions and representations of the Evil One from the Nikāyas to Mahāyāna texts? The logical text with which to begin such an investigation is the Astasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitāsūtra, or 8,000 Lines Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra78, mentioned briefly above as the earliest known Mahāyāna text.

The concepts of emptiness and non-duality in the Asta. are not difficult to detect. In a discussion between the disciples Śāriputra and Subhuti, the very nature of such basic terms as “bodhisattva” and even the titular “Perfection of Wisdom” are bandied about, argued over, and finally demolished. These terms, Subhuti contends, correspond ultimately to nothing, leading his interlocutor to ask logically, “How can a bodhisattva be known as possessing perfect wisdom, when the very form does not possess the own-being

75 Kalupahana, pg. 6; Ramanan, pg. 60. This issue of doctrinal “tug of war” becomes central in Chapter Three of this thesis – stay tuned!
76 Ramanan, pg. 68.
77 Harvey, pg.92.
78 Hereafter abbreviated as Asta.
of form; when the perfect wisdom does not possess the own-being of perfect wisdom?"  
Subhuti answers that since all Dharmas are unborn, perfect wisdom has no own-being and possesses the characteristic of emptiness, insinuating that to possess perfect wisdom is to acknowledge the truth of the emptiness of all things.  

A few verses after the episode above, the convertible link between emptiness and perfect wisdom is further forged. This particular passage depicts the Buddha instructing disciples that when a bodhisattva entertains neither thoughts of “I am” nor “I am not,” he trains in perfect wisdom. More specifically, the bodhisattva realizes there are no Dharmas to train in, as they are empty and “do not exist in such a way as foolish, untaught, common people are accustomed to suppose.” This kind of statement points to the previously described two-tiered understanding of truth. Common, ignorant people contemplate existence in the provisional, temporal sense and can only appreciate the Dharma in that manner. However, the enlightened will see the ultimate, unspeakable, and empty nature of Dharmas, which is to have no nature.

The non-existence as well as non-non-existence of bodhisattvas, Dharmas, and perfect wisdom leads to their undifferentiated nature, immutability, and emptiness. The “suchness” then of a bodhisattva is identical to the suchness of the Tathāgatas and the dharmas. There is but one, non-dual suchness to all things. The identity of perfect wisdom with emptiness throughout the text is plain and unequivocal, as the Buddha is said to state, “For all dharmas are isolated and empty. Therefore the same mark of non-attachment, which makes perfect wisdom isolated and empty, also makes all dharmas empty.” Thus the text equates perfect wisdom with emptiness and non-duality, asserting that an accomplished bodhisattva courses in the perfect wisdom, which is to excel at understanding the Dharmas, which is to appreciate the empty nature of reality.

Given the above conclusion, Māra’s role in the Perfect Wisdom literature can be examined. In chapter one, four categories (divided into two pairings) were employed to catalog and analyze the appearances of Māra in the Nikāyas: the abstract or philosophical

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80 Ibid. pg. 86, v. 11.
81 Ibid. pg. 87, v. 14.
82 Ibid. v. 15.
84 Ibid. pg. 237, v. 399.
pairing, consisting of the dichotomic and expansive (shape-shifting) categories, and the functional, in which Māra becomes a didactic tool and also a means to demonize heterodoxy. These categories will also be useful in this chapter for the purposes of showing commonalities and incongruities in the presentation of Māra between Nikāya and Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The first category, the dichotomic, immediately requires redefinition when applied to the Asta. as the kind of parables demarcating between a realm of Māra and a realm of the Buddha, so frequent in the Nikāyas, are wholly absent from the Asta. What one finds is not the clear and insistent delineation between two different worlds but rather warnings about Māra’s hostility and opposition. This opposition is always specified as opposition not specifically to the Buddha or his disciples, as is the case in the Nikāyas, but to the propagation of the perfect wisdom, which, as I argued, is a kind of shorthand for the teaching of emptiness and non-duality. Such is to be expected, at least according to Subhuti, who remarks, “whatever is very precious…provokes much hostility…one should therefore expect that as a rule many obstacles will arise to this perfect wisdom.”

The Buddha apparently agrees, stating that “Māra the Evil One will make great efforts to cause obstacles, the Tathāgata in his turn will send help.” The last comment gives some impression of a personally combative relationship between Māra and the Buddha, but it fails to refer to a division between dominions, as is done in the Nikāyas.

Another passage that also faintly resonates of this dichotomy speaks of those who do not hear the perfect wisdom as “partisans of Māra, deceased in Māra’s realms,” which is opposed to those who course in perfect wisdom and “shatter Māra’s realms.” Despite these brief allusions to differing realms, references to Māra that hint at the dichotomic category eschew its delineating tendencies and instead more forcefully characterize him as an obstacle-maker. Some enumerations of the kinds of obstacles Māra creates are reminiscent of descriptions in the Nikāyas, such as disruption of concentration during meditation, or the appearance of confusing or distracting sights or people, such as

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86 Ibid.
87 Ibid. pg. 255, v. 436.
dancers, women, flashy clothes, food, music, jesters, poets, and so on. In chapter one, instances of this manner were placed in the expansive or shape-shifting category and shall be here also, but a difference in quantity and kind must be noted. While the Nikāyas abounded with such descriptions of Māra’s interference, they are rarer in the Asta., and the latter also lacks occurrences of the Evil One’s transmogrification into various animals or objects, such as elephants, snakes, or stones. One possible conclusion from this is that the Nikāyas had a much greater interest than the Asta. in portraying Māra as present in mundane surroundings.

Far more prominent in the Asta. are instances of Māra from the functional category, in which the symbol is utilized as a didactic tool or means to demonize heterodoxy. Examples of these references to Māra far outnumber the other categories, giving an indication as to where the emphasis of the Asta. lies. This is first evident in regards to the concept of perfect wisdom. The potency of perfect wisdom, and thereby emptiness, is reinforced by the assurance that “Māra and his hosts will be unable to harm those who take up this perfection of wisdom, who bear it in mind, preach, study and spread it.” In the same vein and on another occasion, Māra seeks to disrupt an assembly with his army, but when the god Śakra recalls the perfection of wisdom, Māra must retreat. So powerful is the perfection of wisdom, and emptiness, that even if all beings and gods in the great trichiliocosm ally themselves with or even become Māras, a bodhisattva who courses in perfect wisdom cannot be harmed.

Aside from advancing the supremacy of perfect wisdom, the Māra symbol becomes a kind of barometer by which the aptitude of a bodhisattva can be measured. In the Nikāyas, the merit and worthiness of arhats was tested by the machinations of Māra, using the symbol therefore to create the parameters of an ideal practitioner. It is not surprising, then, to find Māra utilized in this Mahāyāna text to reinforce the qualities of that movement’s ideal practitioner, the bodhisattva. In some cases, this reinforcement is done negatively, by attributing to Māra common faults and pitfalls that threaten the practice of a bodhisattva. One such deed of Māra is to foster excessive pride in a

90 Ibid. pg. 103, v. 49.
91 Ibid. pg. 111, v. 78.
92 Ibid. pg. 260, v. 447-448.
bodhisattva. The Evil One might use his power to chase a ghost away and lead a bodhisattva to believe the latter has accomplished this feat, causing his pride to grow, effort to slacken, and attitude toward others to turn boastful and scornful.\(^{93}\) Māra may also appear in a variety of human disguises, recite the bodhisattva’s past lives and inform him he has been predicted from past ages to be a Tathāgata, which (if the ruse is successful) leads just as destructively to pride and conceit.\(^{94}\)

Another lure of Māra is to explain detachment as living in a remote forest or jungle, away from people and settlements. A bodhisattva who takes this advice will mistakenly cultivate pride and become conceited toward those who remain in the villages. If a bodhisattva truly understands detachment, the Buddha explains, he will know one can be detached and isolated even amongst villages and large crowds.\(^{95}\) This temptation of Māra’s is significant. Mahāyānists often pejoratively characterized Hīnayāna practitioners or arhats as self-involved hermits, a point of view that harmonizes with the Evil One’s explanation of detachment in the episode above. The text thus exhorts its followers to avoid a trap of Māra into which it claims their fellow Buddhists have already plummeted.

A bodhisattva will also study and follow the perfect wisdom despite even the most extreme discouragement, as is exemplified in a discussion of the hells. It is said that Māra will attempt to create trepidation in a bodhisattva by conjuring visions of the hells filled to the brim with bodhisattvas, implying that unless perfect wisdom is abandoned, he will share in the same fate.\(^{96}\) The text, though, reassures all participants in the path that no bodhisattva who does not desire rebirth in the hells will reincarnate there, leaving open the opportunity that if some good can result from the perfect wisdom being taken to the hells, a bodhisattva shall do so.\(^{97}\)

From these accounts, a portrait of an ideal bodhisattva begins to emerge, with Māra’s dark brush strokes serving as the backdrop to make the highlights more brilliant: a bodhisattva must be selfless, avoid being prideful, and dwell amongst people rather than in isolation. The text offers an immediate response to any who would question the

\(^{93}\) Ibid. pg. 230, v. 385.
\(^{94}\) Ibid. pg. 231, v. 387.
\(^{95}\) Ibid. pg. 233, v. 392-395.
\(^{96}\) Ibid. pg. 202, v. 328.
\(^{97}\) Ibid.
importance of any of these characteristics of the bodhisattva career: to do otherwise is to be corrupted by Māra. When the Evil One succeeds and a bodhisattva acquiesces or succumbs to his ploys, Māra is exultant, yet if the bodhisattva perseveres and dwells in perfect wisdom, despite the tricks or frightful scenes Māra conjures, “the evil Māras are pierced by the dart of sorrow.”98 The options are thus made clear: if one remains on the path of perfect wisdom, Māra will be defeated; however, if one relinquishes that path, Māra is victorious. The teaching of the Mahāyāna and the characteristics of the bodhisattva are thus advanced in contradistinction to the figure of Māra.

