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Why Buddhists Worship Trees

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[On technical conventions and bibliography, see Appendix or Piyasilo, *Guide to Buddhist Studies*, 1990 (unpublished MSS).]

3
WHY BUDDHISTS WORSHIP TREES

Buddhist mythology of evil and the Great Enlightenment

1. INTRODUCTION

What is a **shadow**? It is a darkness that is shaped like the person or object that stands before some light. It is a part of you, yet it is not you. It disappears when the light is dimmed, but it is not altogether gone. Each of us have our own shadow, but its cause is outside of ourselves.

It is darkest where the light is brightest. With his enlightenment, the Buddha became the light of the universe. This is the brightest of all lights, and in such light, anything that is not transparent would cast a dark shadow. The darkest shadow is cast perhaps by a mysterious figure that is found nowhere else in the history of religion, except in Buddhism.

2. TWO LANGUAGES

(a) Mythos and logos

The Abhidharma tradition speaks of two levels of languages on which the Dharma is transmitted—**the conventional (*sammati/sammutti*)** and **the ultimate (*paramârtha/paramattha*)**, those of the world and of the Dharma. The Commentarial tradition mentions a further two methods of teaching (*desanā*)—in terms of **persons** (*pudgalâdhisṭhāna/puggalâdhiṭṭhāna*) or the symbolic and in terms of Dharma or **ideas** (*dhammâdhiṭṭhāna*) (PmA 449). The Abhidharma uses mainly ultimate language, that is, in terms of ideas.[1]

In modern terms, the person-based approach and the idea-based approach to teaching and communication are found in the concepts of *mythos* (tale) and *logos* (word) respectively [1:1]. ***Mythos*** or the story is the presentation of ideas on the level of human emotion, that is application of personal feelings and imageries. ***Logos*** or the word is the presentation of ideas on the level of human language, that is the application of logic and reasoning.

(b) Conventional language

The conventional or "people" language is used, for example, in **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M no. 22, that contains the parables of the water snake and of the raft) and **the Dāru-k,khandha Sutta** (S 4:179 f, the parable of the floating log). Examples of post-canonical collections of "people"-oriented teachings are the well-known **Jataka** stories, and the legends of **the Peta Vatthu** (Stories of the Departed) and the **Vimāna Vatthu** (Stories of the Heavenly Mansions).

<u>The Dārukkhandha Sutta (The Discourse of the Floating Log)</u>

> On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Kosambī on the bank of the river Ganges. The Blessed One saw **a great log being carried along by the current of the river Ganges**, and he pointed it out to the monks.
>
> "If, monks, that log does not veer towards the near shore, does not veer towards the far shore, does not sink in mid-stream, does not get cast up on high ground, does not get caught by human

[1] On the two levels of language, see for example Buddhadasa's *Two Kinds of Languages*, Bangkok, 1974.

beings, does not get caught by nonhuman beings, does not get caught in a whirlpool, and does not become inwardly rotten, it will slant, slope and incline towards the ocean. Why? Because the current of the river Ganges slants, slopes and inclines towards the ocean.

"So too, monks, if you do not veer…you will slant, slope and incline towards Nirvana. Why? Because Right View slants, slopes and inclines towards Nirvana."

When this was said, a certain monk asked the Blessed One: "What, Venerable Sir, is the near shore…the far shore…sinking in mid-stream…getting cast up on high ground…getting caught by human beings…getting caught by nonhuman beings…getting caught in a whirlpool…inward rottenness?"

The near shore	=	the 6 internal sense bases.
The far shore	=	the 6 external sense bases.
Sinking in mid-stream	=	harbouring delight and lust.
Getting cast up on high ground	=	harbouring the conceit "I am".
Getting caught by human beings	=	associating with the joys and sorrows of lay life.[2]
Getting caught by nonhumans	=	living the holy life with the hope to gaining heavenly rebirth.
Getting caught in a whirlpool	=	enjoying the five cords of sensual pleasure (of the 5 physical senses).
Inward rottenness	=	false claims to living the holy life.

Now at that time, **Nanda the cowherd** was standing near the Blessed One. He then said to the Blessed One: "Venerable Sir, I will not veer towards the near shore, I will not veer towards the far shore, I will not sink in mid-stream, I will not get cast up on high ground, I will not get caught by human beings, I will not get caught by nonhuman beings, I will not get caught in a whirlpool, and I will not become inwardly rotten. May I receive the going-forth under the Blessed One, may I receive the ordination?"

In that case, Nanda, return the cows to their owners."

"The cows will go back on their own accord, Venerable Sir, out of attachment to the calves."

"Return the cows to the owners, Nanda."

The Nanda the cowherd returned the cows…and was ordained. And soon, not long after his ordination, dwelling alone, aloof, diligent, ardent and resolute, attained to that supreme goal of the Holy Life, for the sake of which those of the families rightly go forth home into homelessness. He knew by his own knowledge: "Birth is destroyed; lived is the Holy Life; done is what had to be done; there is no more for this state of being." And the Venerable Nanda became of the Arhants.

(S 4:1769 ff. abridged.)

(b) Ultimate language

Traditional examples of the use of **ultimate or Dharma language**–-or *logos*–-are found, for example, in the exposition of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path in the First Discourse, or in the verse spoken by Aśvajit to Śāriputra the first time they met. Often enough the Buddha would follow up with analogies and illustrations what he has expressed in the Dharma language (e.g. **Assu Sutta**, S 2:180).

<u>The Assu Sutta (The Discourse on Tears)</u>

At Sāvatthi. "Monks, **this cycle of life and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) is without a discoverable beginning**. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. What do you think, monks, which is more: the stream of tears that you have shed as you roamed and wandered in through this long course, weeping and wailing from being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable—this or the waters in the four great oceans?"

[2] Also at S 3:11.

> "As we understand the Dharma taught by the Blessed One, Venerable Sir, the stream of tears we have shed as we roam and wander in through this long course, weeping and wailing from being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable—this alone is more than the waters in the four great oceans."
>
> "Good, good, monks! It is good that you understand the Dharma taught by me in such a way. **This stream of tears….is more than the waters in the four great oceans**. For a long, monks, you have experienced the death of a mother,…the death of a father,…the death of a brother,…the death of a sister,…the death of a son,…the death of a daughter,…the loss of relatives,…the loss of wealth,…loss through illness; as you have experienced this, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable, the stream of tears that you have shed is more than the waters in the four great oceans.
>
> "For what reason? Because, monks, this cycle of life and rebirth is without a discoverable beginning…. It is enough to experience revulsion towards all formations, enough to become dispassionate towards them, enough to be liberated from them."
>
> (S 2:180)

The experiential part of the Discourse on Tears ("weeping and wailing…") is in the **ultimate language** because the truth reference is a direct one, that is, the discourse relates personal experience. The imagery portion ("the four great oceans…", "death of a mother…") uses conventional language of the world.

