

THE DEMON MARAS: TEMPTING OURSELVES

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Much is made in the Buddhist literature of the Maras, the various forms of temptation and distraction that appear as obstacles in our dharma path. And although they often are portrayed as physical entities like the three temptresses that appeared to the Buddha, this kind of imagery encourages us to look outside ourselves for Maras, when quite the opposite is the truth.

Maras come not from outside us but from right inside our own mindstream. No one tempts or carries us away. We get carried away all by ourselves and the person to watch out for who does all this is us. This makes vigilance much more difficult because we literally have to watch our self.

Technically maras are anything that distracts or takes us away from the dharma, our particular path toward realization. Maras inveigle us through our own attachments and desires. They are not people or demons on the outside but simply our own weaknesses personified. Maras seduce us away from our own best interests. Sound familiar?

Our maras captivate us; they capture our attention and can hold it for a long time. They seduce us mentally and then physically. And I am not talking about the minor distractions life presents but rather major attractions or attachments that can expand out of all proportion until they totally encompass us in like a giant bubble.

Before we know it we find ourselves at rapt attention in an ever-expanding bubble that we just can't seem to pop. We may even be somewhat conscious that we are out of control and veering from our best intent but yet still be unable to stop it. We witness all this happening right before our eyes like in a dream.

Caught in a time warp that we know has no future, like the deer in the headlights or like when frozen in a bad dream we cannot seem to move a muscle, we are caught in the mara and have no choice but to just let it play itself out. We have had no training to end it.

Or we can make rules and they may help. For example, if one of our maras is alcohol, then we can make a rule not to drink, ever. This can work but it's not the same as finding out why we don't want to drink in the first place and being able to say no to alcohol because having a clear mind is just preferable.

And suppressing maras is no final solution. As we grow stronger and more confident in our practice we don't just want to keep our heads down and try to stay out of mara's way. Ultimately we want to look our maras in the eye and know firsthand that they are illusory. We want to consciously make them release their hold on us and to not be so easily captivated and carried away by them.

Our ultimate goal is to be able to trust ourselves to always make the right decision, to always choose a path that is dharmic for us, one that leads to our greater good and the good of others. Doesn't that make sense?

If we show no fear of our maras, don't try to suppress them, and even welcome them to put us

to the test, this takes a lot of confidence. Like quicksand, as we are increasingly encapsulated and carried away in the bubble of a mara, it is up to us to pop that bubble, removing all its magnetism and hold over us. To do that we have to have faith in what we have been taught and faith in ourselves that we will have the awareness to see through the veil of obscurations that maras weave. Again: this takes confidence. This is why for many of us it is better to avoid what can be maras for us than to attempt to deal with them directly. Don't try this at home!

What I outline above can be a little scary. I am not trying to frighten anyone but rather to point out that most of us can't manage this all at once. It takes time and it takes training. Training in meditation is an incremental and usually a slow process but it is sure of a good result if undertaken diligently and with the proper intent.

Good spiritual friends and advisors can help, and of course a real-life teacher is best of all. They can pop our bubbles and free us but in the long run we must learn to free ourselves. I had such a teacher in Andrew McIver. Many is the time I would seek Andrew out, having thoroughly entangled myself in the self-defeating web of my own bad habits, call them maras, demons, or whatever. Andrew would know at a glance that I was in trouble again and, in the midst of a teaching, he would suddenly bring his newspaper down on the cement seat where we were sitting or some such surface. Whack! And, presto, my bubble was popped and I was back again in my ordinary mindset. It happened instantaneously, only I could not yet do it for myself. It is something each of us has to learn.

There is a solution to handling maras but the solution is slow and takes time. After all, Shakyamuni Buddha was working through maras up until the very last moment before he was enlightened. That should tell us something. It is not like we have a choice. Even if the process of overcoming maras is long, there is no time like the present to get started working on training the mind. I hope this is helpful.