While the foregoing serve as striking examples of Māra’s didactic deployment in the Asta., the human forms that text ascribes to the Evil One testify to the potent presence of the second functional category, the condemnation of heterodoxy. As was noted before, though Asta. possesses some evidence of the Evil One’s shape-shifting, it lacks the Nikāya’s numerous appearances of Māra in animal or inanimate form. Where the Asta. far exceeds the Nikāyas is in cases of the Evil One assuming human shape. In the Nikāyas, such stories are portrayed as accounts of times past when the Buddha, or occasionally his followers, crossed paths with Māra and how the Evil One was bested. They are descriptive of these encounters as well as instructive, carrying a message of how other followers should view and react to similar circumstances. On the other hand, the stories in the Perfection of Wisdom literature are almost completely hypothetical and prescriptive, speaking of the possible human forms one can expect Māra to assume at some future date, what he will say, and the appropriate reaction of a bodhisattva.

The importance of this distinction will become apparent once examples of Māra’s human appearances in the Asta. are described. One instance warns that Māra will appear among crowds where bodhisattvas are teaching the perfect wisdom and will bring along the sūtras “associated with the level of Disciples and Pratyeka-buddhas. He will advise them that they should ‘train in this, write expound, and repeat this, for from it all-knowledge will be created.’”99 Similar occurrences are anticipated in which Māra will “come in the guise of a Śramana” and argue that the perfection of wisdom the bodhisattvas understand is not the real perfection of wisdom, for that is found only in the

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98 Ibid. pg. 245, v. 416.
vehicle of the Disciples. Also in the guise of a Śramana, the Asta. portends that Māra will say, “Give up what you have heard up to now, abandon what you have gained so far!...What you have heard just now, that is not the word of the Buddha. It is poetry, the work of poets. But what I here teach to you, that is the teaching of the Buddha, that is the word of the Buddha.”

The intent of such stories is abundantly clear: all the arguments Māra spouts through the vessels of Śramanas or disciples are known to be the very arguments used by those who opposed the Mahāyāna movement and its new sūtras. From a historical perspective, it cannot be disputed that what are now called Mahāyāna sūtras first began to appear some five or six centuries after the death of the historical Buddha. To reiterate what was stated earlier in this chapter, Mahāyānists contended the sūtras were held over in one form or another from the time of the historical Buddha or were otherwise inspired. Other Buddhists, however, objected that these were new poetic creations and only the already existing canon could be claimed as the authentic teaching of the Buddha. This contentious discourse is captured here in the utilization of the symbol of Māra by the Mahāyānists and serves as the same defense mechanism against doctrinal detractors as it did against Brahmins and others in the Nikāyas. At once it deflects the criticism and also discredits the critic as an agent of Māra, or perhaps the Evil One incarnate.

It can also be appreciated from this vantage why the Māra stories fitting the demonization category are so frequent in the Asta. and why they, unlike the heterodoxy examples in the Nikāyas, are of an entirely instructive or prescriptive nature. Many hints in the text, such as its copious pleas and exhortations for duplication and dissemination, point to the tenuous and unsure nature of the movement. The Asta. emerged at a time when the Mahāyāna was a sapling amid oaks, straining for its share of sunlight in the form of adherents. Challenges such as those launched by Nikāya Buddhists required a vigorous defense while at the same time loyalists must be prepared for the slings and arrows they will endure. The stories of Māra in human form in the Asta. thus serve the vital function of training Mahāyānists to anticipate assaults by other Buddhist sects and offer a prescribed response. In this way, an aspiring bodhisattva will be prepared when a

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100 Ibid. pg. 170, v. 249.
102 Harvey, pg. 91.
group of arhats (Māra in disguise, of course) gloats that while they are already enlightened, the bodhisattva shall never see Nirvāṇa.\(^{103}\)

Related to the instance immediately above, no example better illustrates the back-and-forth dialectic in which the Māra symbol was caught than another case of the Evil One in monk’s form. This case adds a new twist, however, namely that one must be wary of a monk who alleges that the perfection of wisdom is the work of Māra, for surely the making of such an allegation is the work of Māra.\(^{104}\) Obviously, the authors of the Asta., while utilizing the Māra symbol against their detractors, were aware those same critics would be eager to point the figure of the Evil One back towards the Mahāyāna. This story seems to indicate clear knowledge of the demonizing utility of Māra and shows a Mahāyānist attempt to compensate for its use against Mahāyānists.\(^{105}\)

Even as Māra was utilized as a tool against opponents exterior to the Mahāyāna, the symbol was turned inward upon those bodhisattvas who strayed from the path. In the future, the text explains, some bodhisattvas might lose faith in the perfection of wisdom and walk out of the assemblies “declaring it is not the Buddha’s word.”\(^{106}\) This, it says, is because they are beset by Māra, just as are those bodhisattvas who spurn the perfection of wisdom and defect to the “disciple and pratyekabuddha vehicles.”\(^{107}\) The text goes on to argue that all bodhisattvas who prefer other sūtras to the perfection of wisdom are in thrall to Māra, blinded by the Evil One’s shadowy lies.\(^{108}\) A new movement would certainly require a means to explain once and future defections and those bodhisattvas unable or unwilling to follow the tenets of the perfect wisdom. In an article describing the sectarian characteristics of the Mahāyāna’s development, Stephen Kent astutely notes that “Mahāyānists’ hatred of renegades and dissenters is a typical response, since nothing

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104 Ibid. pg. 204, v. 331.
105 Ibid. pg. 246, v. 420. Even amidst this atmosphere of battling factions, the text still advises its readers to abstain from anger or hatred toward members of the Disciple or Pratyekabuddha vehicle, as these emotions will result in Māra’s victory. Stephen Kent interprets this as a typical sectarian response since continued polemics with other groups can “dissipate members’ energy from goals that are more productive for groups’ aspirations, and may even alienate potential recruits.” Kent, Stephen. “A Sectarian Interpretation of the Rise of the Mahāyāna.” Religion. Vol. 12. Oct. 1982. pg 313.
106 Ibid. pg. 139, v. 178-179.
107 Ibid. pg. 163, v. 234.
108 Ibid. pg. 164, v. 236; pg. 165, v. 239.
threatens sect-members as much as the ‘enemy within.’”

Now let us summarize what has been found to this point. When the four categories that were used to analyze Māra’s role in the Nikāyas are applied to the Asta, important differences arise, mainly that examples fitting the abstract (dichotomic and expansive) categories are much less frequent, whereas the functional (didactic and demonizing) increase in number and change in kind. In the case of the didactic category, Māra is now used to advance teachings that are not only particularly Buddhist, but particularly Mahāyānist (such as the perfection of wisdom and bodhisattva path). Where the demonizing category is concerned, a transformation has also occurred, with Māra implemented against other Buddhists.

With these preliminary conclusions made, we are left to wonder what might become of Māra as the Mahāyāna expanded and developed. A few hints can be found in the Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 lines, a later recension of the Perfection of Wisdom literature. Here, despite the earlier repeated references to Māra as an obstacle-maker, Subhuti at one point remarks that, “Nowhere is this dharma obstructed…It has no counterpart, because it is without a second. It has no opponent because it has gone beyond all opposites.” If this is true, then what of Māra’s role as opponent to the Dharma, of his efforts to impede its progress, not to mention the text’s insistence on his malign work against the perfection of wisdom?

Perhaps taking up this very issue, another passage explains that in actuality bodhisattvas are unaffected by Māra: “Māra and his hosts will be unable to gain entry to them (so as to harm them). And why? Because these sons and daughters of good family will be well-sustained by just the emptiness of form, by the emptiness of feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness. And why? Because emptiness cannot gain

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109 Kent, Stephen. pg. 319. Kent’s article contains several valuable insights into the sociology of the Mahāyāna movement. His emphasis on sectarian issues as explanatory of all aspects of the Mahāyāna, however, is quite problematic, especially when applied to the use of the symbol of Māra. It is true, as he contends, that Mahāyānists referred to Māra as the force behind the obstacles their group encountered, which is a standard sectarian characteristic. However, Kent fails to explain why Nikāya Buddhism, which was not a sectarian movement, presents Māra in much the same fashion. The better explanation, which this thesis has argued, is that Mahāyānists, utilized the symbol in the familiar didactic and demonizing means, only to their own unique ends.

110 Ramanan, pg. 31. 250 C.E. is the approximate date given.

entry into emptiness…”

Here are the seeds of an even more radically divergent vision of Māra as perhaps provisionally present, but ultimately as empty as all other beings or phenomena and thus no more good nor evil than any of them.

This application of emptiness and subsequent interpretation of the figure of Māra comes to a culmination in later Mahāyāna sūtras. Of these, I shall deal with the Sūramgamasamāddhisūtra and Vimalakīrtinirdeśa. Due to their many philosophical similarities and frequent joint translation by such masters as Kūmarajīva, the two works are often paired and naturally complement each other. Both works unfortunately also share a difficulty at to their precise date of origin, although both internally claim to be the word of the historical Buddha and extant from that time. Scholars, however, are firm in asserting a much later date for these sūtras, although exactly when is not a matter of absolute certainty. The first known translation of the Sgs. is a Chinese document from 186 C.E. If a prior Sanskrit version exists, and it is quite possible it does not, it would therefore be somewhat earlier. Because of these doubts, the consensus holds the probable date of the sūtra to early or mid-2nd century C.E.

