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Māra Re-Imagined: Stories of the "Evil One" in Changing Contexts[1]

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INTRODUCTION

Any scholar of Buddhism who has studied the various narratives of the awakening of Siddhārtha Gautama will also have encountered the figure of Māra, the deity/demon who represents desire and death and attempts to prevent Gautama's realization. Found in numerous textual permutations—such as the *Buddhacarita*, *Nidāna-kathā*, or *Lalitavistara* to name some of the primary accounts—the story of this confrontation has been a frequent subject for adaptation and reinvention in Buddhist traditions. While previous work on Māra has been done regarding the figure's symbolism in these Indian traditions and some contemporary festivals in Southeast Asia,[2] little attention has been focused on appearances of Māra in Western forms, especially popular culture. To do so has two immediately discernible benefits. First, it is instructive as to at least some of the ways an ancient figure such as Māra is perceived in or adapted to a mass media world. Second, it might provide evidence for the broader reception (or even consumption) of Buddhism in the Western world, including the tensions and renegotiations inherent in the process of adapting an older narrative symbol to new times and media.

Several theoretical ideas concerning the ongoing revision and adaptation of religious narratives, especially in the context of popular culture, are helpful as background to what I will explore in this paper. For instance, in their treatment of religious themes in popular culture in America, Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey Howard Mahan acknowledge the reflective properties of mass media, but emphasize that it "both reflects and shapes us."[3] The two perspectives are, of course, not mutually exclusive, and together provide an explanation for how

religious narratives take on stereotypical guises in popular culture and mass media, yet proceed to engender new forms. Anthropologist Edmund Leach summarizes this way of understanding religious narratives very well, writing that religious narrative (or, to use another term, "myth") "is a language of argument, not a chorus of harmony."[4] Myths may be made, but we would be wrong to think they ever stop being made, or being contested. In defining the term "transvaluation," James Liszka has argued along these lines also, writing that myth "is a shape, or better, a value-shifter rather than a value producer."[5] It is better, therefore, to understand religious narratives as being in a constant state of flux, the concept of "myth" as coextensive with "myth-making," and religious story-telling as inextricable from socio-political debate and imagination.[6] Religious narratives exist in an ongoing process of reinterpretation and the affect of popular media as a factor in these transformations cannot be ignored.

In this paper I will analyze and compare two such instances of the reinterpretation, or even recalibration, of Māra in Western popular media and the ways those re-imaginations of the figure reflect, and perhaps even shape, Western contexts. The first is Canadian convert Buddhist Ajahn Puṇṇadhammo's work *Letter from Māra*, an explicit Buddhist reworking of the literary classic *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis, with Māra providing instructions to his minions for ensnaring humans specific to the contemporary West.[7] The second is the appearance of Māra in two series (eight episodes) of the British science fiction television series *Doctor Who* in the early 1980s. One, entitled "Kinda," ran in early February of 1982 and a second, "Snakedance," in January of 1983. While these manifestations of Māra have different contexts, motivations, and represent very different kinds of media, their symbolism is very telling for the deployment of Māra in Western Buddhism. Indeed, they both grow out of yet constitute different responses to what Buddhist Studies scholars have called "Buddhist modernism." One of the leading scholars on this topic, David McMahan, has described Buddhist modernism as "forms of Buddhism that have emerged out of an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity," such as nationalist elements and the replacement of traditional mythology with modern science and cosmology.[8] In reacting to these forces, Buddhist modernists have demonstrated a complicated relationship with the West. As McMahan points out, Buddhist modernists have not carried out a "mere accommodation to [Western

discourses] . . . some of the developments have selectively adopted certain modern Western ideas and practices as tools to critique dominant features of modernity."[9] In the following, I will attempt to bring out both these different levels of responses to modernity in *Letter from Māra* and episodes of *Doctor Who*, attend to the effect of the different media involved in their representations, and ultimately consider their potential significance for evolving notions of Buddhist narrative.

