

## Review

*Malleable Māra: Transformation of a Buddhist Symbol of Evil*, by Michael D. Nichols. New York: State University of New York Press, 2019. xv + 251 pp. \$85 (hb). ISBN 978-1-4384-7321-5.

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The very beginning of *Malleable Māra: Transformation of a Buddhist Symbol of Evil* introduces two contrasting passages describing the nature of Māra. In the first, Māra is characterized as an intimidating god within the early Buddhist Pāli canon. Yet, in the second narrative of a later text, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, the evil one is portrayed as being in the service of Mahāyāna Buddhism. These examples cleverly set a precursor to what is explored throughout the book. Indeed, Michael D. Nichols focuses on the many representations and alterations in Māra's character over an expansive period of time, analysing the instances through a literary and mythical approach. Through such a detailed survey of the developments of Māra, Nichols reveals how Buddhist authors have continuously employed this figure to respond to sociohistorical changes. On this basis, Nichols argues that the myths of Māra are therefore reflective of the different concerns and anxieties of Buddhist communities from early Buddhism to the present day.

In the first two chapters, Nichols provides the reader with an overview of Māra, helping to formulate the nature of this Buddhist figure. At this point, the Evil One is shown to have many epithets, among which are the combination of both a god and demon, a cosmic figure who has control over thoughts and senses, and the lord of desire and death. In order to map and interpret these changing characteristics, Nichols adopts the interpretive approach of transvaluation: 'the shifting of values, which describes how ... myth can be used in the service of sociopolitical debate and criticism' (p. 8). Additionally, Nichols is concerned with dialogue and the way in which it has been used throughout narratives of various traditions as a means for emphasizing the ideals of different Buddhist communities. By focusing on these aspects and applying them to the myths of Māra, Nichols convincingly identifies three primary categories of the Evil One's portrayal throughout

Buddhist narratives. As shown throughout the chapters, each mode—didactic, shape-shifting, and demonizing—appears within the different periods and narratives drawn upon, yet the primary purpose tends to alter inline with the immanent concerns of the author and community at that time.

Found within the Pāli canon, the representation of Māra in his earliest form is first shown to be didactic. This is apparent through the portrayal of the Evil One's opposition to *dharma* and embodiment of *saṃsāra* which both serve as means of reinforcement for precepts central to Pāli Buddhism during this period. As Nichols discusses throughout the second chapter, this depiction of Māra in early narratives urges *bhikkhus* to adopt the codes of conduct communicated, with a particular emphasis on the notions of *dharma* and chastity for one's awakening. In fact, the conduct of *bhikkhus* is also reflected in and solidified by the shape-shifting and demonizing aspects of Māra's nature. As the god of *saṃsāra*, the Evil One was considered an entity capable of assuming any deceptive form. For the Pāli Buddhist community, he was therefore a dangerous lure and external force that one could encounter at any time. An example provided of this manifestation is an encounter between a farmer and the Buddha. During a discourse, a farmer interrupts and challenges the Buddha, with the Buddha concluding that the farmer is Māra in disguise. In response to this, Nichols argues that these literary instances are not only examples of Māra's shape-shifting ability, but they also demonize certain individuals or groups as they aim to 'explain away times when an outsider interrupted or challenged a *dharma* talk as simply a machination of Māra' (p. 23). In fact, this reflects later discussions of the portrayal of the Evil One as these categories continue to be adopted by Buddhist authors throughout differing sociocultural contexts.

In the subsequent chapters, the symbolism of Māra is again shown to mould the expectations and ideals of the authors. In these milieus, the figure assumes various roles ranging from a connection with Indian demonic creatures, to having divine Brahmanical characteristics, then shifting to serve Mahāyāna Buddhism, and eventually expanding across Asia and the West through a modernized Māra. Nevertheless, the three categories of this symbol put forth by Nichols remain the same. The narratives discussed are shown to be didactic in style through the use of Māra for the advancement of Buddhist teachings. In the earlier periods, the belief that the Evil One was a force that could be encountered at any moment aided the construction of certain ideals. As Nichols discusses, this includes the code of conduct for *bhikkhus* by setting the boundaries of the Middle Way doctrine, the ideal of non-violence and knowledge as means for overcoming evil, and the *Perfection of Wisdom*. These notions were presented in comparison to Brahmanical practices and non-Mahāyānists in order to validate their significance and status, and they were also employed to demonize individuals from these sects with Māra being the driving agent. Indeed, just as the early dispute between the farmer and the Buddha revealed the Evil One to be the source of discontent,

these later instances hold this Buddhist figure responsible for any opposition or hindrance where the teaching or practice of Buddhism is concerned.

During Māra's expansion across Asia, his characteristics were again reinvented within the didactic framework through his association with the myths and figures central to those regions. This was to congeal their form of Buddhist notions, namely *tantra*, intersubjectivity, non-dualism and omniscience. Conversely, in the West, Māra became an oppositional motif and form of one's psyche for convert Buddhists as a means of communicating their own empowerment through personal experience. In this way, Māra was transformed from a dangerous entity one can physically encounter, into a Western symbol of negative realities representing modernity, consumerism, and one's psychological impulses. Despite this particular usage of Māra differing from his Asian portrayal, in these two later contexts he has continued to be employed as a tool for the teaching of a particular doctrine again through the demonization of opposition: Māra assuming the form of communists or invaders, as well as consumerism and modernity. In fact, Nichols highlights that many proclamations of Māra have also made their way into everyday mass media, with the examples of *The Screwtape Letters* and *Doctor Who*.

Many Buddhist studies have addressed the mythic figure of Māra, generally focusing on the linguistic or philosophical aspects portrayed within a specific text or epoch; yet Nichols provides an alternative understanding based upon literary mythical instances. Though a more in-depth analysis of why Buddhist communities faced particular trepidations could be provided at times, Nichols compellingly achieves the aim set out. That is, demonstrating the alterations of the figure of Māra while addressing how this is reflective of Buddhist communities coming to terms with, and making sense of, the concerns encountered. This book will be valuable for both specialists and students of Buddhism.