The exact time period of the Vkn. is equally murky. Robert Thurman, Burton Watson, and Etienne Lamotte have all produced translations into Western languages, and as a result of their studies all three have come to differing views on the date of the text. Watson claims the earliest Chinese text to be from around 188 C.E., making the original version extant from the 1st century C.E. Thurman argues that nothing is known about the original text and none is apparent until sometime after the life of Nāgārjuna (circa 150 C.E. to 250 C.E.) and bases his own translation on the 9th century Tibetan version. Lamotte, unlike the previous two, works with and discusses several of the many different versions in which the Vkn. can be found. From his thorough treatment, he deduces the age of the oldest Chinese translation to the 3rd century C.E. (between 222-229) and the prior Sanskrit version to a few decades before. Although Watson’s argument is more

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112 Trans. Conze, pg. 221, v. 7.
113 Hereafter abbreviated as Sgs. and Vkn. respectively.
114 Etienne Lamotte, preface to Sgs. translation, pgs. x-xi.
115 Ibid. pg. viii.
116 Burton Watson, preface to Vkn. translation, pg. 1.
117 Encyclopedia of World Religions, Wendy Doniger (ed.)
118 Robert Thurman, preface to Vkn. translation. pg. ix.
119 Lamotte, preface to Vkn. translation. pg. xxv.
recent, Lamotte’s understanding has stronger legs to stand on, in my view, both for the wider array of sources and research it draws upon and also for the light it sheds upon the Sgs. If the Sgs. can be reliably dated to around 186 C.E., perhaps slightly before, and the first version of the Vkn. to a few decades before 222 C.E., this would place their composition to roughly the same time period. Such a conclusion is perfectly logical given the aforementioned philosophical links between the texts and their frequent appearance in tandem.

For the purposes of this current study, there are two important points to glean from this exercise in textual dating. First, the closeness in chronology of the sūtras suggests that the philosophical similarities are not coincidental but rather harmonious chords of a single movement. Second, all the dates above reliably place the Sgs. and Vkn. after the origin of the Perfection of Wisdom Literature, providing the opportunity to investigate a later presentation of the concepts of emptiness and non-duality and its affect on Māra.

Thus, as one might expect, in the Sgs. the rhetoric of emptiness and non-duality has reached new heights and broken more ground, especially in the portrayal of Māra. The Evil One enters the sūtra after the Sgs. (or “Concentration on Heroic Progress”) has been expounded by the Buddha for some time and Śāriputra becomes curious as to why Māra has not made any attempt to interrupt the assembly. The Buddha at first explains that whenever the Sgs. is professed, Māra is bound, suggesting the familiar theme of opposition, but further remarks roil the waters: “If Māra Pāpimāt now hears the name of the Sgs. being uttered he will succeed in transcending the works of Māra.”\textsuperscript{120} Māra will transcend Māra? This somewhat confusing but tantalizing statement implies the conversion of Māra, something for which earlier texts, such as the Nikāyas – nor even the Asta. – did not allow.

The Buddha presses the point and asks a bodhisattva – significantly named Māragocaranupalipta, “undefiled by the domain of Māra” – to seek out Māra and “compel him to establish himself in the Sgs.”\textsuperscript{121} The bodhisattva obeys and once the Evil One is found, the Buddha’s words prove prescient, as Māra has indeed been bound as a

\textsuperscript{120} trans. Lamotte, pg. 174.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., pg. 175. The bodhisattva’s name shall hereafter be abbreviated “Māragocara.”
result of the discourse on the Sgs. Māragocara, admonishes Māra, telling him that those who resist the Sgs. are ruled by wrong views, but (and here non-duality shifts into high gear) they are not really bound for there can be no deliverance, as the Dharma is neither bound nor delivered. While Māra fumes, a number of Devakanyas, daughters of Māra, approach the bodhisattva, lamenting their place in Māra’s realm and pleading for the means of release. Māragocara, again trots out the concept of non-duality in response, telling them that, counter-intuitively, by not destroying the bonds of Māra they will be freed. Understandably, the Devakanyas ask how this can be and Māragocara answers that false views neither come nor go, exist nor non-exist and “not to see anything is the right view and the right view is neither right nor wrong.”

Meanwhile, Māra has plotted a solution to his woes. He assents to arouse the bodhicitta and course in the Sgs., although in actuality this is only a ploy to be released from his bonds. The Buddha and his assembly, who have been watching the entire encounter, ask if Māra’s hollow vow will still be efficacious. To the surprise of all, the Buddha answers affirmatively. Māra’s intention does not matter, for by the sole virtue of having heard the Sgs. he will “come to eliminate the works of Māra, the practices of Māra…and will finally reach supreme and perfect enlightenment.”

Concern begins to grip Māra, especially over the fate of his dominion and its members, who are being stolen away by the Sgs. Māragocara, and the Devakanyas tell Māra to forego these worries since in actuality no one has departed his realm: “the suchness of the world of Māra is the suchness of the world of the Buddha. Between these worlds there is neither duality nor difference.” The barrier between realms is even more crushingly shattered when Māra leaves for his palace and instead finds the Buddha’s assembly. The Evil One proceeds toward the assembly and discovers it was his palace all along! Bringing the episode to a close, Māra agrees to allow the use of his palace to the assembly, which is somewhat of an empty gift as the obvious insinuation is

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122 Ibid.
123 Ibid. pg. 176. This incident becomes a further demonstration of the absence of true or false views as 200 especially lustful Devakanyas proposition the bodhisattva, offering their vows to attain the path in exchange. Agreeing to such terms would normally be a violation of the five precepts, but the bodhisattva, arguing that ultimately purity and pollution are empty, consents.
124 Ibid. pg. 179.
125 Ibid. pg. 192.
126 Ibid. pg. 193.
that the two realms have in fact been identical from the outset. Finally, all present extol the exploits of Māragocara. who “enters the palaces of Māra and yet never leaves the assembly gathered around the Buddha, seems to travel through the world of Māra, to stroll and amuse himself there, but he makes use of the Buddhadharmas to win over beings.”127

These last lines underline the didactic function of the symbol of Māra in this sūtra. Due to the concept of emptiness, both Nirvāṇa and Samsāra are empty and identical, consequently charging the bodhisattva with the task of existing in Samsāra while possessing the qualities of Nirvāṇa. Māra, previously the symbol of Samsāra, provides a convenient tool to illustrate such a teaching. Bodhisattvas such as Māragocara., who is offered as a paradigm in the Sgs., are to travel in Māra’s company and even “possess the supreme power of Māra’s; but abstain from the works of cruel Māras.”128 The impenetrable barrier the Nikāyas erected and repeatedly reinforced between the world of the Buddha and the world of Māra is thoroughly demolished and crushed into powder in the Sgs., to be replaced by the bodhisattva path, which in turn is the result of the concept of emptiness. It must be noted that this point relies on the earlier portrayal of the two realms as insoluble, for otherwise the realization of their convertibility is anticlimactic. Playing off the Nikāya presentation of the Buddha and Māra as irreconcilable opposites, this sūtra quickly turns that presentation on its head to reinforce concepts particular to the Mahāyāna. The new philosophical concepts have thus created a new representation of the symbol of Māra to impart the ideal of the bodhisattva path.

This new representation of Māra is just as evident in the Vkn, which shares the Sgs. goal of advocating the qualities of the bodhisattva path.129 The paradigm in this case is Vimalakīrti, a lay householder who is feigning sickness to bring bodhisattvas to visit him. Once they arrive, he instructs them on the finer points of the bodhisattva path, on which nearly all seem to be either confused or lacking. In the course of these events,

127 Ibid. pg. 196.
128 Ibid. pg. 113.
129 References to the Vkn. that follow are taken from both the Thurman and Lamotte translations. I deemed it necessary to divide my references between both rather than rely solely on one is not due to any discrepancies between the translations, but due to the different aims of each scholar. The text of both read quite similarly, but Thurman’s aim was philosophical as compared to Lamotte’s concern for philology. I quote from the appropriate translation depending on the case.
Māra appears and is mentioned several times. During one instance, the Evil One assumes the form of Indra before the bodhisattva Jagatimdhara, and offers him a score of maidens. Vimalakīrti sees through the deception and demands the maidens for himself. Māra is forced to comply and his chagrin is multiplied by Vimalakīrti’s subsequent teaching of the Dharma to the maidens and instruction that they profess what they have learned in Māra’s abode and to Māra himself.\textsuperscript{130} The parallels with the incident between Māragocara and the Devakanyas are striking. In both cases, the maidens or daughters of Māra are converted by a bodhisattva and given the mission of spreading the Buddha’s word into Māra’s realm, also for the purpose of the Evil One’s conversion. Also, the bodhisattva virtue of remaining in Samsāra or Māra’s realm is reinforced.

Other instances of conversation between Vimalakīrti and various bodhisattvas echo the Sgs.’ equality of the realms of Māra and the Buddha, as well as cast new light on the Evil One’s true identity. During a discourse on emptiness, Mañjuśrī inquires as to why Vimalakīrti, a householder, has no servants. The latter replies that “all Māras and opponents are my servants. Why? The Māras advocate this life of birth and death and the bodhisattva does not avoid life. The heterodox opponents advocate convictions and the bodhisattva is not troubled by convictions. Therefore, all Māras and opponents are my servants.”\textsuperscript{131}

There are three important points to draw from Vimalakīrti’s remarks. The first is the invocation of Māra as an actual servant of Buddhism, as an agent of its propagation, and more will be said about this soon enough. The second salient inference to be made rests on the difference between what Vimalakīrti has to say about heterodoxy and what was seen in the \textit{Asta}. The \textit{Asta} offered copious examples in which the opponents of the perfect wisdom and Mahāyāna were affiliated with Māra and cast in the role of demons. The Sgs. and Vkn., however, noticeably lack such instances. A logical explanation seems that, with the advent of a doctrine such as non-duality, which erases ultimate differences between good and evil, associating an opponent with a figure of evil would lose its heft and sting.