3. CONCEPTUAL LANGUAGE

Even the ultimate or Dharma language, however, is at best "conceptual" to the uninitiated or unenlightend, especially the intellectually-inclined. Indeed, when the Buddha teaches using Dharma language, it *sounds* the same to all his listeners but it *means* different a thing to each of them (due to "mental diffuseness", *prapañca/papañca*)! There is the remarkable example of **the weaver's daughter** of Āḷāvī (DhA 3:170 ff) who, when the Buddha gazed at her, intuitively knew that he wanted her to approach him, and the following dialogue (called **the Four Questions**) ensued before the congregation:

Buddha:	Where do you come from, young girl?
Girl:	I know not, Venerable Sir.
Buddha:	Where are you going?
Girl:	I know not, Venerable Sir.
Buddha:	Do you <u>not</u> know?
Girl:	I know, Venerable Sir?
Buddha:	Do you <u>know</u>?
Girl:	I know not, Venerable Sir.

(DhA 3:172 f)

The four questions respectively mean:

> "Where were you before you were reborn here?"
> "Where will you be reborn?"
> "Do you know that you will surely die?"
> "When will you die?"

No one in the crowd who "listened" to the Buddha only conceptually understood his words—but the weaver's daughter understood him intuitively, answered the questions correctly and gained the Eye of Wisdom (*prajñā,cakṣu/paññā,cakkhu*) that sees things on the ultimate (*paramârtha/param'attha*) level.

4. INTENTIONAL LANGUAGE

The Tibetan tradition has preserved for us the lives, legends, songs (*doha*) and teachings of at least 84 **Siddhās** (grub-thob, "accomplished ones") who are renowned for their psychic abilities. Their remarkable

teachings and songs were written in a special language that is known in India as s*andha,bhāṣā* (Tib. dgongs-pa; "intentional language") or *saṃdhyā,bhāṣā*" (lit. "twilight language").

The intentional language is neither symbolic in the conventional sense (for then even a non-Buddhist intellectual could "translate" it) nor is it ultimate (insofar as it has been written down and therefore subject to mere intellectual interpretation). It is a "third" language, a *tertium quid*, between the conventional expression and the ultimate understanding of the Dharma.

The intentional or "twilight" language is not only a protection against the profanation of the sacred through intellectual curiosity and professionalism, and misuse of yogic methods and psychic forces by the ignorant and the uninitiated, but has its origin mainly in the fact that everyday language is incapable of expressing the highest experiences of the spirit (which could at best be hinted at through similes and paradoxes) (Govinda 1960:53, 102).

In the intentional language of the Siddhas, experiences of meditation are transformed into external events, inner attainments into visible miracles and similes into quasi-historical events. If, for example, a certain Siddha is said to have stopped the sun and the moon in their courses, or that they have crossed the Ganges by stopping its flow, then it has nothing to do with the heavenly bodies or the Indian river, but with the unification, sublimation and liberation of "solar" and "lunar" currents of psychic energy in the Buddhist yogi's body. (Govinda ibid)

5. EXPRESSING THE INEXPRESSIBLE

Intentional language is a new language in the sense that new or special senses are conveyed by the words and expressions used. They may or may not make logical sense to the uninitiated and as such easily misconstrued by them. Intentional language is a "shock" language in the sense that it aims at knocking us out of our conventional way of thinking and understanding to look beyond words and sounds, to read between the lines and beyond the confines of conventional language.

A number of verses of **the Dhammapada** illustrate the Buddha's use of intentional language. Two remarkable examples are:

> Having slain mother and father,
> And the two kshatriya kings;
> Having destroyed the country with its tax collector—
> Ungrieving goes the brahman!
>
> (Dh 294)

> Having slain mother and father,
> And the two brahmin kings;
> Having destroyed the tiger as the fifth—
> Ungrieving goes the brahman!
>
> (Dh 295)

Here the "mother" represents craving while the "father" conceit.[3] The two "kshatriya kings" and "brahmin kings" each symbolizes the extreme views of eternalism and of nihilism. The "country" is an analogy for the sense-organs and sense-objects; its "tax-collector", attachment and lust. The "tiger" represents the five mental hindrances, and the "brahman" is the Arhant.

Another famous example of intentional language (this time in graphic form) is found in the episode of 7-year-old Prince Siddhârtha during **the Ploughing Festival** when he meditated under a jambu tree. It is

[3] The Buddha's use of mother-father imagery here rings a modern note echoed in modern psychology, e.g. Erich Fromm. *The Forgotten Language*. NY: Grove Press, 1951.

said that the shadow of the jambu tree did not move away from him even though it was well past midday! This illustrates the transcendence of time during meditation. Similarly, in Tibetan sacred art, the sun and the moon are often depicted together to represent the timelessness of the Dharma.

6. MEETING OF TWO LANGUAGES

Both the terms *sandha* and *saṃdhyā* have to do with "intimate union" or "holding together". The latter term is of special interest, for it also means "union, junction, juncture, especially that of day and night, morning or evening, twilight" (Monier-Williams, SED). The intentional or twilight language represents a meeting of the "daylight" language of conventional perception and the "night" language of ultimate reality.

The day represents what is easily seen and evident for all those who care to see. In **the night**, special care and guidance are needed—not to mention a special kind of sight is needed so that one does not stumble or shrink back with fear because of the dark. The night is also a time of peace and regeneration.

The three watches of the night [15] have been used by the Buddha as an analogy for the three stages of life (Dh 157). The wise one is "wide awake amongst the slumbering" (Dh 29). The hidden language of the "night" (symbolism and mythology) is linked to the daylight language of words and conventions by **the "twilight" of intentional language.**

If any of the world religions is deprived of its mythology—symbolism, analogies, myths and intentional language—it would cease to be a spiritual system or even a religion. It would degenerate into a cold mass of meaningless dogmas, rules and rituals that has to be enforced only through "faith" and the spiritless word, and not through direct knowledge and compassion. Furthermore, most people would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to look directly into the Eye of Truth when they still have some dust in their own eye!

7. POSITION OF MĀRA

I mentioned something about the "darkest shadow"at the start of this chapter. Who or what is this darkest shadow? Like the Devil in Western religious thought, **Māra** stands as the lone figure that dominates the Buddhist doctrine of evil. Māra is regarded as the arch-enemy of those in quest of personal growth and spiritual development. Though some traits of Māra parallel **the yaksha myth**, he is not mentioned in pre-Buddhist traditions. Māra is, in other words, uniquely a Buddhist conception.

Unlike the demons (*piśāca*, *yakṣa*, *rakśaṣa*, *asura*, and *nāga*) that are a peripheral feature of the Scriptures, Māra is at the very core of the Buddhist mythology of evil from the earliest times (e.g. the Padhāna Sutta of the Sutta Nipāta) to the Commentarial period. His importance is attested by the stock phrase: **"this world, with its devas, Māra and Brahmas, recluses and brahmins, its devas and humans"** (e.g. M 3:60; Sn 4:24).

This important stock phrase implies a distinction between the Bodhisattva's inability before enlightenment and the Buddha's ability after the Enlightenment, to discern intrinsic features of the cosmos:

> So long, monks, as I did not directly know as they really are the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of these four elements[4], I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in *this world with its devas, Māra and Brahmas, recluses and brahmins, its devas and humans*. But when I directly know all this as it really is, then I claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world with…its devas and humans.
>
> (S 1:170)

[4] The four elements: earth, water, heat, air, Vism 364-70 = Vism:Ñ11:85-117.

It is for this reason that the Buddha is described as **"world-knower"** (*loka,vidū*), and after him, the Arhants, too. As such, only those who are enlightened can truly see that, among the realities of the universe, there is that which is called Māra.