LETTER FROM MĀRA

Beginning with *Letter from Māra*, the author Ajahn Puṇṇadhammo, according to biographical information on his website, was born in Toronto in 1955 as Michael Dominskyj.[10] Becoming interested in Buddhism as a young man, he traveled to Thailand for thirteen years and ordained as a Theravādin monk. In 1992, he returned to Canada and founded a meditation and retreat center near Thunder Bay, Ontario called the Arrow River Forest Hermitage. This center, in both its physical and digital form on the Web, is dedicated to educating the unfamiliar about Buddhist teachings. According to advertisements, visitors to the center receive access to its library of Buddhist texts and tailored meditation instruction. Visitors to the website can download free Pāli language tutorials, as well as lessons detailing such fundamental Buddhist teachings as the doctrines of karma and rebirth, dependent origination, and the narratives of the life story of the Buddha. Some of these expositions are lengthy text documents a browser can download, while others are pithier and even punchy. For example, as a potent demonstration of impermanence, the page on the website advertising downloadable copies of these discourses also contains an animation of Marilyn Monroe's face. Underneath her face, a caption beckons, "Mouse over here, baby, to see the real me." When the user scrolls the mouse cursor over her face as invited, the actress's face morphs into a leering skull, with a new caption taunting, "Mouse over again to return to your illusions, sucker."[11]

Additional links take one to archives of Puṇṇadhammo's writings, which include blogs detailing Buddhist ruminations on contemporary ethical issues (such as abortion or the 2003 Iraq War) and a column on similar topics published in the *Toronto Star* from 1999–2006. As with the other items housed on the retreat center website, Puṇṇadhammo's writings as a whole are geared toward communicating basic concepts and principles of the Buddhist path to a largely unfamiliar Western

audience. It is in this context and in this motive that we can approach Puṇṇadhammo's work *Letter from Māra*, a short book available as a pamphlet from the Buddhist Publication Society or as a downloadable file on the Arrow River Forest Hermitage website.[12]

One other piece of background material, though, is necessary to understand Puṇṇadhammo's project with this slim, clever little book: its literary inspiration. *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis, which Puṇṇadhammo cites explicitly as the inspiration for his book in its acknowledgements, was originally published in 1942 and is shaped as a series of correspondences from a senior devil named "Screwtape" to his nephew, a more subordinate demon called "Wormwood," who is engaged in trying to tempt and corrupt one particular, unnamed Englishman. Lewis' aim in the book was to demonstrate, from his Christian point of view, the character and intent of malign influences in the world. As the very name "Screwtape" suggests, Lewis puts forth a scenario in which the activity of these demonic beings is the inversion and perversion of the nature of God's creation. The ultimate demonic goal, as Lewis imagines it, is "spiritual cannibalism," by which "devils can, in a spiritual sense, eat one another; and us," subsuming another's mind and emotions into oneself.[13] Ultimately for Lewis, evil is hunger and void, which the demonic attempts to satisfy by absorbing others through domination. Puṇṇadhammo borrows Lewis' motif to convey his understanding of the role of the figure of Māra in the world, and along the way his interpretation of essential aspects of Buddhist teachings, to a modern Western English-speaking audience.

Puṇṇadhammo structures his book as a series of ten letters from Māra to each of his ten armies who range abroad in the world of death and rebirth, ensuring that beings do not escape. The concept of Māra's ten armies stems from the earliest Buddhist reference to the god, the Pāli *Padhāna-sutta* of the *Suttanipāta*, in which the Buddha-to-be rebukes Māra by naming and declaring powerless his armies of sense desires, boredom, hunger and thirst, craving, sloth, cowardice, uncertainty, malice and obstinacy, honor and notoriety, and finally, self-praise and denigration.[14] Māra himself is described in his heavenly realm, sitting at his office desk, "an elegant figure in a comfortable leather chair." We are told he is "tall and handsome, impeccably dressed and groomed" with a suave, "timeless and fashionable style."[15] Two goddesses serve as his personal assistants, doing his nails and hair as he sits at his desk, dictating his letters to yet another goddess/secretary.

In between, using a mouse made of "rubies and unicorn ivory," Māra scrolls through computer updates on the realms of his empire, the sensory world, which he oversees in the campaign to limit the influence of "the Adversary"—the Buddha.