\textsuperscript{130} Thurman, pgs. 37-39. 
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid. pg. 44.
The third point bears on the very character of non-duality. Vimalakīrti, even while expounding what should be orthodox behavior for bodhisattvas, allies himself with Māra and heterodoxy. This is but one instance of such behavior by the householder, for in other places in the text he promotes engaging in the deadly sins and journeying to the hells as a means of learning the Dharma.\textsuperscript{132} Mañjuśrī agrees with this view, arguing that since all humanity is caught in the grip of passions, it is through the passions that enlightenment must come.\textsuperscript{133} Indeed, the bodhisattvas are encouraged to use the passions in whatever form necessary to rescue beings, for example taking the form of courtesans to catch men with the “hook of desire” and lead them to the Dharma.\textsuperscript{134} Such references mirror the attributes given to Māra in the Nikāyas as a hunter, a trapper who sees all humanity as his prey and will employ whatever bait is needed to ensnare the quarry. Here, though, the bodhisattva claims that role and the distance between the follower of the Buddha and the Evil One is shortened.

That distance entirely vanishes elsewhere in the text as Vimalakīrti asserts, “the Māras who behave like Māra in the innumerable universes of the ten regions are all bodhisattvas established in inconceivable liberation and who, through, skilful means, behave like Māra in order to ripen beings.”\textsuperscript{135} Not only the distinction between worlds has evaporated but also between paradigmatic figures, as Māra has taken on the characteristic of a being like the Buddha, working toward the liberation of beings. The inference is partly that Māra creates such suffering in the world that beings will desire release, that desire being a prerequisite to attaining the path. Earlier in the text, the Buddha himself admits to the same kind of practice, briefly turning the entire universe into jewels and lotuses, then explaining, “My Buddhasektra (Buddha-field) is always as pure as this, but, to help inferior beings ripen, the Tathāgata makes it appear like a field vitiated with many flaws.”\textsuperscript{136} It would appear that Māra is also adept at this strategy.

Alternatively, the Evil One might also be seen as an integral part of the Buddha’s strategy, as a device in the grand scheme to liberate all beings. When answering a question from Ānanda, the Buddha says as much, explaining that Māra is a necessary

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid. pg. 64.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid. pg. 66.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid. pg. 71.
\textsuperscript{135} Lamotte, pg. 150.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid. pg. 24.
figure, for “it is through the four Māras and 84,000 kinds of passions that defile beings that the Blessed Lord Buddhas actuate Buddha deeds.” Because of this necessity, acquainting oneself with the deeds and powers of Māra is an irreplaceable step in a bodhisattva’s training (a proposition the Sgs. also makes). To follow the Buddhadharma, Vimalakīrti argues, a bodhisattva must take the five poisons, commit the five acts of badness, “follow the way of Māra” and also “know the feats of Māra and conform to the Māras.” No longer a clear-cut opponent of the Buddha, Māra in the Vkn. is an agent by which the Dharma can be propagated and a teacher, in a sense, from whom bodhisattvas are to learn vital lessons.

It is important to note that this development is not unprecedented among Buddhist symbols of evil. In fact, a similar trajectory can be viewed in stories of and references to Devadatta, the Buddha’s cousin. Reginald Ray, in his work *Buddhist Saints in India*, accurately relates that the Nikāyās present Devadatta as “an inveterate evildoer” who attempts to split the Sangha and supplant the Buddha as leader. Certain Mahāyāna texts, though, found in Mongolia, offer an entirely different view: “Stupid men believe wrongly and assert that Devadatta has been an enemy of the Buddha. That the sublime bodhisattva Devadatta, during five hundred births in which Buddha was going through the career of bodhisattva, inflicted on him all possible evil and suffering was in order to establish the excellence and high qualities of the bodhisattva.” Devadatta would therefore play the same role for Gautama Buddha, during his previous lives, which Māra plays for bodhisattvas, namely to acquaint them with the nature of Samsāra and suffering so that they may learn true compassion.

Still, though, coming back to Māra’s representation, there are a few references in both the Sgs. and Vkn. to the accomplishment of “crushing” the armies of Māra, which seems incongruent if the deity is actually performing a service in one’s ultimate favor. These occurrences can be explained by the distinction between provisional and ultimate truths. On the provisional level, one is exhorted to resist Māra, while at the same time it must be realized that duality between good and evil is fundamentally illusory and

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137 Ibid. pg. 226.
138 Ibid. pg. 175.
139 Ibid. pg. 183.
140 Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India*, pg. 162.
141 Ibid. pg. 178 n. 56.
ultimately Māra’s deeds are empty and equally conducive to realization of the Dharma. Thus, as one sees in the Sgs., when the curtain of ignorance is raised, the palace of Māra and the assembly of the Buddha are found to occupy the same space and in the Vkn., the Evil One himself is a bodhisattva. However, due to this tension between provisional and ultimate personas, Māra can be seen as a somewhat ambivalent figure in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Whereas in the Nikāyas Māra is a malign figure regardless of the situation, in the later Mahāyāna sūtras the circumstances surrounding discussions or appearances of the Evil One are of utmost importance. Depending upon the particular context or teaching that is being reinforced, Māra can be portrayed in either the provisional (evil) or ultimate (bodhisattva) aspect, all because the concepts of emptiness and non-duality have complicated the symbol’s once univalent meaning.

Also as a consequence of emptiness and non-duality in the Vkn. and Sgs., the four categories that fit Māra’s appearances in the Nikāyas, and necessitated revision when applied to the Asta., require an even more drastic overhaul concerning these later Mahāyāna sūtras. The category of dichotomic distinction between a world of the Buddha and a world of Māra completely collapses. The expansive/shape-shifting category, so closely linked to the dichotomy, also evaporates, as its main purpose served to demonstrate Māra’s menacing presence in all facets of Samsāra. If Samsāra is no longer to be feared in the same manner and random encounters with Māra are to be seen as avenues of enlightenment, the need to warn practitioners of the Evil One’s ubiquity atrophies. Thus, instances of an expansive, shape-shifting Māra are not found in these later Mahāyāna texts.

The functional categories, it was seen, also undergo a distinctive change from the Nikāyas to the Mahāyāna. In the Asta., the heterodox, demonizing utilization of Māra is at first redirected against fellow Buddhists who oppose the Mahāyāna, yet when this tension somewhat dissipates and the rhetoric of non-duality intensifies, this appearance of Māra withers away. Of the four categories, the one which retains the strongest presence in the transition between the Nikāyas and the Mahāyāna is the didactic. This too, though, is redirected and the symbol of Māra is reinterpreted and redeployed to expound and reinforce the virtues, characteristics, and techniques of the ideal bodhisattva and teach the meaning of emptiness and non-duality. As was surmised earlier, just as Māra was used in
the Nikāyas to assert teachings that were particular to Buddhism, in the Mahāyāna sūtras one finds Māra utilized in the didactic capacity of imparting the teachings particular to the Mahāyāna.

At the conclusion of this chapter, it is obvious that Nikāya and Mahāyāna Buddhism have significantly different visions and conceptions of Māra. Given the often close proximity in which these kinds of Buddhism exist, one wonders what the result might be if the differing views of Māra were to encounter each other. That is the subject to which attention shall be turned next, in the particular context of Southeast Asia, which has a plentiful history of just this kind of contact.
Chapter Three

Māra Mixed Up
The beginning of the previous chapter described the multifarious kinds of Buddhism that mingled and quarreled with one another in the India of the early Common Era. As confusing and frustrating to neat, tight categorization as that location and time period is to Buddhist Studies, it has an equal, if not a superior in the Buddhism of Southeast Asia. While Southeast Asia is fairly uniformly Theravādin today, such was not always the case. The first six or seven centuries of the religion’s presence in the region witnessed not the monolithic dominance of a single sect, but rather the existence of multiple Buddhist groups. Given the topic of this project, the main focus in this chapter shall be on the dynamics between the Mahāyāna and Theravāda in Southeast Asia and the revisions or changes the symbol of Māra undergoes as a result of those dynamics. In short, I seek to explain what becomes of Māra when a diverse religious milieu becomes far more monotypic.

Based on the dating of several archeological sites, it is generally agreed upon that Buddhism arose in Southeast Asia between the fourth and sixth centuries C.E. Over the past 14-1600 years, the Buddhism of the region has become predominantly Theravādin in nature, and the Theravādin “party line” as it were, asserts that this current status is merely a continuation of a long tradition of doctrinally pure Theravāda. Historical evidence not only fails to lend credence to such a statement, but actually contradicts it outright. In fact, the scholarly consensus today is that any Theravādin claim of doctrinal purity extending so far into the past ought to be greeted with immense skepticism. The truth of the matter is that from the earliest times of Buddhism’s presence, Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, Tantra, Theravāda, and even Hindu groups coexisted in Southeast Asia. Testifying to this amorphous mixture, Pāli inscriptions in Lower Burma show Theravāda influence by the fifth to sixth century C.E., yet nearby Sanskrit and Pāli/Sanskrit mixed tablets record the Mahāyāna bodhisattva path from the same, if not earlier period. Other remains in Burma betray a characteristically Sarvāstivādin preoccupation with the existence of

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142 The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia (ed.) Nicholas Tarling. pg. 291. It should be noted that a few scholars believe Buddhism had an influence on the region far earlier than the dates given above. See Buddhist Trends in Southeast Asia, (ed.) Trevor Ling. pg. 110.
143 The term “Hīnayāna” is used here and hereafter simply for the convenience of denoting schools, such as the Sarvāstivādins, who were as non-Theravādin as non-Mahāyānist.
multiple temporalities, while statues of Vishnu and bodhisattvas rest nearby, all extant also from the fifth to sixth centuries.\footnote{D.G. Hall, \textit{A History of Southeast Asia}, pg. 142.}

Further exploding the Pāli-Theravādin theory of primacy in Southeast Asia is the fact that the earliest sites of Buddhism in North and Central Thailand are decorated in Sanskrit, not Pāli, revealing some early influence other than Theravāda.\footnote{Bardwell L. Smith (ed.) \textit{Religion and Polity in Northern Thailand}, pg. 22.} Even more devastating, the presence of large numbers of Sanskrit inscriptions referring to characteristically Mahāyāna teachings, such as śūnyatā, argue for the prevalence of the Mahāyāna, not Theravāda, among Buddhist groups in Southeast Asia until roughly the thirteenth century C.E.\footnote{The \textit{Cambridge History of Southeast Asia}, pgs. 283, 293, 296.} From all this we can conclude, as Donald Swearer does, that the notion of a pure Pāli-Theravāda orthodoxy and lineage in Southeast Asia is a fiction “created by Sinhalese monastics.”\footnote{Swearer, \textit{The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia}, pg. x.} If Theravāda is plainly the dominant form of Buddhism in Southeast Asia today, and, just as firmly, the history of the region tells of a time when schools and doctrines teemed with multiplicity, it is logical to wonder what might account for such a turn of events.