In his study of *Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil*, **T.O. Ling** observes that from the extent of the discourses mentioned alone, "it is clear that the Pali Canon is by no means lacking in mythology; even though it may not be so elaborate in its detail as that of the Mahāyāna" (1962:43 f). He agrees with E. Windisch who himself says that "I agree with Senart in believing that the mythological belongs to the essence of Buddhism, and cannot be separated from it. For, even if the historical Buddha was simple an ordinary human being there has probably never been a Buddhism completely devoid of mythology." (1895:182)

Māra and yakṣa

The Māra mythology runs closely with the popular **yaksha mythology**. The yaksha belongs to a class of Indian nature spirits generally benevolent towards human beings. They are among the earliest of deities to be depicted in religious art where they usually appear as colossal in size, slightly pot-bellied and taut with physical energy. His female counterpart, the *yakṣī* or *yakṣiṇī* (*yakkhiṇī*), often appear as nude or semi-nude fertility figures decked in jewelry.

In later Buddhist literature, they were degraded to the figure of fierce red-eyed ogres of both sexes who ate flesh and blood, and devoured corpses and even human beings. Māra is sometimes referred to in the Pali texts as a yaksha (e.g. M 1:338, S 2:122, Sn 449; cf. V 1:21 f). The Mahāvastu calls him the "great yaksha" (Mvst 2:260, 261). T.O. Ling has made a comprehensive comparison between Māra and the yaksha (1962:45).

8. SOURCES ON MĀRA

The main canonical sources of the Māra mythology are **the Padhāna Sutta** (Sn no. 28), **the Māra Saṃyutta, the Bhikkhuṇī Saṃyutta, the Māra Tajjaniya Sutta** (M no. 50), **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D no. 16), and the Mahavagga of **the Vinaya**. In all these sources, Māra appears to the unenlightened as an archetypal image of primordial evil, that is, a personification of the dark side of the Unconscious or the Shadow (to borrow a Jungian term). In the case of the Buddha and the Arhants, it is Māra the deity himself who appears. [12b]

Māra appears in many discourses, such as the **Mahā Samaya Sutta** (where he is called Namuci) (D no. 20), the **Brahma,nimantanika Sutta** (where, unlike the Brahma Sahampati, he discourages the Buddha to teach) (M no. 49), and the **Nānā,titthiyā Sutta** (where, as Namuci, he advocates self-mortification and heavenly rebirth) (S 1:165 ff). In such texts, Māra appears in connection with divine beings, or in "a supramundane context", to borrow Ling's term.

Māra in the Nikāyas

Māra is sometimes used in the Nikāyas as a didactic tool representing a quality to be avoided. In the Parable of the Deer in **the Dvedhā Vitakka Sutta**, Māra represents those not desiring their own good (M 1:118). In **the Cula Gopālaka Sutta**, the Buddha claims that he knows what is or is not Māra's realm which the Commentary says extends over the whole threefold sentient universe: the sense-world, the form world and the formless world (MA 2:266; SnA 2:506; cf. A 4:228).

The Kāya,gatā,sati Sutta says that Māra gains easy access to one in whom Mindfulness of the Body has not been developed (M 3:95). In **the Mahā Suññatā Sutta**, the Buddha declares that the reflection of

inward emptiness ("as though alone even though sitting in a crowd", MA 4:160) and checking one's mind against any unwholesome state will put one beyond the range of Māra (M no 122).

In the Parable of the Crops in **the Nivapa Sutta**, Māra is the sower of crops (the five types of sensual pleasures) (M 1:155). In a similar parable, that of the Deer, in **the Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta**, Māra is a deer trapper (M 1:173 f). In both these places, Māra is blinded and kept away by one attaining to any of the 8 levels of mental absorption (*dhyāna/jhāna*), which "cast darkness around Māra". [13]

A detailed analysis of Māra as he appears in the other sections of the Nikāyas has been done by Ling (1962: Appendix).

9. MĀRA THE DISTRACTOR

Māra is often represented in the Scriptures as using every way and wile to prevent the knowledge of Enlightenment from being transmitted to others. Soon after the first Rains Retreat, Māra appears before the Buddha and discourages him from teaching the monks regarding the highest liberation (V 1:22). In the Commentaries, Māra (known there as Vasavatti) is said to have tried to prevent the Bodhisattva's renunciation by promising him universal sovereignty in seven days (J 1:63).

The Māra Saṃyutta contains many episodes describing how Māra tries to tempt the Buddha by attacking him with doubts of his Enlightenment; with feelings of fear and dread; appearing before him in various forms and disguises (as an elephant, cobra, etc.); making the rocks of Vulture Peak crash down; making him wonder if he should ever sleep; suggesting that there is no haste to live the Holy Life as human life is long; and by dulling the intelligence of his audience (S 1:103 ff).

The Piṇḍa Sutta speaks of an incident where Māra influences the whole village of Pañca,sālā in magadha not to offer alms to the Buddha who returns with an empty bowl and has to starve. Then, Māra tries to get the Buddha to go a second time, but he refuses (S 1:113; DhA 3:257 ff). Māra repeats this evil feat at Verañjā (V 3:1 ff.) [7:20a]. The Vinaya records that Ānanda does not respond to the Buddha's broad hint whether he should remain for the rest of the cycle (*kalpa/kappa*) because Ānanda's "mind was possessed by Māra" (*mārena pariyuṭṭhita,citto*) (V 2:288).

10. MASTER OF DISGUISES

Māra could assume any shape he wishes, even that of the Buddha himself. In fact, Māra appears in the form of the Buddha to the monk **Upagupta** who is eager to see the Buddha's person (Divy 356-364). A similar story is related in the Pali texts of the layman **Sura Ambaṭṭha** but there Māra tries to confuse him by giving a contrary statement to what the Buddha has earlier taught (DA 864; AA 1:215).

In **the Nānā,titthiyā Sutta**, the deva Veṭambarī spoke against asceticism, but Māra stealing up to him, makes him say another verse contradicting the first (S 1:66). Once when the Buddha is teaching, Māra disguised as a peasant interrupts the discourse to ask if anyone has seen his oxen (S 1:114). When the Buddha was speaking with Dhaniya the herdsman, Māra subtly adds a sly remark to mislead both Dhaniya and his wife (SnA 44; cf. J 1: 231 f).

Once Māra entered Maudgalyāyana's belly and caused him some discomfort. Maudgalyāyana recognized the fiend and declared that he was himself formerly a Māra called **Dūsī** and that the present Māra was the son of his erstwhile sister Kālī (M 1:333 ff). Only the Buddha and the enlightened ones can know of Māra's presence and can see through all of his guiles and disguises (S 1:103-128 = Māra Saṃyutta, e.g. 1.5, 9, 10, 2.2, 4 etc.).

Māra often tries to frighten the monks and nuns who are intent on their training. Once in the village of Sīlavatī, Māra appears in the guise of a venerable aged brahmin and told some monks, bent on their study

not to abandon the things of this life. He even influences the monk Godhika to commit suicide after which he appears in the form of a dark cloud looking for the monk's consciousness (SA 1:145).

11. NAMES OF MĀRA

The word *māra* is derived from **the root √MR, "to die"** (cf. Latin *mors,* death). He is so called because he brings death (*mareti*) to those who try to get away from his power (DA 689). As a bringer of death, he is also called Antaka ("end-maker", e.g. V 1:21; S 1:72). Māra's standing epithet is "the Evil One" (*pāpimā*, e.g. S 1:103 ff; Nm 439; DhA 4:71).