In these instructions, Māra suggests to his armies not to be openly confrontational or evident in the lives of humans, but to subtly and through suggestion point them toward certain behaviors and ideas. For instance, he tells the army of sense desires to turn humans' focus toward ideals of beauty, to heighten fetishes on the physical body, and suggests that the army of boredom be sure to intervene whenever a task at first becomes difficult. He instructs his army of craving to always aim their target's desire a little bit higher (i.e., it is not enough to get the job but to get a promotion, then a raise, then be the boss, and so on).[16] For Puṇṇadhammo, Māra thus operates at a subliminal level, which is consonant in many ways to prior Buddhist representation of Māra, such as in the *Padhāna-sutta* of the *Suttanipāta* where the ten armies of Māra are not impositions or exploitations of an originally pure nature, but examples or even allegories of the fundamental, baseline inclinations of all beings. In other words, Māra and his armies, in a Buddhist view, are not corrupting human nature, but instead trying to keep it on course, which is oblivion of suffering and discontent.

In other ways, however, Puṇṇadhammo strives openly to update his subject, often veering into social and cultural satire. He has Māra remark, for instance, that "technology itself is largely a product of sensual desire," and illustrates this by giving the following reason for not creating a webpage to distract human attention and inflame desire: "it would only be redundant."[17] He also claims to have been behind the creation of the television for the same reason, calling it "Project Vidiot."[18] Puṇṇadhammo is similarly critical of capitalism and big business, styling Māra as the "CEO of Saṃsāra," thus merging the realm of death and rebirth in which beings are incarcerated with an economic system. Indeed, business metaphors abound, as Māra scoffs at any need for his forces to "downsize," scolds his "Research and Development" branch for not developing new ideas to trick humans into believing in immortality, and smiles when his secretary congratulates him with "That's why you make the big bucks, Māra!"[19] Similarly, Puṇṇadhammo targets the cult of celebrity, having Māra display an image of Elvis Presley at his prime before an adulating crowd, then fast-forward a number of

years to where the singer is "bloated and pasty faced" scrambling for his drugs.[20]

Puṇṇadhammo thus repackages Māra for the West in such a way as to be critical of Western culture, especially its focus on technology, capitalism, and popular culture. Māra and his forces, however, are revealed in the work to be ultimately self-defeating. In a clever turn, during each chapter Puṇṇadhammo also has Māra and his attendants exhibit the very quality that they intend to inflict on the world. For instance, while dictating his letter to the army of sloth, Māra asks his secretary to look up the word "accidie" (meaning torpor or apathy), to which she replies, "Why bother?"[21] While composing his letter to the army of malice and obstinacy, the god viciously berates a lowly lieutenant for his inadequate report.[22] Later he indulges in a recitation of his own powers and offices during discussion of the army of self-praise, and so on.[23]

The ultimate example of self-defeat, though, comes at the very conclusion of the book. Māra, whose exquisite youth and good looks have been emphasized throughout, reaches for his "platinum and tiger bone comb" and is horrified to discover a single gray hair.[24] For Lewis, the demonic is self-defeating in the sense that it leads to in-fighting, self-destruction, and self-loathing, as Screwtape and Wormwood demonstrate. Puṇṇadhammo, on the other hand, illustrates that the self-defeating nature of the demonic from the Buddhist point of view is that it is self-*deluding*: those under Māra's influence will believe, as he does himself, that they are immune to change, suffering, discontent, and death. As Māra is evidently intended as an extrapolation, in Puṇṇadhammo's view, of the tendencies and proclivities of the Western world, the text also employs the Evil One as an allegory of the self-defeating, self-deluding nature of that way of life.

