



Victory over Mara

Dominique Side

After a number of years leading the life of an ascetic in the forest, Siddhartha realised that extreme behaviours did not lead to the liberation he was looking for. He decided to sit under a large fig tree to meditate because his earlier experience had shown him that meditation can be a promising practice.

At first, according to the Mahayana stories, he was confronted by worldly temptations depicted in the form of the demon Mara – a religious experience similar to the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness.

Mara symbolises the forces of desire and death. He is a deity who became powerful through previous good works, but who uses his power to entrap people in sensual desire and attachment so they stay within his realm of influence.

Mara wanted to prevent Siddhartha's enlightenment because it would make him free of death's clutches. He began by sending his own sons to arouse anger in Siddhartha. The sons, dressed as warriors, approached menacingly and released their arrows to kill him, but Siddhartha remained unmoved and as the arrows came near they turned into flowers. Next, Mara sent his daughters to try to seduce Siddhartha. Some were fat, some were thin, some were young and others were older so Mara was confident that there was at least one the Buddha would find attractive. But the Buddha had overcome lustful desire so once again he remained unmoved, and the daughters eventually slunk away. Mara then tempted the Buddha's pride by offering him the whole of his kingdom provided he abandoned his quest for enlightenment, but the Buddha refused. He had overcome all hope for fame and glory so Mara's offer failed to tempt him.

Finally, Mara taunted the Buddha with the warning that nobody would ever believe him when he announced to the world that he had attained enlightenment. In response, the Buddha touched the earth with his right hand and called the earth goddess as his witness, whereupon the earth quaked in reply. Mara finally gave up and fled.

Note

This story is a dramatization of one of the Buddha's main religious experiences. It taught him that, before one can attain one's religious goal, it is necessary to overcome all desire, aggression, pride and other harmful emotions. This episode can be seen as victory over evil, but evil in Buddhism is not primarily an external force; rather it is the power of our own negative emotions.



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