He is known as **Vasavatti** or Adhipati (Nm189, 489; Nc 227, 507) because he has power over all (*sabbesaṃ upari vasaṃ vattati*; SA 1:158). All those who are heedless come under his power as he is their kinsman (*pamatta,bandhu*; S 2:123, 128; Sn 430; cf. Dh 21).

He is called **Namuci** (originally the name of an *aśura* in the Rig Veda) because he does not release (*na muñcati)* his victims (SnA 386; Nm 455). In the Mahāsamaya Sutta, Namuci is mentioned as one of the asuras present in the assembly (D 2:259).

Another Pali name for Māra is **Kaṇha** (the "Dark One"; D 2:262, M 1: 377, Sn 355, Tha 1189) which is an ancient synonym for *pisāca* ("goblin", D 1:93). The Sanskrit equivalent of Kaṇha is Krishna (*kṛṣṇa*) who appears in the Bhagavad Gītā where he justifies war and encourages Arjuna to kill his enemies. Though it is anachronistic to compare Māra with Krishna (for the latter is a later arrival), there are some interesting parallels between them on a doctrinal level. [Cf. Nyanamoli, 1972:19 n 3]

In **the Lalita,vistara**, Māra is the god of desire and lust (*kāmâdhipati*, Lalv 130.8). Aśvaghoṣa (Buddha Carita 13:2) and Kṣemendra (Bodhisattvâvadāna Kalpalatā ii, 583.61) identify him with Kāma-deva (Cupid). The **Divyāvadāna** says that after the meeting between Māra and Upagupta, they parted good friends; it is even said that Māra was converted (Divy 357, 361, 363). But then again he could have just pretended (Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 Lines, 1186).

12. TYPES OF MĀRA

(a) Māra's Army

Māra's army (*māra,sena*) is said to comprise **ten evil forces**: Sensual Pleasures, Aversion, Hunger and Thirst, Craving, Sloth and Torpor, Fear, Spiritual Doubt, Hypocrisy, and Obstinacy (Sn 436). This is a kind of provisional list mentioned, not by the Buddha, but by the Bodhisattva. He also has a host of terrible demons like those who attacked the Bodhisattva under the Bodhi tree.

Māra is said to have **three daughters**: Tṛṣṇā/Taṇhā (Craving), Arati (Aversion) and Rāga (Passion) [17] to tempt the Buddha when everything else fails (Sn 835). The three, however, are said to be **allegorical**. In the Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 Lines (71), Avadāna Śataka (i,215.7) and the Śikṣā,samuccaya (244.4), Māra is said to be the leader of the Māra,kāyika devas (cf. Kv 164 f; DhA 3:102). All of them, however, are powerless against the Buddha and the enlightened ones.

(b) Number of Māras

The Commentaries often mention **four kinds of Māra** (KhA 155; SnA 201; ItA 136): Skandha Māra (*khandha*, the Aggregates; S 3:195), Kleśa Māra (*kilesa*, defilements; DhA 1:289), Abhisaṃskāra Māra (*abhisaṅkhāra*, karmic accumulation; UdA 216) and Devaputra Māra (the deity; A 2:17; SnA 44).

The four Māras mentioned in the Mahāyāna texts (Mvst 3:281, Lalv 354.11, 224.8, Daśa,bhūmika Sutta 54.17, Karuṇā Puṇḍarīka 127.7, Śikṣā,samuccaya 198.10 and Dharma Saṅgraha sect 80) have, in place of Abhisaṃskāra, **Mṛtyu Māra** (*maccu,māra,* Death personified; A 4:228; SnA 44) who is often mentioned alone (e.g. S 1:156; Sn 357, 587; Dh 21, 47 etc).

All these five Māras are also listed together by the Commentators (Vism 211; UA 216; ThaA 2:16, 46). They are, however, a later scholastic schematization of the "dark forces" that hinder one's spiritual progress.

13. HOW MĀRA IS DEFEATED

Although Māra often appears to the Buddha and his disciples, trying to distract them from their spiritual practice or simply as a transcendental nuisance, there are **only two cases of actual confrontations between the Buddha and Māra**. These confrontations are recorded in the Padhāna Sutta and the Mahā Saccaka Sutta.

In **the Padhāna Sutta** (Sn no. 28), Māra pursues the Bodhisattva for seven years like a dark hungry crow hovering "around a stone that looks like a piece of fat" (Sn 447 f.) but fails to discourage him [2:20]. **The Mahā Saccaka Sutta** contains an account of the events in the night of the enlightenment at Uruvilvā. Here the conflict is not described in mythological terms, but in the abstract terms of Buddhist doctrine.

After the declaration of each of the three knowledges (of the recollection of past lives, of the karma of beings, and of the cessation of defilements), the Buddha repeats the refrain:

> Ignorance was dispelled, true knowledge arose. Darkness was dispelled, light arose. So it is with him who abides vigilant, strenuous and resolute.
>
> (M 1:248-249)

Ling suggests that alongside this refrain may be placed the Buddha's words in which he is represented (in the Cakkavatti Sīhanāda Sutta) as telling the monks that only by great effort could Māra be overcome:

> I consider no power, O monks, so hard to subdue as the power of Māra. (D 3:77)

In his first words after the Enlightenment, the Buddha declares that he has "seen" (*diṭṭho'si*) (Dh 154; Tha 184) the House-maker which can be taken as a reference to Māra who is usually exposed with Right View or spiritual vision (cf. A 2:17).

On separate occasions, Māra appears to various nuns [9:10ab, 11], and tries to confuse them with speculative questions, such as those about man's creator but the nuns (Śāilā/Selā and Vajrā/Vajirā) respond with the right answers and Māra leaves disappointed with the words "The nun...knows me!" **Māra is defeated with knowledge**: "Fight Māra with the weapon of wisdom" (Dh 40).

The practice of meditation, especially the four Stations of Mindfulness (*smṛtyupasthāna/satipaṭṭhāna*) keeps Māra at bay (S 5:146). Although Māra rules over all the universe, the mind concentrated in any of the eight Absorptions "cast darkness around Māra" (A 4:432). [8]

The Buddha is sometimes known as ***Mārâbhibhū,*** the Overcomer of Māra (Sn 545 = 571).

<u>Symbolic adaptation</u>

Legends of demons and discarnate beings have always fascinated the masses. Through the Māra myth, the Buddha "converts" the indigenous demon beliefs into a skilful means for personal development. The Māra myth concretizes the dark elusive spectres of the human Unconscious and resolves the problem of

evil, not by just giving them a name, but also understanding that Māra underlies all of life itself—as defined in the first Noble Truth.

The figure of Māra is not a mere poetic fancy, for it points to real human problems—of pain, disease, decay and death. Māra stands for all that Nirvana is not. Māra, like the Buddha, of which he is the antithesis, is not a permanent figure; for he, too, dies and is reborn. Like Maudgalyāyana (who was Dūsī in a past life), Māra, too, has a chance to become an Arhant, of becoming enlightened like the Buddha.