MĀRA AND DOCTOR WHO

Now we turn to our second example of a modern reinvention of Māra, this time in the science fiction context, with his appearance in two episodic series of the British television program *Doctor Who*. The writer of both series, Christopher Bailey, has commented that at the time of writing he had been studying Buddhism fairly heavily and the episodes he crafted for *Doctor Who* provided an opportunity "to digest imaginatively" what he had learned.[25] As background, the character Doctor Who himself is a time-travelling alien, capable of living multiple lives

through a process of regeneration, who combats evil and injustice across the temporal and physical universe. As a consequence of the character's ability to regenerate, the role has been assumed by numerous actors and is played by Peter Davison in the episodes we will consider. Called simply "the Doctor," his real name is never revealed, not even to the bands of companions who accompany him on his journeys. In the first episodes interesting us, the Doctor and three companions (named Tegan, Adric, and Nyssa) visit a world called "Devaloka." The planet is shown to be entirely forested, with abundant food, consistently temperate climate, and no predatory animals. The native population, called the "Kinda," lives in huts made of thatched branches, has few possessions, and is led by two "wise women" named "Paññā" and "Karuṇā." Māra first enters the episode when Tegan, one of the Doctor's companions, falls asleep under a tree. She dreams of three ghostly white, frightening figures that torment her. Calling themselves "Dukkha," "Anicca," and "Anatta," they agree to relent only if Tegan allows a more powerful force to possess her. At that time, a snake (symbolizing Māra) wriggles into her arm, becoming a tattoo.

Tegan awakens under Māra's control and begins to spread the being's influence around the society, creating chaos, havoc, and conflict. At times, Māra leaves one host for another, always symbolized by the transference of the snake tattoo. The Doctor seeks out the wise women Paññā and Karuṇā, telling them of the recent calamities. They recognize the snake as the mark of "Māra, the evil one," and go on to say, "It is the Māra who now [turns] the wheel, who [dances] to the music of our despair. Our suffering is the Māra's delight, our madness is the Māra's meat and drink." Acting together, the Doctor and wise women devise a plan to trap the Māra in a wall of mirrors, as it "cannot bear the sight of its own reflection." Once a possessed Kinda is trapped in this mirror enclosure, Māra leaves his body and takes on the form of an enormous red snake, growing to ever larger and larger proportions until it bursts into nothing. When asked what has happened to Māra, the Doctor remarks that it has gone back to where it came from, "the dark places of the inside."

With terms such as "Paññā," "Karuṇā," "Dukkha," and so forth, the writer's attempt to insert Buddhist ideas into the story is quite obvious. However, the episodes are not a mere transplantation of Buddhist thought into a new medium by any means, as there is substantial blending with Western thought and symbolism, particularly

Christian. As we recall, the planet Devaloka is entirely forested, and is repeatedly referred to by another group of intergalactic explorers the Doctor encounters as a "paradise," since it lacks bad weather, disease, predators, hunger, and so forth. The trees are continuously in fruit, which are shown without exception to be apples. Finally, if one takes into account the symbolic shorthand and ultimate physical form of Māra—a giant snake—the allegorical meaning of the story is largely hybrid: a Garden of Eden world employing Buddhist terms is terrorized by a Satanic figure named Māra.

To make a second point about this first set of episodes before we proceed to the next, we should deal with the thematic meaning behind who is responsible for unleashing and fostering Māra's reign of terror. Previously I mentioned another group of space-travelling explorers the Doctor encounters. This group, hailing from a "galactic federation," has come to the planet to investigate it for possible colonization. They live in a massive domed structure and explore the planet in a self-propelled mechanical suit, relying on technology for all their needs. This, as well as the group's rhetoric about the need to appropriate and consume the planet's resources, sets them in stark contrast to the native, nature-loving, wise, spiritual Kinda. It is, by all appearances, a recurrent (and simplistic) dichotomy: technology versus nature, colonizer versus colonized, spiritual versus soulless, the rational West versus the "mystic East" (to invoke Jane Iwamura's concept of "virtual orientalism").[26] It is the technology-minded and dependent space explorers who release Māra and then serve as the evil one's primary hosts, before the knowledge of the Kinda can be summoned to combat it. To follow the allegory, it is then inherent in the Western way to be oblivious of and unleash Māra, while the only salvation rests in taking up Eastern wisdom.

