

Conquering Māra

After Prince Siddhatha, the Bodhisatta, left the palace, he practiced asceticism in Uruvela for six years as the ascetic Gotama. Gaining no satisfaction and seeing no benefit from such practice, he accepted a nourishing meal of rice cooked in milk from a woman named Sujata.



In the afternoon of the Vesak full moon, when he was thirty-five years old, Gotama stood under the Bodhi tree. As he sat down on the Diamond Throne, facing east, he made a strong determination: “Even though my blood dries up, and my bones and skin waste away, I will not get up from this seat until I have attained perfect Enlightenment!” He began meditating and soon attained the tranquility of the jhanas. Many devas gathered around him to pay homage and to praise him for his determination.

At that time, Māra, the Evil One, seated in his abode in the highest heaven of the Sensuous World,¹ heard this determination and became both worried and angry. This mighty deva, the personification of death, realized that, if Gotama succeeded, he would free not only himself but also countless others from suffering. This would greatly weaken Māra’s power over mankind.

Assuming the form of a fierce yakkha with one thousand arms, each brandishing a deadly weapon, Māra mounted his elephant, Girimekhalā. Accompanied by his ten armies², Māra roared loudly and stormed forward. All the other devas fled in terror.

Māra’s soldiers assumed frightening forms and surrounded Gotama. They attacked him on all sides, but they could not break his concentration. All of their dangerous weapons turned to flowers and fell at Gotama’s feet. Then Māra plunged the world into absolute darkness. He created a thunderstorm and split the darkness with bolts of lightning. He showered the meditating Gotama with ice and boiling

¹This heaven is called the Heaven of those who wield power over the creations of others (*Paranimmita-vasavatti*)

² Māra’s armies are: (1) Lust; (2) Discontent; (3) Hunger and thirst; (4) Craving; (5) Laziness; (6) Cowardice; (7) Doubt; (8) Hypocrisy and obstinacy; (9) Undeserved praise and gain; and (10) Praising oneself and looking down on others.

water, followed by fiery hot sand and stones. He created a cyclone with a wind strong enough to uproot trees. He made the wind both foul-smelling and poisonous, but Gotama remained calm and undisturbed. Failing at all of this, Māra sent his three daughters, Discontent (*Arati*), Passion (*Ragā*), and Craving (*Tanhā*), to distract Gotama. They danced seductively, but he never looked at them. Unable to break the Bodhisatta's concentration, these beautiful young maidens became old and disappeared.

Māra realized that he could neither frighten nor distract Gotama, so he decided to tempt him with a seemingly irresistible offer. "Gotama!" he shouted. "I will make you king of the entire world. You will have unlimited power, and you will enjoy unlimited pleasures. All you have to do is abandon your quest."

Gotama replied that his attainments were already greater than that.

In desperation, Māra asked what right Gotama had to sit on the Diamond Throne. All of Māra's soldiers again rushed forward to push Gotama from his seat. Gotama calmly touched the earth with the middle finger of his right hand.³ The deva of the earth appeared and testified that the Bodhisatta had fulfilled the Ten Perfections during his previous lives.

As proof of the Bodhisatta's virtue, this deva, who is sometimes called Mother Earth, wrung out her hair, releasing a great flood. From her hair flowed all the water which Vessantara had poured in his innumerable acts of generosity.⁴ There was so much water that it washed away Māra's armies. This perfect generosity was too much for Māra. He surrendered and paid homage to the Bodhisatta. As the sun was setting, all the devas joyfully returned and gathered around the Bodhisatta to celebrate his victory.

As the full moon arose, the Bodhisatta continued meditating and made greater attainments. During the night, he recalled all his past lives. Then he saw the kamma and rebirth of all living beings in Samsara, the Round of Existence. Finally, at dawn, having destroyed all his mental defilements, he attained perfect Enlightenment and became the Buddha.

³ In Buddhist art, this hand gesture is called "Earth Witness."

⁴ It was as Vessantara that the Bodhisatta had spent his last life on earth. It was during this life that he supremely developed the Perfection of Generosity.

Conquering Mara, Exercises

Part 1 *The Same Meaning*

Draw a line from the word in Column A to the word in Column B which has the same meaning.