By mentioning the Sinhalese monastics, Donald Swearer has begun to indicate an answer to that question. What eventually became the Theravāda in Southeast Asia today ultimately has its roots in the Mahāvira monks of Śri Lanka, or Sinhala.\footnote{Robert Lester, \textit{ Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia}, pg. 66.} This Sinhalese influence only begins in the eleventh or twelfth century C.E.,\footnote{Ibid.; Smith, pg. 22; Swearer, pg. ix.} which is a period of some significance in the history of Buddhism. As Southeast Asia inherited Buddhism from India, the multiplicity of the religion’s forms in its homeland was naturally a part of that inheritance and thus explains the diversity found for the first several centuries in the region. However, by the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Buddhism was dying out in the land of its birth and practitioners in Southeast Asia could no longer look to India for influence and support as they had before.\footnote{Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, pgs. 281-282.} The Buddhism of Śri Lanka, though, was thriving and quickly filled the vacuum, becoming a reference point of stability for the Buddhists of Southeast Asia.\footnote{Smith, pg. 6; Swearer, “Buddhism in Southeast Asia,” pg. 391.} Sinhalese Buddhism, unlike what had previously existed
in India and Southeast Asia, was fairly monotypic, consisting of strict Pāli-Theravādin monasteries of the Mahāvira line.

Another historical development during this same time that facilitated the rise of the Theravāda was the advent of the classical states of Southeast Asia, particularly Pagan in Burma, Angkor in Cambodia, and Sukhothai in Thailand. For a time, the Buddhism of these states was a mix of Mahāyāna, Tantra, and other schools, each receiving royal patronage. However, as wars and other disasters depleted the sanghas, the kings of the various states sought to reinvigorate the monasteries with “reinfusions of orthodoxy.” As the most prosperous and stable Buddhist community of the time, Śri Lanka’s Theravādins accepted the invitation and began to flood the region with monks and officials, as well as educate candidates for ordination from the mainland in their home monasteries.

The Buddhism of Southeast Asia was thus slowly reshaped in the image of Śri Lanka. In Burma for example, “reform” became the royal watchword and Theravāda the only acceptable orthodoxy, while all others came to be regarded as heretical. Theravāda, which had been present in the region for centuries, was asserted by the royalty as a paradigm of authenticity while other schools were said to be deviations from purity, stability, and constancy. Subsequently all traces of other doctrines were vitiated, effectively suppressed, or at the very least, subordinated. By the fourteenth or fifteenth century, Sinhalese Theravāda Buddhism had become the dominant religion in Southeast Asia.

Shedding further light on the royal affinity for Sinhalese Theravāda Buddhism is the notion of kingship (which is also informative with regard to what we will find regarding Māra). According to legends, which are not historically verifiable, the Buddha visited Śri Lanka during his lifetime and after his parinirvāṇa several of his teeth and

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154 Swearer, “Buddhism in Southeast Asia,” pg. 386.
155 Ibid. pg. 387; Hall, pg. 123.
156 Mendelson, pg. 51.
158 Ibid.
159 Ibid., pg. 24.
160 In Cambodia’s Angkor for instance, in 1340 Sanskrit inscriptions and carvings of bodhisattvas cease when the king affiliates with Pāli-Theravāda. Hall, pg. 126. In the temples of twelfth century Pagan, John Strong has found bodhisattva images, but hidden beneath or nearly blocked out by more Pāli-friendly inscriptions. The Legend and Cult of Upagupta, pg. 182.
other relics were taken to Śri Lanka. Beside the desire to replenish and “purify” their sanghas, many Southeast Asian monarchs sought to forge ties with Sinhalese Buddhists in hopes of acquiring these relics as a means of legitimating their rule.

Beyond this rather one-sided relationship, the Southeast Asian monarchs found the Pāli-Theravādin notion of kingship very much to their liking and a symbiosis quickly formed between royalty and the sangha. Ultimately, this relationship is justified by the cosmology found in the Aggañña Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya. In the sutta, the Buddha recounts the beginning of this world-cycle, when beings were mind-made and possessed bodies of a very subtle nature. After these beings had existed for some time, a thin film began to form the first surface of the earth. Out of curiosity, the beings sampled this film and began to consume more and more of it, leading to the development of substantial bodies of a digressively coarser quality. Immorality and decline soon followed physicality.

The resultant view of the cosmos in Theravāda is of luminousness descending into corruption and through this reasoning, a corrupt world thus necessitates a strong paradigm of righteousness in the form of a king. Due to his wealth and great power, the king in Theravāda doctrine was the greatest holder of merit and possessed the capacity to delay or arrest the degeneration of the cosmos, placing responsibility for the kingdom’s salvation squarely on his shoulders. The king will exemplify his righteousness and meritorious prowess partly through his edicts and partly through his generous patronage of the Theravādin sangha. By virtue of Pāli-Theravādin doctrine, therefore, both parties got what they wanted: the Theravādins legitimated the rule of the great power centers of Southeast Asia and the Theravādins received royal patronage.

With this contextualization complete, we can turn to the most prominent stories of Māra in Southeast Asia, namely the Lokapaññatti and its predecessor, the Aśokāvadāna. The latter is part of the Divyāvadāna, a Sanskrit anthology of legends, and was compiled in India in approximately the second century C.E. John Strong suggests that its

161 Lester, pg. 66.
162 Smith, pg. 7.
164 Aung-Thwin, pg. 46.
166 John Strong, The Legend of King Aśokā: a Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna, pg. 16.
authorship is possibly Sarvāstivādin, although this is not certain. While not a Southeast Asian text, the Aśokāvadāna story is the foundation out of which the Lokapaññatti grows, and thus is a main antecedent of the region’s understanding of Māra, as well as other mythical figures. In fact, the figure of King Aśokā was the template for the “Dharma king” described above and served as a model for the kings of Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka.¹⁶⁷ A small portion of the Mahāvamsa contains a related story about Aśokā in which the king is portrayed as a link in the chain from the Buddha to Śri Lanka and thus from Śri Lanka to Southeast Asia.¹⁶⁸ One of Aśokā’s noteworthy acts in the tale – the anachronistic nature of which highlights the sectarian intentions – is to defrock a large number of monks who refuse to fall in line with Theravāda orthodoxy.¹⁶⁹ Given his alignment in the story with a lineage headed to Southeast Asia and avid support of Theravāda doctrine, the implication for supposed orthodoxy in Southeast Asia is clear.

This said, we can at last end our neglect of the Evil One and examine what this doctrinal conflict has meant for Māra in this region. Beginning naturally with the Aśokāvadāna, we see that the story as a whole deals with Aśokā’s career. It begins by explaining how he earned great merit in a past life, then narrates his early tenure as king, conversion to Buddhism, and finally how the remainder of his rule was spent as the ideal earthly cakravartin, or wheel-turning monarch. The episode featuring Māra occurs very early in the story and actually does not even involve Aśokā. Instead, the foil for the Evil One is the legendary monk Upagupta, who becomes a focus of ritual and mythical attention in Southeast Asia. Upagupta is preaching the Dharma to a crowd when Māra, ever eager to disrupt a profession of the Buddha’s teaching, sends a shower of pearls from the sky to distract the listeners.¹⁷⁰ On the next two successive days, the Evil One repeats his interruptive performance, effectively foiling Upagupta’s attempts at winning converts. As a final insult, he places a garland of flowers around the monk’s neck.¹⁷¹

Upagupta does not merely accept defeat, however. He meditates on who the source of this trouble might be, and once the realization dawns that the culprit is none

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., pg. 39; Aung-Thwin, pg. 58.
¹⁶⁸ Strong, The Legend of King Aśokā, pg. 23.
¹⁶⁹ Ibid.
¹⁷⁰ Ibid., pg. 186. This and the following citations of the Aśokāvadāna come from Strong’s translation, which forms the second half of his book The Legend of King Aśokā.
¹⁷¹ Ibid. The basis for the insulting nature of this gesture is that possession of such decorations by the ordained connoted a misunderstanding of impermanence.
other than Māra, the monk decides the time for the Evil One’s conversion to the Dharma is at hand.172 Upagupta approaches Māra with a garland of his own and the gloating deity, interpreting this as a sign of surrender, allows himself to be decorated. Soon enough, though, the flowers magically transform into their true nature: the corpses of a snake, a dog, and a human.173 Nearly driven mad by the stench of the rotten flesh, Māra nonetheless cannot remove the garland and goes on a lengthy and exhaustive search for a fellow god who can rid him of his burden. He consults Mahendra, Varuna, Yamā, and even Brahma, among others, but none can undo Upagupta’s magic.174

The only recourse for Māra is to seek out the monk who has stricken him. En route, the Evil One experiences a change of heart, realizing that if the power of Upagupta is great enough to thwart the gods, he could have chosen to perpetrate far worse in retaliation for the disruption of his sermons. Instead, he only bound Māra, and upon this thought, the Evil One was touched by the monk’s compassion.175