14. WHO IS A BUDDHA?

The conception of Buddhahood is best understood in terms of evolution, that is, to say, **spiritual evolution** [2:6]. This is the gradual process of self-perfection through conscious interaction with the outside world and the internal focus of one's spiritual energies. The Buddha, in other words, is the highest evolved being within our world system over a significantly long period of time, usually a world-cycle.

The Buddha is complete with noble qualities, just as with the coronation or enthronement of a king, he is conferred sovereignty over the whole nation (MA 1:54 f.). The **Puggala,paññatti** describes the Supreme Buddha as follows:

> Now in things never heard before, one understands by oneself the truth, and one therein attains omniscience, and gains mastery in the spiritual powers. Such a one is called a Perfect Self-enlightened Buddha.
>
> (Pug 29)

The attainment of Buddhahood or enlightenment is explained in the Pali texts as the realization of **the truth of Dependent Origination** (*pratītya,samutpāda/paṭicca,samuppāda*) (V 1:4-5; M 1:167) and as the attainment of Nirvana (M 1:167). The doctrine characteristic of the Buddhas and each time rediscovered by them and fully explained by them to the world consists in **the Four Noble Truths**.

THE 7 WEEKS AFTER ENLIGHTENMENT

15. THE FIRST WEEK

After his enlightenment, the Buddha fasted for 49 days. During the first week, he spent all his time meditating in the lotus posture (*padm'āsana*) under the Bodhi tree, experiencing the bliss of Release (*vimutti,sukha*), i.e. Nirvana. At the end of the week, the Buddha reflected on the Law of Dependent Origination. During the first watch of the night (6-10 p.m.), he reflected on this law in direct order, thus:

> When this (cause) exists, this (effect) is;
> With the arising of this (cause), this (effect) arises.

In the middle watch of the night (10 p.m.-2 a.m.), he reflected on the same law in reverse order, thus:

> When this (cause) does not exist, this (effect) is not;
> With the stopping of this (cause), this (effect) stops.

In the third and last watch of the night (2-6 a.m.), he reflected the same law in direct and reverse order, thus:

> When this (cause) exists, this (effect) is;
> With the arising of this (cause), this (effect) arises.
> When this (cause) does not exist, this (effect) is not;
> With the stopping of this (cause), this (effect) stops.

16. THE SECOND, THIRD AND FOURTH WEEKS

During the 2nd week after his enlightenment, the Buddha gazed at the Bodhi tree with the motionless eye as a mark of gratitude to it for having sheltered him during his struggle for enlightenment. The emperor Aśoka was said to have built **the "Shrine of the Unblinking Eye"** (*animisa,cetiya*) to mark the sacred spot (UA 52; MA 2:184; J 1:77).

During the 3rd week, he mindfully paced up and down on the **"jewelled promenade"** (*ratana-caṅkamana*) near the Bodhi tree. The Buddha had made this promenade using his psychic power to convince some skeptical devas that he had actually attained Enlightenment.

During the 4th week, the Buddha sat meditating on the Abhidharma (Higher Doctrine)[5] in **the "jewelled chamber"** (*ratana,ghara*). His mind and body were so pure that he radiated **the Buddha aura** or rays of the five colours, namely, blue, yellow, red, white, orange, and a mixture of the five (*pabhassara*). Blue stands for confidence, yellow for holiness, red for wisdom, white for purity, orange for detachment, and the mixture of the five represents all these noble qualities. From then on, the Buddha radiated these colours whenever he desired to. These colours are incorporated into **the international Buddhist flag** officially adopted at the meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Colombo, Śrī Lanka, in 1950.

17. THE FIFTH WEEK

From the narrative point of view, the 5th week after the Great Enlightenent was a very turbulent one. The Buddha spent this period in meditation under the **Goatherd Banyan tree** (*aja,pāla nigrodha*). According to the Saṃyutta Nikāya, Māra appears to the Buddha and invites him to pass away. When Māra fails in his effort, his **three daughters**, six times then tries to tempt the Buddha (S 1:124 f; cf A 5:46, J 1:78 f; DhA 3:195 f). At the end of the week, a conceited brahmin approached the Buddha.

(a) The Satta,vassāni Sutta

The Satta,vassāni Sutta (the Discourse on the Seven Years) (S 4.24) of the Māra Saṃyutta tells us that during 5th week after the Enlightenment, **Māra the Evil One** appears to the Buddha who is sitting under the Goatherd Banyan Tree, and fervently persuaded the Buddha to pass into final Nirvana soon after the attainment of the Enlightenment, since his search for the truth has been accomplished, asking him for what purpose would he want to teach the Dharma to others. In this case, the Buddha is reminded of the futility of teaching the Dharma.

[Māra:] Is it because you are sunk in sorrow
That you meditate in the woods?
Because you have lost wealth or pine for it?
Or committed some crime in the village?
Why don't you make friends with people?
Why don't you form any intimate tie?[6]

---

[5] **Abhidharma.** Traditionally, it is said that the Buddha here reflected on the Paṭṭhāna, the 7th and last book of the Abhidhamma. The Paṭṭhāna is a book of "causation", dealing with the 24 *paccayā* or modes of relations between mental and material states. While the other Abhidhamma texts take the analytical approach, this is the only Abhidhamma text that takes the synthetical approach. It is also important to note that what the Buddha is mediating on here in the method of Abhidhamma, not the Seven Texts, which were compiled very much later (between the 2nd and 3rd Councils). [Chapters 4 & 6.]

[6] This same verse would later be used by Rāgā, Māra's daughter in her attempt to confuse the Buddha [3:17].

[Buddha:] Having dug up entirely the root of sorrow,
Guiltless, I meditate free from sorrow.
Having cut off all greedy urge for existence,
I meditate taintless, O kinsman of the heedless!

[Māra:] That of which they say, "It's mine,"
And those who speak in terms of "mine"—
If your mind exists among these,
You won't escape me, ascetic!

[Buddha:] That which they speak of is not mine,
I'm not one of those who speak so.
You should know thus, O evil one:
Even my path you will not see.

[Māra:] If you have discovered the path,
The secure way leading to the Deathless,
Be off and walk that path alone;
What's the point of instructing others?

[Buddha:] Those people going to the far shore
Ask what lies beyond Death's realm.
When asked, I explain to them
The truth free from basis for rebirth (*yaṃ saccaṃ taṃ nirūpadhiṃ*).

The Buddha then declares to Māra that he will not pass away until the fourfold community (*catvāri pariṣad/cattāro parisā*)—monk disciples, nun disciples, layman disciples and laywoman disciples—who are "accomplished, trained, skilled, learned, well-versed in Dharma, trained in accordance to the Dharma, correctly trained and walking the path of the Dharma, who will pass on what they have gained from their own teacher, teach it, declare it, establish it, expound it, analyze it, make it clear: until they shall be able by means of the Dharma to refute false teachings that have arisen, and teach the Dharma accompanied by wonders (*saprātihārya dharma/ sappāṭihāriya dhamma*) [10:9a].

Māra then admits that he is defeated **like a crab whose claws have been removed** and crushed by playful children and left stranded on high ground, unable to move or return to its pond. "So, too, Venerable Sir, all those distortions, manoeuvres, and contortions of mine have been cut off, broken, and smashed to bits by the Blessed One. Now, Venerable Sir, I am unable to approach the Blessed One again seeking to gain access to him."