A	B
abandon	accomplishments
abode	calm
attainments	charity
benefit	deteriorate
cyclone	earlier
dawn	fear
entire	gain
foul	give up
generosity	home
mankind	humanity
mental	hurricane
nourishing	nutritious
previous	of the mind
quest	search
seductively	sexily
terror	sunrise
tranquility	unpleasant
waste away	whole

Part 2 *Opposites*

Draw a line from the word in Column Y to the word in Column Z which has the opposite meaning.

Y	Z
absolute	defeat
boiling	destroy
create	dissatisfaction
disturbed	fail
evil	fragrant
foul-smelling	freezing
greater	good
highest	infinite
limited	lesser
loudly	lowest
push	old
satisfaction	partial
setting	pull
shouted	rising
succeed	softly
victory	strengthen
weaken	undisturbed
young	whispered

Part 3 *True or False*

Mark each sentence T if it is true, F if it is false, and ? if unknown.

1. ___ After the Bodhisatta had practiced asceticism for six years, he gave up and accepted food from Sujata.
2. ___ The Bodhisatta had made a firm determination to know all his past lives.
3. ___ Mara was threatened by the Bodhisatta's determination.
4. ___ Mara assumed the form of the fierce elephant Girimekhala with a thousand tusks.
5. ___ When every other ploy failed, Mara made the Bodhisatta a tempting offer—power over the entire world!
6. ___ Mara challenged the Bodhisatta's right to sit on the Diamond Throne.
7. ___ Mother Earth offered proof by releasing a flood of all the tears that the Bodhisatta had wept.
8. ___ As Vessantara the Bodhisatta had perfected generosity by giving away everything he'd been asked for.
9. ___ Even Mara had to pay respect to the Bodhisatta.
10. ___ The Bodhisatta became the Buddha by seeing the kamma and rebirth of all living beings.
11. ___ Mara lost all his power when the Bodhisatta became perfectly Enlightened.

Part 4 Choose the best answer

Circle the letter of the phrase which best completes the sentence.

1. Mara was angry about Gotama's determination because _____.
 - a. Gotama might free himself
 - b. Gotama might free countless others
 - c. Gotama might challenge Mara's power
 - d. (All of the above)

2. Seated on his elephant, Girimekhala, Mara _____.
 - a. carried a thousand different weapons.
 - b. had a thousand heads.
 - c. had one thousand armies
 - d. (None of the above.)

3. Mara offered to make Gotama _____.
 - a. the king of the whole world
 - b. his son-in-law
 - c. the general of his army
 - d. (None of the above)

4. Mara's daughters, Discontent, Passion, and Craving, demonstrated the truth of _____.
 - a. suffering
 - b. impermanence
 - c. non-self
 - d. the law of kamma

5. By conquering Mara, the Buddha _____.
 - a. opened the door to the deathless
 - b. overcame death and rebirth
 - c. showed the way to Nibbana
 - d. (All of the above)

6. The Buddha conquered Mara with _____.
 - a. wisdom
 - b. determination
 - c. morality
 - d. generosity

Part 5 For discussion

1. How is Mara described in the story? Who or what is he?

2. What does Mara mean to us in the 21st century?

3. How can we defeat Mara in our own lives?

Part Four Death Meditations

For each of these meditations, Place one word or expression from the box in each blank.

The Teaching of the Sage Araka

bubble	escape	river	still
cow	grass	rushes and flows	sun
dewdrop	iron pan	sliver of meat	tongue
drop of saliva	mountains	step	water

The life of human beings is short and full of suffering. One should understand this and live virtuously.

For one who is born, there is no _____ from death.

The life of human beings is like a _____ on the tip of a blade of _____ which quickly evaporates with the rising of the _____.

The life of human beings is like a _____ on the water which quickly bursts.

The life of human beings is like a line, drawn in _____ with a stick, which quickly vanishes.

The life of human beings is like a _____, flowing swiftly down from the _____, which never stands _____, but always _____.

The life of human beings is like a _____ which a man forms on the tip of his _____ and spits out with little effort.