Once Māra finds Upagupta, he begins to recite several instances, which he now regrets, of persecution he has committed against the Buddha and his followers.176 Of these confessed infractions, Māra mentions his attempt to sabotage the Buddha’s almsgathering in a Brahmin village and occasions when he assumed the forms of a giant snake and bull to startle and frighten bhikkus.177 Despite all this, the monk assures him, Māra can overcome his nefarious past merely by taking faith in the Buddha. Furthermore, Upagupta agrees to remove the bonds, but on two conditions. First, Māra must never harass monks again, and second, he must manifest the body of the Buddha for him.178 Because he possesses shape-shifting abilities and a memory of the Buddha’s appearance, the Evil One is perfectly able to accommodate. Still, Māra has reservations, namely that if Upagupta should revere him in the Buddha’s form, the Evil One would be destroyed, as unenlightened beings cannot bear the reverence of the enlightened.179 Even though

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172 Ibid., pg. 187.
173 Ibid.
174 Ibid., pg. 188.
175 Ibid., pg. 189.
176 Ibid., pg. 189-190.
177 These incidents all come from the Mārasamyutta of the Samyutta Nikāya. See chapter one, pgs 16-17 of this thesis for a discussion of these events in the context of the Nikāyas.
178 Ibid., pg. 192.
179 Ibid., pg. 193.
Upagupta promises not to venerate Māra he is overcome by the sight of the Buddha and forgets the agreed upon injunction. The Evil One protests and the monk explains that he was worshipping the image and not the vehicle of the image, as one worships the god and not the clay out of which the god’s image is fashioned. Māra is satisfied with this answer and the episode ends with the Evil One exhorting all who will listen to find the Dharma.

The purpose of the encounter with Māra in this story is predominately to solidify Upagupta’s credentials and to inspire Aśokā to seek the monk. Once they have met, Upagupta will serve as Aśokā’s guide on his pilgrimage to sites the Buddha once visited. Furthermore, their reciprocal reverence and respect further epitomizes the ideal relationship between king/cakravartin and sangha.

Once we begin to examine this portrayal of Māra, it becomes apparent that it is unlike any representation analyzed in either of the previous two chapters. It resists neat categorization as either in the Nikāya or Mahāyāna tradition and the best we can conclude is that it is the product of a mixing of the two points of view. On the one side, the notion of Māra’s convertibility is a very Mahāyānist idea. In the Sgs., we saw another example of the binding of Māra, in that instance by the Sgs. itself, presaging the revelation of his intrinsic relation to the Dharma. By assuming the Buddha’s form, Māra accentuates Upagupta’s understanding of the Dharma, an interesting role for an Evil One as, in this case, he is serving to advance the Dharma rather than obstruct it. Thus, I would argue that by assuming the Buddha’s form, Māra is utilizing upāya-kauśalya, or skilful means for the purpose of instructing Upagupta.

There are also important elements in the Aśokāvadāna, however, that prevent us from treating it as a fully Mahāyānist characterization of Māra. The overarching theme of sangha-cakravartin symbiosis is a definite mark of Theravādin influence. Second, by virtue of his interruptive performances during Upagupta’s initial sermons, Māra possesses a degree of the expansive/shape-shifting ability that was prevalent in the Nikāyas but disappeared in later Mahāyāna sūtras. Third, despite being convertible, Māra is never portrayed as innately or ultimately good, as he is in the Vkn. or Sgs. Rather, he must be badgered, berated, humiliated, and conquered before he acquiesces to the

180 Ibid., pg. 196.
Dharma. This understanding is far more in keeping with the Nikāya perception of Māra. The portrayal of Māra in this story is thus heterogeneous, which is what one might expect given that second century Buddhism in India was of a somewhat heterogeneous nature. The Sarvāstivādins are the primary candidates for authorship of the text and this goes some distance toward explaining the heterogeneous portrayal of Māra. The Sarvāstivādin school occupied a sort of middle ground between the Theravāda and Mahāyāna, thus such a portrayal is to be expected from them.

Based on the second century Aśokāvadāna is the Lokapaññatti, a story that has served as the foundation for much of the Southeast Asian comprehension and presentation of Māra. The story was written in the eleventh or twelfth century in Lower Burma, which as we saw was a time and place of heavy Mahāyāna influence just before the Theravāda resurgence. Basic features of the legend are in common with the Aśokāvadāna: Upagupta confronts Māra, who is compelled to manifest the physical form of the Buddha; subsequently the monk comes to have a relationship with King Aśokā. The Lokapaññatti, however, develops these elements quite differently. As this story is so vital to analyzing Māra’s role later in Southeast Asia, I will briefly recount the significant portions before further scrutinizing the dissimilarities.

The tale begins when Aśokā prepares a festival to dedicate 84,000 stūpas he has constructed. Anxieties about Māra’s potential to disrupt the festival cast a pall over the king’s deliberations, though, and to circumvent the threat he instructs the sangha to find someone to protect against Māra’s interference. After some debate, the monks settle on Upagupta as a candidate for this task and bring him to Aśokā’s council, where he accepts the job. As anticipated, on the festival day Māra arrives and conjures a rainstorm to extinguish the lamps Aśokā has lit for his ceremony. Upagupta responds without hesitation and diverts the rain. The Evil One then takes the forms successively of a great bull, a seven-headed snake, and a huge yaksa to destroy the lampstads. Not to be outdone, Upagupta transforms into a tiger, a garuda, and an even larger yaksa to defeat

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181 Strong, The Legend and Cult of Upagupta, pg. 186.
182 Ibid.
183 Ibid., pg. 189.
184 Ibid., pg. 195.
185 Ibid., pg. 200.
each of Māra’s shapes in turn.\textsuperscript{186} Then, just as in the \textit{Aśokāvadāna}, he affixes Māra with a garland of corpses that the Evil One cannot remove. Not content to leave affairs even in that state, the monk proceeds to tie Māra to a mountain with his monastic belt for the duration of the festival (seven years, seven months, and seven days).\textsuperscript{187}

This time spent bound to the mountain changes Māra and once Upagupta releases him, the Evil One confesses that he has meditated on the compassion of the Buddha.\textsuperscript{188} This conversion does not prevent Māra from taking a few final jabs at his persecutor, however, for when the Evil One vows to attain Buddhahood in a future lifetime, he explains that it is because he would rather be a Buddha than a disciple as “disciples such as you are compassionateless; if I were to become such a disciple, I, too, would be compassionateless.”\textsuperscript{189} Apparently not content to stop there, the Evil One further explains his decision to pursue Buddhahood by emphasizing the inferiority of other paths: “The Buddha was endowed with great virtue, but you śrāvakas are terrible people.”\textsuperscript{190} Upagupta, the hero of the story and a śrāvaka himself, astoundingly agrees with this assessment, saying, “the Buddha is greatly compassionate…but I am a man of the Lesser Vehicle.”\textsuperscript{191} The remainder of the story, in which Māra assumes the Buddha’s form for Upagupta’s veneration, so closely resembles the \textit{Aśokāvadāna} version that it does not merit further elaboration.

Upon inspection, it is clear that while certain Nikāya elements remain (Māra’s shape-shifting, for example) the \textit{Lokapaññatti} has amplified the Mahāyāna elements already observed and noted in the \textit{Aśokāvadāna}. Māra’s conversion to Buddhism has become not only a vow to attain the path, but to attain Buddhahood, the possibility of which is a distinguishing feature of the Mahāyāna. Not only that, but Māra and even Upagupta go to great pains to deride practitioners who seek goals other than Buddhahood. The rhetoric against śrāvakas or arhats obviously bears the mark of Mahāyāna influence and Māra’s rather caustic remarks should seem quite familiar after the discussion of the Perfection of Wisdom literature in chapter two. Since the

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\item \textsuperscript{186} Ibid., pg. 201.
\item \textsuperscript{187} Ibid., pg. 207.
\item \textsuperscript{188} Ibid., pg. 207.
\item \textsuperscript{189} Ibid., pg. 102.
\item \textsuperscript{190} Ibid., pg. 102.
\item \textsuperscript{191} Ibid., pg. 102.
\end{enumerate}
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Lokapaññatti was composed in a Mahāyāna-affiliated area in Burma during the last days of Mahāyāna dominance in Southeast Asia, the presence of these themes is hardly surprising. If the Mahāyāna had continued in its ascendancy, we could speculate that stories of Māra even up to the current day might extol his potential Buddhahood. As we have seen, though, a different kind of Buddhism rose to the forefront in the region. The appropriate subject to discuss now is how the Sinhalese-aligned Theravādins, who held a far different vision of orthodoxy, reacted to the Lokapaññatti.

Again, John Strong leads the way, as his is the authoritative work on the current state of Upagupta, and thus Māra, in Southeast Asia. From the beginning, he reports, the Theravādin orthodoxy bitterly opposed the Upagupta story. In 1829, a committee of Theravādin monks issued their verdict on the Lokapaññatti, condemning it as rife with “superstitions” more in line with Mahāyāna practice. Of particular offense to this committee were Upagupta’s displays of magical power, which they argued were violations of both the Vinaya and the Buddha’s teachings. A proper arhat, they explained, has eliminated his tendencies to grasp at things of this world. As the use of magical powers displays grasping, Upagupta should not be considered an arhat and his story is, as mentioned above, harmful superstition. Strong has argued elsewhere that the Vinaya prohibitions of magical displays and powers so common in legends of Upagupta and others stem from the pragmatic reason that current monks cannot duplicate them. Rendering demonstrations of such powers illegal circumvents requests from the populace that monks cannot possibly fulfill.