Then Māra makes his famous confession comparing himself to "a crow that walked round a stone that looked like a lump of fat" and finding nothing tasty there, leaves disappointed. (S 1:122-124). [3:17a]

(b) The Māra,dhītā Sutta

The Māra,dhītā Sutta details the Buddha's encounter with Māra's daughters. Māra, having failed to stop the ascetic Siddhârtha from gaining enlightenment, expressed his disappointment in these verses:

There was a crow that walked around
A stone that looked like a lump of fat.
"Let's find something tender there," it thought,
"Perhaps there's something nice and tasty."

But because it found nothing there,
The crow departed from that spot
Just like the crow that attacked the stone.
Disappointed, we leave Gotama.

(S 1:124)

Then Māra went away to a spot not far away from the Buddha. There he sat down cross-legged, "silent, dismayed, with his shoulders drooping, downcast, brooding, unable to speak, scratching the ground with a stick". Then Māra's daughters, noticing his indisposition, approached him. Having heard the reason for Māra's disappointment, the daughters decided to cheer their father up by approaching the Buddha themselves.

Having approached the Buddha, Māra's daughters suggestively proposed: "We serve at your feet, O ascetic!" The Buddha paid no attention. Then the daughters discussed amongst themselves: "Men's taste are diverse. Suppose we each manifest ourselves in the form of a hundred young women."

Six times Māra's daughters appeared each time in the form of a hundred women before the Buddha. The first time, as a hundred young maidens, they approached and made the same proposal again. The Buddha paid no attention. Again they met and discussed a new strategy.

The second time, they appeared as a hundred young women who have not yet given birth. Again they failed.

The third time, they appeared as a hundred women who have given birth once…

The fourth time, they appeared as a hundred women who have given birth twice…

The fifth time, they appeared as a hundred women of middle age…

The sixth and final time, they appeared as a hundred old women, proposing to the Buddha: "We serve at your feet, O ascetic!" The Buddha paid no attention to them each time.

Since the direct approach did not work, they then decided a more subtle approach. This time, each of the daughters approached the Buddha with a question:

Tṛṣṇā asked the Buddha [**the Kumāri,pañha**, the maiden's question]:[7]

Is it because you are sunk in sorrow
That you meditate in the woods?
Because you have lost wealth or pine for it?
Or committed some crime in the village?
Why don't you make friends with people?
Why don't you form any intimate tie?

The Blessed One:

Having conquered the army of the pleasant and agreeable,
Meditating alone, I discovered happiness,
The attainment of the goal, the peace of the heart.

[7] In the Kālī Sutta, Mahā Katyāyana gives a commentary on this Kumāri,pañha, where he mentions various *kasiṇa* (device) meditation methods, saying that the Buddha had successfully used the "consciousness device" (*viññāṇā kasiṇa*). (A 5:46).

Therefore I don't fraternize with people (*janena na karomi sakkhiṃ*),
Nor do I fall into any intimacy (*sakkhī na sampajjati kenaci me*).

Then **Aratī** addressed the Blessed One in verse:

How does a monk here often dwell
That, five floods crossed, he has crossed the sixth?
How does he meditate so sensual perceptions
Are kept at bay and fail to grip him?

The Blessed One:

Tranquil in body, in mind well liberated,
Not generating (new karma), mindful, homeless,
Knowing Dharma, meditating thought-free,
He does not erupt (with anger), nor drift (with lust), nor stiffen (with delusion).

When a monk here often dwells thus,
The five floods[8] crossed, he here has crossed the sixth.
When he meditates thus, sensual perceptions
Are kept at bay and fail to grip him.

Then **Rāga** addressed the Blessed One in verse:

He has cut off craving, faring with his group and order;
Surely many other beings will cross (*tarissanti*) (to liberation).
Alas, this homeless one will snatch many people,
And lead them away beyond the King of Death.

The Blessed One:

Truly the Tathāgatas, the great heroes,
Lead by means of the true Dharma,
When they are leading by means of the Dharma,
What envy can there be in those who understand?

(S 1:127 f.)[9]

In this episode, the daughters of Māra are evidently the deities personifying three of the ten forces of Māra's army [6].

(c) The conceited brahmin

At the end of the seven days, a conceited (*huhuṅka*) brahmin came and asked him who is a brahmin.

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[8] Comy. ***The five floods crossed*** (*pañcôgha,tiṇṇo*): one who has crossed the flood of defilements in the five sense-doors. ***The sixth***: he has crossed the 6th flood of defilements, that pertaining to the mind door. Or alternatively: by the mention of five floods: the 5 lower fetters are meant; by the 6th, the five higher fetters.

Tranquil in body (p*assaddhi,kāyo*): this comes about with the tranquillizing of the in-and-out breathing in the 4th absorption (see A 2:41). ***In mind well liberated*** (*suvimutta,citto*): well liberated by the liberation of the fruit of Arhantship. ***Not generating*** (*asaṅkhārāno*): not generating the 3 types of volitional formations (in the sense, form, and formless worlds). *Meditating thought-free* in the 4th absorption. ***He does not erupt*** (*na kuppati*) because of hate, ***nor drift*** (*na sarati*) because of lust, ***nor stiffen*** (*na thīno*) because of delusion. Or alternatively: by the first term the hindrance of illwill is intended; by the second, the hindrance of sensual desire; by the third, the remaining hindrances.

[9] This verse occurs at V 1:43 in a different context, that is, in connection with Sañjayin, the erstwhile teacher of Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana.

The Buddha answered, saying:

> The brahmin who is free from evil things,
> Not conceited, pure and self-controlled,
> Perfect in knowledge, and living the Holy Life
> Can rightly call himself a "brahmin"
> If he is proud of nothing in the world.

From this statement and other similar words, we can see that the Buddha is against the caste system. To him, one does not become a brahmin or a high class person because of birth. Whether one is a "high class" or a "low class" person depends on one's own actions: one who does good is a brahmin, one who does evil is not.

In the Buddha declares to **Āgneya/Aggika Bhāradvāja** that "actions make the man", not birth or status:

> Not by birth is one an outcaste,
> Not by birth is one a brahman;
> By one's deeds, one is an outcaste,
> By one's deeds, one is a brahman.
>
> (Sn 142)

18. THE SIXTH WEEK

During the 6th week, the Buddha stayed under **the Mucalinda tree** (Barringtonia acutangula), enjoying the bliss of Nirvana. A sudden storm with torrential rain and violent winds raged throughout the week. On the onset of the storm, the serpent-king Mucalinda emerged from his underground abode and coiling around the Buddha's body seven times, spread his hood over the Buddha to protect him from the rain, cold, heat, insects, and other discomforts.

At the end of the seventh day, the serpent-king uncoiled himself. Turning himself into a handsome young man, he paid his respects to the Buddha. The Buddha then said these words to him:

> Solitude is happiness for one who is contented, who has heard the Dharma, who sees
> Happy is goodwill in the world, and restraint towards living beings.
>
> Happy is detachment in the world, having transcended sense desires;
> But to be free of the conceit "I am"—that is the greatest happiness of all.
>
> (V 1:2)

19. THE FIRST LAY DISCIPLES

During the 7th week, the Buddha meditated under **the Rājāyatana tree** (Buchania latifolia). At the end of the seventh day of the seventh week, he emerged from his meditation, completing 49 days of fasting. At that time, that is, the 8th week, the merchants, **Trapuṣa (Tapussa) and his younger brother Bhallika**, were travelling by the road from Utkala (Ukkala, modern Orissa).