At the beginning of the second series of episodes, also written by Christopher Bailey, it becomes clear that Māra was not defeated: Tegan continues to have nightmares of a "cave of snakes" on another planet named "Manussa" (continuing the appropriation of Pāli language terms).[27] The Doctor decides they should visit this world to investigate. Meanwhile, the audience is introduced to the society of Manussa, which is revealed to once have been the home-world of the Māra and is preparing to celebrate the five hundred year anniversary of the evil one's defeat. The society's upper-class royalty, primarily a mother (named Taṇhā) and son (Lon), are preparing for the ceremony

but demonstrate that neither they nor anyone else truly take it seriously any longer: Māra is just an ancient superstition. Lon and Taṇhā would rather lounge languidly on opulent couches in their palace, eating grapes and drinking wine. The mother and son deride the much smaller portion of the population who not only believe in the reality of Māra, but the possibility of its imminent return. These people, who are called "Snakedancers," according to Taṇhā are "frightful, dirty people covered in ash, some of them almost naked, living entirely on roots and berries and things, putting themselves in trances." The leader of these Snakedancers, who initially led them from society into the desert to prepare for Māra's return, is called "Dojjen."

Immediately there are some aspects here that require comment. First, "Taṇhā" and "Dojjen" (which seems a likely play on "Dōgen," the Zen meditation master) continue the tradition of the use of Buddhist names and terms. Yet, in other ways, the arrangement of representations in the preceding betrays an interesting pastiche of traditions. The description of the Snakedancers seems more fitting for Hindu *aghoris* rather than Buddhist monks (or perhaps a particular Western stereotype of all "mystical Eastern" meditators as "frightful, dirty people"). The notion of those preparing to resist Māra associating with snakes also seems a bit jarring, but this is explained by an interview with the writer, who attributed this detail to a fascination with Pentecostal snake-handling services in the U.S. Appalachians.[28] The tapestry of representations thus reaches far and wide, making numerous and, at times, surprising connections. On that point, Catherine Albanese has said the following: "Popular culture always pieces and patches together its universe of meaning, appropriating terms, inflections, and structurations from numerous overlapping contexts and using them as so many *ad hoc* tools to order and express, to connect inner with outer, and to return to inner again."[29] Bailey's work seems a perfect example of this tendency.

Meanwhile, in the rest of these episodes, the Doctor uncovers evidence of an enormous crystal (called the "Great Mind's Eye") that will allow Māra to assume control over Manussa again. Evidently, as is explained later in the episodes, centuries earlier the Māra formed through that crystal as a distillation of the restlessness, greed, and hatred of the Manussans. Māra has by now possessed Tegan and then Lon, who will have the crystal in his keeping during the ceremony in an underground cavern. The Doctor travels to find Dojjen, who emerges

from the desert as an elderly man, completely pacific, and entirely silent (he communicates only via telepathy), barefoot, carrying a staff. He sits cross-legged with the Doctor and instructs him in single-pointed concentration with platitudes such as "find the still point in your heart" and "hold on to the place the winds of fear cannot blow." The meditatively-trained Doctor arrives at the cave just as Lon has unleashed Māra, once again in the form of a giant snake. The assembled crowd gasps and screams in horror, but the Doctor concentrates on a smaller crystal Dojjen gave him, projecting his calm, unafraid mind onto Māra, which eventually falls over dead, but not before spewing copious amounts of gory, pink slime.

COMPARISON

At this point we can put the two instances into conversation, to look at the similarities and differences in their adaptations of Māra to new cultural circumstances. Here we can also revisit the themes raised in the introduction of the two narratives' connection to Buddhist modernism, the connection between their respective forms of media and the narratives they employ, and their longstanding significance for Buddhist narrative. As the latter two points are interestingly interconnected, first let us consider the relationship of these two narratives to Buddhist modernism. Immediately we can apprehend that each obviously reacts to Christian symbolism, both explicitly and implicitly. Puṇṇadhammo, for example, brings Buddhist messages forward by deliberately borrowing the method of a Christian apologist, and thus grafting his message about Māra onto a more dualistically-Christian worldview: in *Letter from Māra* one gets the impression of Māra stalking the world, or at least sending his minions to do so, as (perhaps stereotypically) Christians have over ages imagined Satan doing. To an extent this is reminiscent of Stephen Prothero's observation about the famous convert Henry Steel Olcott's attempt (in his own mind) to adapt Buddhism to the modern world: Puṇṇadhammo has partly fed a Buddhist lexicon through a Christian grammar, presumably as a means to connect to and communicate with an audience more familiar with that religious language.[30]