However this strategy of condemnation came about, it effectively eradicat

belief in the Upagupta legends among some groups, but others to this day have retained a strong faith in the account of the monk and his battle with Māra. From reading Strong’s accounts of how these groups express that faith, however, I do not receive the impression that the orthodoxy gave up so easily. Rather, my contention, which shall be borne out by the evidence, is that failing at eradicating the legend of the Upagupta-Māra

\[192\] Ibid., pg. 184.
\[193\] Ibid.
\[194\] “The Legend of the Lion Roarer: A Study of the Buddhist Arhat Pindola Bhāradvāja.” pg. 73
\[195\] Ibid. Strong refers to these differing groups as “the elite” and “the masses.” Such a distinction is problematic in many respects, particularly in that clear delineations between such groups are often hard to make. As such terms would add little more than confusion to this chapter, I have avoided them.
confrontation, the Theravādins settled upon recasting it in what they perceived to be an orthodox light more in keeping with the Nikāyas.

At this point, I must note a shift in the kind of evidence I will be using. Up to this point I have relied on textual sources and fueled my arguments on the interpretations of those texts. The thread of primary written sources dealing with Māra in Southeast Asia, however, ends with the Lokapaññatti and in order to support my assertions I must supplement that frayed thread with a new tether. Wider cultural behavior, such as ritual and political and social rhetoric, is far easier to find and it is to this kind of evidence that I now turn.

To this day, mainly in Thailand and Laos, Buddhists call upon Upagupta to protect against Māra’s machinations during rituals and festivals.196 One member of the laity in Thailand describes Upagupta’s role, based on his fragmented understanding of the Lokapaññatti, as binding Māra, who takes the form of drunk and belligerent people, so that the Buddha can erect stūpas.197 In other villages -- which also add the innovation of Māra taking the form of drunks, thieves, and other generally obnoxious individuals – the Evil One is thought to bring rain and poor weather, just as he is said to in the Lokapaññatti.198 Any tragedy, accident, or injury that occurs during these festivals is attributed to the power of Māra and the failure to invite Upagupta’s protection.199

At this point, it should be obvious that the categories that were of such use in classifying Māra in the Nikāyas, and that subsequently disappeared in the Mahāyāna, are again of use regarding these appearances of the Evil One in contemporary Southeast Asia. Māra is portrayed as diametrically opposed to Upagupta, the Buddha’s servant, and is expansively present, able to assume the shape of a rain shower, stray fireworks, or a pack of drunkards, all toward malign purposes. In his new form of advocating drunkenness, Māra has resumed his didactic purpose as this debauchery is contrasted with the calm reserve and propriety of Theravādin monks.200 In Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, repelling Māra is thought to be of such importance that many wear amulets or medallions in Upagupta’s likeness, occasionally chanting, “by Upagupta Māra

196 Ibid., pg. 93.
197 Ibid., pg. 255.
198 Ibid., pg. 269.
199 Ibid., pg. 270.
200 Ibid.
was bound.”\textsuperscript{201} The Evil One, who is an ambivalent figure in the Mahāyāna sūtras, apparently possesses no such ambivalence to the laity of this region.

In the monasteries as well, this vision of Māra and appreciation of Upagupta can be found. Numerous sites show images of Upagupta preparing to bind Māra and sometimes even carrying a dead dog with which to garland him.\textsuperscript{202} Wat Uppakhut, a monastery in downtown Chiang Mai, Thailand, possesses a sitting Upagupta statue, holding his monastic belt outstretched in another clear reference to Māra’s binding, although the latter is not depicted.\textsuperscript{203} This imagination of the scene is of even more interest as, while the laity were allowed to select Upagupta’s appearance, the scene of Māra’s binding was chosen by the monks.

Nowhere in any of these contemporary accounts of Māra based on the \textit{Lokapaññatti} is mention made of the Evil One’s future Buddhahood, his display of the Buddha’s form to Upagupta, his conversion, or even his capacity to convert. These were not peripheral aspects to the story, but rather central pillars of the depiction of Māra. Their absence in contemporary Southeast Asia demands explanation and an answer to why Upagupta’s confrontation with Māra is weighted entirely towards conquest rather than conversion. My suggestion, as noted before, is that Theravādin notions of orthodoxy, while perhaps not always acquiesced to by the populace, nevertheless seeped into the culture and pervaded the monasteries. While the Theravādin authority would prefer to eradicate practices such as the cult of Upagupta, the secondary solution would be to refashion them wherever possible in a more favorable, more canonical vision. This would explain why incidents such as Māra’s conversion and Buddhahood vanish in presentations of the Evil One in Southeast Asia: while perfectly in keeping with the Mahāyāna concepts from which they arose, they are not consonant with the Nikāyas and are thus occluded. What has been retained in the cult of Upagupta regarding Māra fits without amendment or caveat into the categorical analysis of Māra in the Nikāyas, as a dichotomic, expansive figure utilized didactically to profess the Buddhist, particularly arhat, ideal. What is more, the symbiotic relationship between Upagupta and Aśokā (the

\\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., pg. 279.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., pg. 99.
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid. pg. 288.
former defeats Māra while the latter provides supporting alms) serves to reinforce the relationship between monastery and royalty so sought after by Theravādin authority.204

Providing further evidence for my proposition is the return of Māra to a more Nikāya understanding throughout Southeast Asia, apart from the cult of Upagupta. The most common such reference to or depiction of Māra is of the confrontation at Bodh-Gāyā when Gautama put the Evil One and his army to flight before achieving enlightenment. Temples in Southeast Asia often have Buddha images performing the bhūmisparśa, or earth-touching mūdra, a shorthand for the victory at Bodh-Gāyā.205 In the Visakhapuja, a celebration of the Buddha’s life performed in many places in Southeast Asia, the role played by Māra is to attack and be defeated at Bodh-Gāyā.206 Civil and religious rituals alike in Śri Lanka, including marriages and harvests, contain songs of the Buddha’s victory over Māra, even embellishing at times upon the myth, to the detriment of Māra.207 For instance, as Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere report, in certain marriage ceremonies celebrants use filled pots to symbolize both fertility and the moment when the Buddha attained enlightenment. The story goes that the Buddha, in the process of defending himself against Māra, called upon the Earth Goddess to bear witness to his merit. She arose as commanded and levied a curse against the Evil One. The exact nature of the curse is left unexplained by Gombrich and Obeyesekere but the important point is that this incident is an aspect of the story not present in the Buddhacārīta or Lālītavistāra versions. Overall, by focusing on this particular myth about Māra, namely the confrontation at Bodh-Gāyā, the ceremony reinforces and propagates the Evil One’s complete opposition and resistance to the Dharma.

Ordination ceremonies of new monks in Southeast Asia further establish this characterization of Māra. In Thailand, a monk pours water over the ordinand and chants the Jayanto Paritta, a recounting of the victory over Māra at Bodh-Gāyā and an exhortation to the ordinand to duplicate this conquest.208 This conflict is even acted out in other instances, with costumed villagers playing the role of Māra and his army,

204 Strong, The Legend of King Aśokā, pg. 81.
205 Swearer, The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia, pg. 9.
206 Ibid., pg. 41.
207 Gombrich and Obeyesekere, pg. 269.
208 Wells, pg. 193.
obstructing the ordinand’s procession to the monastery.209 Sometimes the obstruction occurs at the very last possible moment, with an actor in the role of Māra standing in the doorway of the monastery, blocking access until members of the procession throw him aside.210 In Laos, there are no such elaborate theatrics with the employment of actors. Instead, the ordinand’s home is surrounded by staffs to symbolize Māra’s weaponry, captured at the Bodh-Gāyā battle.211

With the dichotomic, expansive and didactic categories revitalized, one would expect to see evidence of resurgence in the use of Māra to demonize heterodoxy. As we saw in chapter two, this application of the symbol atrophied with the advent of emptiness and non-duality and the evaporation of the dichotomic relationship between the Buddha and Māra. A reinstitution of this dichotomous relationship, however, would logically lead to a potential renewal in uses of Māra to demonize opponents of a doctrinal, or other, nature.

In fact, this is indeed the case. For instance, Śri Lanka has a long tradition of spiritual and magical practices that have coexisted uneasily with and within Buddhism. According to one account, a former monk left his order because it opposed magical practices and labeled those who engage in such conduct as followers of “Māra’s Dharma.”212 Largely, the orthodoxy and older generations in Śri Lanka malign magic for reasons reminiscent of the Theravada orthodoxy’s derision of the Upagupta legend in Southeast Asia: since monks are required to shun the mundane, it is inconsistent for them to practice magic, which entails a concentration on the latent powers of the mundane.213 The former monk mentioned above also draws a moral line regarding magical practices, albeit in a significantly different place. He explains that good magic can be seen as “avoidance of sin, performance of right, purifying one’s thoughts; this is the teaching of the Buddha,” while black magic, (doing harm to others) is “doing all sin, performance of wrong, not purifying one’s thoughts” and can be termed “the teaching of Māra.”214 Interestingly, both sides utilize the dichotomic and demonizing aspects of Māra but in

209 Lester, pg. 92.
210 Swearer, The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia, pg. 51.
212 Gombrich and Obeyesekere, pg. 62.
213 Ibid.
214 Ibid.
different ways. The orthodoxy and older generations who seek to eradicate magical practices characterize all such practitioners as followers of Māra. As one such magical practitioner, the former monk responds not by challenging the dichotomy but by further subdividing the categories, arguing that the teachings of the Buddha and Māra are still opposed, yet “good magic” is on the side of the Buddha, while “black magic” is associated with Māra.

Also notable is the quotation’s disagreement with the Mahāyāna concept of nonduality that, as was seen in the Vkn., holds that passions, desires and even sins can lead just as irrevocably to awakening as righteousness does. To the Theravādin orthodoxy, these Mahāyāna views -- as well as the practice of magic -- are not only extra-canonical, but anti-canonical and the weapon of choice to demonize them is the symbol of Māra.