A certain deity who had been their relative in a former life told them that the newly enlightened Buddha was staying at the foot of the Rājāyatana tree, and that they should go and make some offerings to him for their own welfare and happiness. They took some rice cake and honey to the Buddha.

The Vinaya account relates that when the Buddha had nothing to receive the food with, the Four Guardian Kings brought **four crystal bowls** from the four quarters and offered them to the Buddha.

After the Buddha had partaken of this meal, the two merchants took **the Twofold Refuge** (*dve,vācika saraṇa*) (A 1:26). They thus became **the first Buddhist disciples** (*dve,vācika upāsaka*) by declaring:

> We go to the Blessed One and the Dharma for refuge. As from today, let the Blessed One regard us as followers who have gone to him for refuge for as long as life lasts.

They took only the "Twofold Refuge" (*dve,vācika saraṇa,gamana*) because the Sangha or Buddhist Order was not yet founded. The Twofold Refuge was used only in the pre-Sangha days and consisted in taking Refuge in the Buddha and the Dharma. [10]

As they were simple merchants, the Buddha did not teach any profound doctrine to them, but according to **the Lalita,vistara**, he recited a blessing bestowing on them wealth and good fortune in the four quarters and under the twenty-eight constellations.

According to the Jātaka Commentary, when they asked the Buddha for an object of veneration, the Buddha gave them a bit of his **hair and nails**. The merchants then erected stupas over these relics. It is said that the hair relic is still enshrined in the famous Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Rangoon, Burma.

Later on, after listening to the Buddha in Rājagṛha, Trapuṣa became a Stream-winner and Bhallika joined the Order and became an Arhant (V 1:3 f; AA 1:382 ff; ThaA 1:49 ff; J 1:80).

THE BODHI TREE

20. BUDDHAS AND BODHI TREES

(a) The 24 Buddhas

The expression "Bodhi tree" (*bodhi,vṛkṣa/bodhi,rukkha*) is a generic name for the tree under which a Buddha sits and attains enlightenment (*bodhi*). According to the **Nidāna,kathā,** the Jātaka Introduction, different Buddhas have different trees of their choice and each of the is described as the Bodhi tree of his dispensation (J 1:29 ff.). This is a list of **the 24 Buddhas** of the past and their respective Bodhi trees, according to **the Buddha.vaṃsa Commentary**:

(A) Taṇhaṅkara	***sattapaṇṇi*** (Skt *saptaparṇa*). The 7-leaved Alstonia scholaris.
(B) Medhaṅkara	***palāsa*** (Vedic *palāśa*). Buttea frondosa, Judas tree. Popular name: *kiṃsuka.*
(C) Saraṇaṅkara, 19. Vipassī	***pāṭalī,*** Bignonia (or Stereospermum) suaveolens.
1. Dīpaṃkara	***pipphalī*** (Skt *pipphala*). Ficus religiosa; the holy fig tree; same as *assattha* (Skt *aśvattha*).
2. Koṇḍañña	***sāla,kalyāṇi,*** "the auspicious sāla tree"; probably the same as *sāla.*
3. Maṅgala, 4. Sumana, 5. Revata, 6. Sobhita	***nāga*** (Skt *nāga,keśara*). Mesua ferrea Linn.; the iron-wood tree).
7. Anomadassī	***ajjuna*** (Skt *arjuna*). Terminalia (or Pentaptera) arjuna; same as *kakudha* (see Piyadassī).
8. Paduma	***soṇa*** or *mahāsoṇa* (Skt *śyoṇaka*). Oroxylum indicum or Calosanthes indica, Trumpet flower.

[10] The first Threefold Refuge lay-disciple (*te,vācika upāsaka)* was Yaśa's father, and his (Yaśa's) mother together with the rest of the family later became the first female lay-disciples (*te,vācika upāsikā*), Vin 1:15 ff; DhA 1:72; JA 1:80 f.

9. Nārada	***mahāsoṇa***. See under Paduma. Bv Comy says this is the *ratta,soṇa* (red trumper flower).
10. Padumuttara	***salaḷa,*** *salala* (Skt *sarala*) Dipterocarpus indicus, a sweet-scented tree, perhaps a pine, Pinus longifolia. (J 1:37 gives *sāla*, Shorea robusta).
11. Sumedha	***mahānīpa.*** Anthocephalus cadamba.
12. Sujāta	***mahā,veḷu,*** "the great bamboo", probably the elephant bamboo, Dendrocalamus brandisii.
13. Piyadassī	***kakudha***. Terminalia (or Pentaptera) arjuna. (J 1:39 reads *piyaṅgu*, Panic seed, Panicum italicum)
14. Atthadassī	***campaka***. Michelia champaka, the champak.
15. Dhammadassī	***bimbi,jāla*** or *ratta,kuravaka*, the Red Amaranth tree.
16. Siddhattha	***kaṇikāra***. Cochlospermum religiosum or Pterosprmum acerifolium.
17. Tissa	***asana***. Pentaptera or Terminalia tomentosa.
18. Phussa	***āmaṇda,*** Emblic myrobalan, Phyllanthus emblica. (J 1:41 gives *āmalaka*; MA 4:147 says they are identical.)
20. Sikhī	***puṇḍarīka***, Fragrant or white mango, Mangifera spp. Also called *setambha* (BvA 247; DA 416).
21. Vessabhū	***mahā,sāla***, the great sāl tree, Shorea robusta. See under Padumuttara.
22. Kakusandha	***sirīsa***. Acacia sirissa, Albizia lebbeck. J 1:42: *mahāsirīsa*.
23. Koṇāgamana	***udumbara***. Ficus glomerata, a species of fig tree.
24. Kassapa	***nigrodha***. Banyan tree, Ficus bengalensis or indica.
25. Gotama	***assattha*** (Skt *aśvattha*). Pīpal tree, Ficus religiosa.

The first three Buddhas mentioned here (A-C) are those of the distant past before Dīpaṅkara, under whom Sumedha (our Bodhisattva) first made his resolve and aspiration to become Buddha. Since then 23 other Buddhas have arisen.[11]

At Bhārhut, Cunningham has identified the Bodhi trees of six different Buddhas, namely, Vipaśyi/ Vipassī, Viśvabhū/Vessabhū, Krakucchanda/Kakusandha, Kanakamuni/Koṇāgamana, Kāśyapa/Kassapa and Śākyamuni (Cunningham, 1879:101). **The pīpal tree**, Gautama's Bodhi tree, has been regared as sacred long before his time (see M.S. Randhawa, *The Cult of Trees and Tree Worship in Buddhist-Hindu Sculptures*, Delhi, 1964.)

(b) The pipal tree

Gautama's Bodhi tree is the *Ficus religiosa* or **holy fig tree**, known as the *aśvattha (assattha*) (V 1:8; M 1:170), that is, the *pipphalī/pipphala,* commonly known in India as the pīpal tree. It is a tall semi-deciduous tree belonging to the family Moraceae. It is a *glabrous* tree (having no hairs, i.e. smooth bark, leaves, etc.), growing naturally often as an *epiphyte* (growing on another plant or structure for support but not nutriment).