On the other hand, while Puṇṇadhammo acknowledges the appropriated nature of his approach, the *Doctor Who* episodes are more implicitly related to Christian influences. As we have seen, the portrayal of Māra in those episodes owes a great deal to the representation of

Satan in key Christian understandings. The writings of Christopher Bailey's fellow British convert Buddhist, Stephen Batchelor, especially in his work *Living with the Devil*, have relevance here. In that book, Batchelor discusses his personal interpretation of the Buddhist figure Māra, yet uses the Christian terms "Devil" and "Satan" throughout. He explains the reasoning this way: "As a Westerner who has practiced Buddhism for the past thirty years, I am aware of the parallel mythologies within that compete for my attention. I was not raised a Christian, but recognize how I have imbibed the myths and values of Christianity from the post-Christian, liberal humanist environment around me."[31] To use Batchelor's phrase, it seems that the walls between the parallel mythologies are quite permeable in "Kinda" and "Snakedance." Despite the use of Buddhist terminology, the dominant means for conceiving and portraying Māra is quite Christian.

At the same time both narratives adapt aspects of the dominant culture, they also, as is consistent with many Buddhist modernists, seek to subvert it. In *Letter from Māra*, the Evil One is a boorish, hedonistic capitalist peddling television, the Internet, and other drugs. Puṇṇadhammo locates Māra, and the activities which increase his power, at the heart of Western economics and leisure activities. Indeed, in one boast to his attendants, Māra chortles, "Their culture is one based on delightful lies of our devising, and the ugly realities are hidden away."[32] There is no doubt as to which culture Puṇṇadhammo targets when referring to *their* culture. In the *Doctor Who* series, Bailey is not quite so blunt, but it would be difficult to read the imperialist galactic colonists and indolent, self-absorbed Manussans, both of whom spread Māra's influence, as anything less than caricatures of a Western culture blind and even accomplice to the forces of death and desire in their midst. It does not seem to be going too far to suggest that Bailey, and the rest of the production team for that matter, positioned their portrayal of Māra as a satire of Western culture, not unlike Puṇṇadhammo's efforts in *Letter from Māra*.

Yet, there is a certain irony involved in these efforts as both works attempt to make Māra (and Buddhism) more relatable to a Western audience and Buddhism more appealing. In the *Doctor Who* episodes this is done by presenting Buddhism (and Māra) as simultaneously rational, scientific, and psychologically reasonable, as well as mystical and magical. In order to give a faux scientific explanation behind the usage of crystals, the Doctor explains that the effect generated by each rests on

"thought resonances," which, when powerful enough, can form matter and operate not unlike sound wavelengths. In addition, the description of Māra as emanating from the dark impulses of the Manussans in the distant past, returning now to haunt them, demonstrates shades of the invisible monster from the science fiction classic *Forbidden Planet*, which termed its beasts as (borrowing heavily from Freudian and Jungian psychology) "monsters from the Id." In both series of episodes (besides being a giant snake), Māra is associated primarily with psychological processes, though stated in generic forms, such as the "dark places of the inside" and "the depths of the human heart." This allows for the writer to describe Buddhism as scientific enough to speak to the West, but also mystical enough to be the salvation of the West. This fits very closely the motivation David McMahan has identified among many Buddhist modernists who perceive a Western world that has lost its magic and desire its re-enchantment.[33] To carry out this re-enchantment, however, as the *Doctor Who* episodes evidence, the mystic ways of the East must nevertheless be filtered through the psychological and technological understandings of the West.