During the immense and calamitous political upheaval in Southeast Asia throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, Māra found an anti-heterodoxy application in a slightly different vein. Some anti-communist Buddhists at this time equated communism with the work of Māra and further argued that to kill communists was thus permissible and not demeritorious. As such killings would in fact be equivalent to battling Māra, one need not fear karmic reprisal.

Therefore, we see that in the doctrinal turbulence of Southeast Asia the figure of Māra sways back and forth from one expression to another, like a tall tree in a strong wind. When the Mahāyāna was in ascendancy, the text of that time, the Lokapaññatti, portrayed Māra with strong Mahāyānist overtones. Ever afterward, under the sway of the Theravāda, Māra has returned to an expression far more consonant with what is found in the Nikāyas. In a larger sense, this confirms what the preceding in this thesis has argued regarding Māra: the symbol is a convenient and apt tool for the display and propagation of philosophical and doctrinal concepts, and when such concepts change, the symbol is altered as well. This also implies that the current treatment of Māra in Southeast Asia, and anywhere there is Buddhism for that matter, may simply be a snapshot of time in the Evil One’s long history, for who knows in what direction future winds may blow?

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215 Swearer, The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia, pg. 113.
Conclusion and Prospectus:

Māra Multiplied?

Coming to the end of a lengthy writing, especially one in which so much time and effort has been expended before pen ever meets paper, is in some ways like arriving at the edge of a scenic precipice after a long journey. The view is all the grander for the toil required to reach it, to cover the sometimes treacherous territory now behind. It is a time when one can catch a breath and appreciate this dual outlook: the arduous yet rewarding terrain behind, and in front the chasm of the canyon, across which new territories beckon.

This final entry in the thesis aims to cover both tasks of looking behind at what has been concluded about Māra as well as what still remains to be done. In chapter one, “Māra of the Myriad Menaces,” the role of the Evil One in the Nikāya literature was examined. I argued that his appearances could be categorized into two pairs of two categories each. The first, the abstract, was divided into the dichotomic and expansive (shape-shifting) categories. A second group, the functional, contained the categories of Māra as a didactic tool and as a means of attacking and demonizing heterodoxy, particularly Brahmins. Chapter two, “Māra’s Metamorphosis,” examined the changes these typologies underwent in certain Mahāyāna sūtras. Most notably, the abstract dichotomic and expansive (shape-shifting) categories atrophied and disappeared due to the new Mahāyāna concepts of emptiness and non-duality, while the functional categories were redeployed to serve interests particular to the Mahāyāna. In the case of the didactic typology, this was to advance the tenets of the bodhisattva path and the heterodoxy category, rather than demonizing non-Buddhists as is found in the Nikāyas, the symbol of Māra in the Mahāyāna is used to demonize other Buddhists who oppose or criticize the Mahāyāna. Chapter three, “Māra Mixed Up,” investigated the ramifications when the differing Nikāya and Mahāyāna Buddhist interpretations of Māra came into contact, using the context of Southeast Asia as a frame. Māra’s major textual appearances in that region occur in the Aśokavadāna and the Lokapaññatti, which both (especially the latter) portray Māra in several aspects that are characteristic of Mahāyānist usage of the symbol. Broader and more recent cultural evidence, however, demonstrates that the current interpretation of the symbol constitutes a restoration of the Nikāya presentation of the
Evil One, almost certainly due to the Theravādin ascendancy in the region in the intervening time between the composition of the Lokapaññatti and the modern day. This study has therefore proven what was set out in the introduction: the symbol of Māra has undergone a transformation in meaning and expression from the Nikāyas to the sūtras of the Mahāyāna. Māra is an extremely malleable figure in Buddhism, adding new meaning to his legendary capacity for shape-shifting. The Evil One is a supremely convenient figure to utilize as a vehicle for expressing philosophical innovations, doctrinal/ideological oppositions, or pedagogical ideals. That Buddhists throughout the centuries, even millennia, should return repeatedly to Māra the Evil One testifies to the symbol’s potency and vitality.

Beyond the significance of Māra to Buddhism and Buddhist Studies, I also contend that this thesis speaks to issues in the discipline of Religious Studies as a whole. One theme of this study has been the intersection of diabolology and sociology. More directly, this thesis has demonstrated the ways in which the rhetoric of evil and the demonic can be used to carve out separation between a group or sect and an antagonistic Other, whether that Other is seen as a wholly external threat (non-Buddhists, in the case of the Nikāyas) or a more closely related, possibly internal menace (other Buddhists, in the case of Mahāyāna sūtras). Another, equally important theoretical conclusion to draw from this thesis is that mythological symbols do not necessarily evolve or develop in a definitively linear fashion. On the contrary, chapter three demonstrates that a symbol can be re-appropriated and restored to an earlier interpretation, as has occurred with Māra in Southeast Asia.

Given the immediately foregoing, it also seems appropriate to discuss new questions for investigation, in both Buddhist and Religious Studies, which this thesis leaves unexplored. Though my naïve (perhaps extremely naïve) desire was to produce a somewhat definitive work on Māra, the Evil One somehow multiplied himself when I was not looking and I now find that there are numerous avenues for further study. Although my preference would be to undertake each of the following queries myself, the length of one’s career and constraints of area specialization make such a possibility unfortunately unlikely. Therefore, I break these questions into two sets: those that I
definitely intend to pursue and others that I suggest might be more suited to scholars who specialize in the particular area/discipline involved.

Taking the latter set first, it appears to me that after examining Māra in the Theravāda (or what at least could roughly be called Theravāda) and the Mahāyāna, it seems only logical to expand the exploration to Tibetan or Vajrayāna Buddhism and inquire as to what shape the Evil One assumes there. My initial speculation, based on some research and the fact of Vajrayāna’s common roots with Mahāyāna, is that Māra in Tibet would be presented in a manner analogous to what is found in Mahāyāna sūtras. Given the Tibetan pantheon of protective deities and wrathful bodhisattvas, I would also speculate that such tendencies might possibly take the portrayal of Māra into a tantalizing new direction. I would welcome an expert or student of Tibetan Buddhism to investigate these hypotheses.

On the theme of portrayals, a second avenue of possible exploration deals with artistic representations of Māra throughout the ages. What were the most common renderings of the figure of Māra, in what form or shape was he most often depicted? In what mythical scenes is he most often found or portrayed? Can a shift in the artistic presentation of Māra be detected at any time and would it be consonant with shifts in doctrinal or philosophical concepts in Buddhism, as this thesis would suggest? Finally, are there any new depictions of Māra being created? That is to say, does the symbol still have artistic currency? An art historian with interests in Asian religions, or vice versa, might find such questions interesting.

Third, as Buddhism encounters the West, particularly the United States, the stories, myths, and doctrines of this ancient tradition are reaching a new audience with a different perspective of the world and often motivations for studying the religion that are quite different from adherents in the East. Did Māra make the trip across the churning expanse of the Pacific along with Buddhism or, possibly because of these differing perspectives and motivations, was the Evil One denied a visa? If he has been permitted to immigrate, how does this new American audience interpret him?

The main question that I intend to pursue myself builds off ideas already presented in this thesis. In particular, I seek to expand on the use of demonization as a weapon against doctrinal, sectarian, or social “Others.” The current study has focused on
this phenomenon in a few Buddhist texts and in the future I seek to expand my research
to other branches of the Pāli Canon as well as other Mahāyāna sūtras. Buddhist-to-
Buddhist interactions need not be the central focus, though, as the rhetoric of
demonization is equally prominent in other South Asian traditions. The capacity for
comparative work in such a project is thus immense, and by no means limited to Asian
religions (giving another valence to my phrase “Māra multiplied”). For example, many of
the same questions I have asked regarding Māra in this thesis could also be addressed to
Satan, the Christian symbol of evil. On the specific topic of demonization, the symbol of
Satan represents a veritable goldmine of material that some scholars have begun to tap
and I would seek to mine as well and investigate in comparison to the demonizing uses of
Māra in Buddhism.

Pulling back now from the edge of the precipice, it is obvious that the potential
questions and avenues of research that lie on the other side could take a lifetime to
pursue. Potential knowledge being infinite and life being finite, one is forced to choose
his or her battles carefully. That said, it is perfectly legitimate to wonder why it was that I
chose Māra for this study as opposed to the myriad of trails with which I was presented at
some past precipice. As alluded to in the intro, the answer lies in such chilling lines
uttered by Māra as, “Where can you go to escape from me?” When first I read this
passage in the Nikāyas a shiver passed through my body and the dark, shadowy places of
my apartment suddenly acquired a new, and less friendly, character. Upon first
discovering them, I thought that studying stories that no longer perceived Māra as wholly
evil would dull this fearful yet exhilarating response, but to my surprise, the opposite was
the case. Envisioned as either a lurking menace perpetually poised to strike or even a
 provisionally evil but ultimately beneficial being, the figure of Māra is a powerful
challenge to the mundane, a portent of a larger world with the ability to transform one’s
surroundings, as I discovered that night in my apartment.

Once I began thesis work, the Evil One’s words proved prophetic: with more and
more books to read, notes to take, and pages to write, escape soon proved impossible.

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1 Wendy Doniger, for instance, discusses Hindu stories that demonize Buddhists and Jains in her book *The Origin of Evil in Hindu Mythology.*
2 Such scholars include Jeffrey Burton Russell, who has written a four part series on the development of the symbol of Satan, Elaine Pagels, whose *The Origin of Satan* highlights the use of the symbol to demonize enemies of Christianity.
Due to his mythological charisma and aforementioned ability to transform the mundane, the symbol of Māra has never failed to be an entertaining and enthralling companion on this journey. At the end, I only hope that this work has been as enjoyable to read as it was to produce.
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