The life of human beings is like a _____ which, when thrown onto a red hot _____, quickly burns up.

The life of human beings is like a _____ which, when led to the slaughterhouse, with every _____, approaches death. –Anguttara Nikaya 7.70

Life in the world is unpredictable

age	broken	death	drop	is	one	pottery	stick
being	cattle	die	fruit	life	pasture	ripe	to
born	cowherd	die	has	old	pots		

Life in the world is unpredictable and uncertain. Life is difficult, short, and fraught with suffering.

Being born, _____; this is the nature of the world.

With old age, there _____; this is the way things are.

As a _____ drives the _____ to _____ with a _____, so _____ and death drive away the life of living beings.

When _____ is _____, it may _____ early in the morning.

In the same way, one who is _____ may _____ at any moment.

Just as all _____ made by all _____ end in _____, so it is with the _____ of all who are born.

Meditation on Death

banks	clay vessel	inevitable	stream	tree
blade	dewdrop	mushroom	summer	water
born	east	overripe fruit	sun	west
calf	hammer	slaughterhouse	tip	

Understand death. Be familiar with death.

Death approaches. Just as each step a _____ takes toward the _____, takes him closer to death, so death approaches with each passing day.

Death is _____, like the _____, which, after rising in the _____, moves steadily to set in the _____.

Death is like a _____ on the _____ of a _____ of grass, which is evaporated by the sun.

Death is like a _____ which dries up in the _____, leaving only its _____.

Death is like _____ poured into the sand, which disappears without a trace.

Death is like the _____ that finally falls from the _____.

Death is like a _____ which the potter smashes with his _____.

Just as a _____ emerges with a cap of soil, when we are _____, we carry our death with us.

Death

Arrange these items in logical order to form a suitable meditation on death. Some of the items are sentences. Some are clauses which must be combined with one or more others. First number the items in order. Then copy the entire passage in the spaces below, inserting capital letters and punctuation.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p><u>1</u> all beings will die, for</p> <p><u>3</u> all beings will receive the fruit of their own merit and evil, and</p> <p><u>5</u> evil doers will be born in hell, and</p> <p><u>7</u> therefore, one should do what is good, an accumulation for a future life</p> <p><u>9</u> when life, vital heat, and consciousness abandon this body, then</p> <p><u>11</u> as a cowherd drives the cattle to pasture with a stick, so</p> | <p>_____ it will lie discarded, useless like a log</p> <p>_____ life ends in death</p> <p>_____ merit doers will be born in a happy destination</p> <p>_____ old age and death drive away the life of living beings</p> <p>_____ merits are the foundation for beings in the world beyond</p> <p>_____ they will be born again accordingly</p> |
|--|--|

Understanding Death

Find the expressions in the second column which fit under each leading statement in the first column and write the numbers on the short blank lines. Then, in the long blank spaces, write the complete sentences

A. Understand death by the shortness of the lifespan. ___ ___ ___ ___

B. Understand death by the weakness of the life force. ___ ___

C. Understand death by knowing that this body is shared by many others. ___

D. Understand death by its absence of signs. ___ ___ ___

E. Understand death by knowing that health ends in sickness. ___ ___

F. Know that death comes to all. ___

G. As a turning wheel touches the earth at only one point, so, too, should life be understood. ___ ___

1. All strength ends in weakness.
2. The present moment arises, persists, then passes away..
3. Every success ends in failure.
4. Many die at birth or in their youth.
5. There is no sign to indicate when death will come—in the morning, in the afternoon, or at night.
6. It is a home to many others.
7. Life needs water and food.
8. Those who live to fifty years, live long.
9. Life is dependent upon air.
10. There is no sign to tell us where one will die—at home or away from home; in the air, on earth, or in the water.
11. Fewer live to be seventy or eighty.
12. Death comes to each moment, and, likewise, to each life, which arises, stays a bit, then passes away
13. The most powerful ruler, the richest man, the general, the head of a great family, and even the Buddha Himself, must die, so how can I hope to be spared?
14. Rare, indeed, are those who live to ninety or one hundred.
15. The way death will come is also unknown—from illness, by accident, or by an enemy's hand.