The leaf is *coriaceous* (tough like leather in texture). The upper surface is shiny and the under-side is *minutely tuberculated* (with a network of tiny swellings) when it is dry. It has a long petiole (leaftstalk). The shape of the leaf is *ovate-rotund* (rounded with oval base tapering at the end, that is, heart-shaped) and narrowed upwards. The apex produces a *linear lanceolate* tail (long, narrow and tapering at the end). The edges of the leaf are *entire and undulate* (that is, smoothly unbroken and slightly bending wavelike).

[11] For Gautama Buddha's past lives under the various Buddhas and other details, see B:H (Chronicle of Buddha) Introd, esp. xlix-lii.

The leaves are lustrous when young, and suspended on their long flexible petioles rustle in the slightest breeze.

The colour of its bark is grey and nearly half an inch (12.7 mm) thick. Its wood is grayish-white and moderately hard, having narrow bands of soft tissue that alternate with broader bands of firmer substance. The tree produces deep-purple fig-like berries in axillary pairs (from inside the leafstalks' "armpits"). Its small fig-like fruit is a favourite with birds and bats. Its tiny seeds, spread through bird droppings and guano, can often be seen sprouting on other trees, on walls or on roofs.

The young tree extends aerial roots as it grows and eventually is able to wind its roots around a nearby building or tree, causing the building to collapse or the tree to wither. Under good conditions, the tree may grow to a height of about 100 feet (30.5 m). Both Buddhists and Hindus regard the tree as sacred.

(c) The Bodhi tree in the early Sutras

The earliest sūtras (e.g. the Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta, M no. 26) that refer to the enlightenment of Gautama Buddha do not mention the Bodhi tree. The earliest Pali reference to the Bodhi tree is probably found in **the Vinaya**, where the Buddha is described, shortly after the enlightenment, as sitting cross-legged for seven days at the foot of the Bodhi tree experiencing the bliss of spiritual liberation (V 1:1).

The Jātaka **Nidāna,kathā,** too, refers to the Bodhi tree, with an account of how the Bodhisattva, having selected an auspicious spot under the tree, spreads a handful of grass he had received from Svastika (Sotthiya) and sits there facing the east, resolving not to rise until he has attained enlightenment. The Jātaka also graphically describes Māra's confrontation with the Bodhisattva, challenging him of his worthiness to sit under the Bodhi tree, and how the Earth herself bears witness to the Bodhisattva's past good deeds (J 1:71 ff.).

The Vinaya mentions that the Buddha spent the first seven days after the enlightenment meditating at the foot of the Bodhi tree. The Jātaka Nidāna,kathā adds that the Buddha spends the second week standing in front of the tree, gazing at it with unblinking eyes as a mark of gratitude.

21. EARLY REPRESENTATION OF THE BUDDHA

In the case of Gautama Buddha, the Bodhi tree sprang up on the same day as he was born (DA 2:425; J 1:54, 6:489; BA 131, 276, 298) [1:11a]. After his Enlightenment, he spent a whole week in front of it, standing with unblinking eyes, gazing at it in gratitude. A shrine was later erected on the spot, north of the Bodhi tree, where he stood, and was called **the Shrine of the Unblinking Eye** (P. *animisalocana cetiya*) (J 1:77). The spot was made into a shrine even in the Buddha's lifetime, the only shrine that could be so used.

While the Buddha was yet alive, he allowed the planting of a Bodhi tree in front of the gateway of Jetavana in Śrāvasti, so that people could make their offerings in the name of the Buddha when he was away. For this purpose, Maudgalyāyana (Moggallāna) took a fruit from the tree at Gayā as it dropped from its stalk before it reached the ground. It was planted in a golden jar by Anāthapiṇḍada (Anātha-piṇḍaka) with great pomp and ceremony. A sapling, it is said, immediately sprouted forth, fifty cubits[12] high, and in order to consecrate it, the Buddha spent a night meditating under it. Since this tree was planted under the direction of Ānanda, it came to be called **the Ānanda Bodhi** (J 4:228 ff).

[12] Cubit (*hattha*, lit. "hand, arm") (J 1:34, 233), an arm's length (V 4:221, 230) or the length measured from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow (about 17-22 inches or 4.3-5.5 cm).

22. WHY BUDDHIST LOVE TREES

Historically, Buddhists do not worship trees, but have a great love for trees and nature from the fact that the Buddha was enlightened under the Bodhi tree and spent a week meditatively gazing at it and living most of his life outdoors. Moreover, the Bodhi tree is the only object that the Buddha actually allowed to represent him so that offering could be made in his absence.

While the Buddha lived, devotees would bring offerings and place them before his Fragrant Chamber (*gandha,kuṭi*) when he was away. The Introduction to **the Kaliṅga,bodhi Jātaka** (J 4:228) records that Ānanda questioned the Buddha regarding what, like the Fragrant Cell, could constitute a "basis worthy of worship" (*pūjāniyasthāna/pūjāniyaṭṭhāna*) during his absence. In his reply, the Buddha spoke of **three kinds of shrines (*cetiya*)**:

(1) **the bodily or analogous forms (*sarīrika cetiya*)**—including relics, hair, and footprint;
(2) **shrine by use or chrematomorphic forms (*paribhogika cetiya*),** e.g. a robe, an almsbowl, a Dharma-seat and the Bodhi tree; and
(3) **memorial forms: shrine by dedication or association (*uddesika cetiya*),** e.g. the *dharma,cakra*, the trident (*triśula* or *nandī,pada*), the stupa, and the Buddha image.

(J 4:228)

The Bodhi tree is a "shrine by use" (*paribhogika cetiya*), since it sheltered the Buddha in his quest for enlightenment. As such, for Buddhists, the Bodhi tree represents the Bodhisattva's unrelenting effort towards self-perfection and the Buddha's enlightened wisdom. By extension, **Buddhists venerate all trees**. After all, every Buddha has his own Bodhi tree (BA 297). In this sense, trees are sacred to Buddhists even before the green movement arose in recent times. [See Kinnard, 1999:66 n100.]

An often used epithet of the Buddha is that of ***āditya,bandhu/ādicca,bandhu***, "kinsman of the sun" (D 3:197; Sn 1128; Tha 26, 158, 417). In the Saṃyutta, the Buddha speaks of the sun as *pajaṃ mama* (my child) (S 1:51; S:B 388 nn158-159), which Buddhaghosa explains as meaning "disciple and spiritual son" (SA 1:86). The Vimāna,vatthu Commentary says that the sun (*āditya/ādicca*) belonged to the Gautama clan (*gotama,gotta*), as did the Buddha; hence his epithet (VvA 116).

In our universe, **the sun** is the ultimate source of all life, since without it life as we know it would cease to exist. In terms of **the food chain**, we ultimately get our energy from the sun, that is, through plants acting as solar transformers, converting and storing solar energy in forms digestible to us. Trees are our halfway houses of life, standing between the raw nuclear power of the sun and the fragile terrestrial life. The Bodhi tree, as such, reminds us how interconnected our life is with everything else around us.

Cut down the forest, but not the tree	*vanaṃ chindatha, mā rukkhaṃ*
From the forest arises fear	*vanato jāyati bhayaṃ*
Having cut down forest and growths	*chetvā vanañ ca vanathañ ca*
O monks, you are forest-free!	*nibbaṇā hotha bhikkhavo*

(Dh 283)

In this sense, Buddhists worship trees.

□ □ □

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