In *Letter from Māra*, Puṇṇadhammo also strives from the beginning to update the Māra mythology and connect it to American technological and popular culture. The aforementioned references to television, the Internet, and Elvis Presley operate in this vein, as does the animated image of Marilyn Monroe, discussed previously, that Puṇṇadhammo employs on his website for the Arrow River Forest Hermitage. With the same kind of dark, ironic humor, Puṇṇadhammo updates Māra for his new audience. For instance, after signing a declaration as "Māra, Lord of Birth and Death, Devourer of Beings," and so forth, he instructs for a copy to also be sent to his lawyer.[34] Through this kind of often very playful language and characterization, Puṇṇadhammo conveys the same attributes and powers upon Māra as traditional Buddhist myth, but renders him as a world-wise, twenty-first century businessman. In short, he is a Māra with a foot in the old and the new worlds, the East and the West, recognizable to both. Here James Liszka's "transvaluation," describing instances in which language "revaluates the perceived, imagined, or conceived markedness and rank relations of a referent" in an opposing system, is especially relevant, as the redeployed Māra similarly draws on Western culture, but only in order to critique it.[35]

In all, that critique is just as deep as what is found in the *Doctor Who* episodes, suggesting that even as Puṇṇadhammo adopts Western terms to describe Māra for that audience, he sees multiple aspects of modernity as inherently flawed. For instance, what seems to please Māra most of all about modern Western society, and consequently serve as a new weapon of enthrallment, is its technological fascination and dependence. In one instance, Māra highlights the effectiveness of television:

> Some of you were skeptical when I began Project Vidiot, even citing possible undesirable educational and cultural side-effects, but now that we have whole generations weaned on the tube, we can all see that the results have more than vindicated my enthusiasm.[36]

In yet another section he calls the television remote the "single greatest advance in the triumph of boredom" for helping to destroy the human attention span.[37] No invention or advance of technology, however, Puṇṇadhammo would have us believe, has come to serve Māra more than the Internet, especially for its ability to disseminate pornography, inflaming sense desires, to further erode the ability to focus, and also to expose humans all the more to the products and services they could waste their lives acquiring or pursuing. While Bailey and the makers of *Doctor Who* re-imagined Māra into an extraterrestrial figure allegorical of psychological processes, Puṇṇadhammo has adapted Māra only as a means to argue that, far from making the mythic figure recede into the distance in the face of the grand achievements in the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution, the culture of the modern West has only made Māra manifestly more powerful and seductive, providing him with more traps and snares for his human prey.

Finally, let us look how these two narratives are connected to their respective media and the significance of these reinterpretations of Māra for understanding Buddhist narratives. First, Puṇṇadhammo's means of communicating a new myth of Māra are both traditional (a written text) and quite novel (a downloadable file on a website). The extent to which the website is interactive, through its browsable contents and responsive animations, also adds a new wrinkle. The Internet format, even as Puṇṇadhammo ironically derides it, also provides for a potentially enormous audience for his version of the Māra myth, unbounded by borders and, by virtue of being "on the cloud," free from the confines of physical book form. *Letter from Māra* also possesses

an instructive relationships with prior Buddhist portrayals of Māra. Puṇṇadhammo, as mentioned previously, though borrowing C.S. Lewis' conceit, has spliced it with the concept of Māra's ten armies as found in the *Padhāna-sutta* of the *Suttanipāta*. Though in that Pāli text Māra's "armies" are simply enumerated and not described in any great detail, Puṇṇadhammo structures the *Letter from Māra* on that framework and personifies each army and its qualities. He also manages (whether intentionally or not is unclear) to strike another chord with the *Padhāna-sutta*, as well as an additional Pāli text, through the manner in which he concludes *Letter from Māra*. If we recall, after running his opulent tiger-bone comb through his scalp, Māra discovers a gray hair, demonstrating his own susceptibility to the corruption of *saṃsāra* and the self-delusion and ultimate futility of his campaign against the Buddha. In the *Padhāna-sutta*, upon Māra's failure to dissuade Gotama from pursuing awakening, the demon-god is said to disappear, sadly letting his *vīṇā* (a kind of lute) fall to the ground.[38] In another seminal text for the early depiction of Māra in Buddhist literature, the *Mārasaṃyutta*, there is a passage that bears a number of similarities to the *Padhāna-sutta,* suggesting overlap between the two texts, or perhaps a common source. In its depiction, the Evil One similarly fails to tempt the Buddha, and in the face of his defeat, rather than drop a musical instrument and vanish, instead he sits down on the ground in silence and dejection, scratching aimlessly in the dirt with a stick.[39] In these instances, Māra is confronted with his failure and, the reader gets the impression, for the first time senses the limits of his powers. This calls into question the scope of his status as ruler of *saṃsāra*, deflating a figure who otherwise seems to expand to the limits of the known world and the human psyche. In the Pāli texts, very mundane, concrete, and even potentially comical objects are employed to impart this message: a dropped lute and a stick scratching in the ground. Puṇṇadhammo likewise invites his readers to put this god-demon in his place by imagining him shocked and awed by an ordinary, usually completely insignificant object: a single hair in a comb. Here, across time and space, the two narrative traditions conclude with startlingly similar visions of a pitiable figure committed to a useless struggle.

For the *Doctor Who* episodes, parallels with earlier Pāli or Sanskrit narratives are more difficult to discern as the influence of the medium of television has far more significantly altered the portrayal of Māra. For example, especially in the Snakedance series of episodes, as Māra

possesses one individual after another, he does so first by demanding, in an appropriately distorted and growling voice, that the victim, "Look at me!" The music crescendos, and the poor individual, forced to look at the snake image, succumbs. Clearly, this seems done for dramatic effect, to make the villain more imposing, built to higher elements to make its eventual fall more satisfying. It is of note to those who have studied Māra because in the Buddhist textual sources, at least, when Māra assails an individual, normally he attempts to avoid attention, and in fact in one of the earliest and most sustained texts on Māra (the aforementioned *Mārasaṃyutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*), the standard formula for Māra's defeat is the recognition of his presence by the Buddha, then a demand that he leave, whereupon Māra grumbles, "the Blessed One knows me," and vanishes.

This portrayal, then, has been exchanged for dramatic license and seems entirely derivative of its television medium. Another result of this medium is its obvious reliance on the visual nature of the character and here, as we have seen, the choice was made to render Māra as a snake. This has its continuities with Western Christian expressions of symbols of evil, but not necessarily with Buddhist thought, resulting in a representation of Māra very much mediated by the dominant religious cultural context.

CONCLUSION

To summarize what I have attempted to argue in this paper, by looking at adaptations of Māra to Western popular culture narratives, we can appreciate how the figure has been tailored to new media and new audiences. To an extent, comparing the two narratives is a bit like comparing an apple to an orange: they are the result of different motivations and very different processes. Indeed, the writing of a short pamphlet by a single author is quite unlike the production of a television program by a scriptwriter, director, actors, and crew. However, as I have argued, expressing and reacting to their Western contexts is a unifying concern for both of these works, even if they represent different polarities of that response and different media.

In the preceding, I have also been concerned with how these works communicate new concerns and also retain facets reminiscent of older textual representations of the figure of Māra as they work to re-imagine the figure. For *Letter from Māra*, Ajahn Puṇṇadhammo has attempted to update Māra for a new context, in new clothes more

relevant to another time and culture, borrowing the style and form of a literary work from that culture as the vehicle of his reinvention. In the episodes of *Doctor Who*, it seems as if an equally complicated dynamic of appropriation and satire has occurred, with Māra assuming a serpentine and dramatic guise in keeping with Western expectation even as his depiction is heavily critical of the West. One way to phrase or consider the adaptations and cross-currents at work in both re-imaginations of Māra comes by looking metaphorically at the means of Māra's defeat in both series of *Doctor Who*, namely the wall of mirrors in "Kinda" and the crystals in "Snakedance." Both crystals and mirrors are objects known for redirection, refraction, and, what is more, reflection of light. This seems an appropriate metaphor for what is occurring in these new media regarding the Buddhist tropes employed: While Bailey's stated objective was to think through Buddhist ideas imaginatively and Puṇṇadhammo has attempted to reach a new audience, their representations of Māra have, like light through a crystal, come across slightly bent by certain cultural presuppositions, and ultimately reflect long-standing Western notions about Buddhism and the so-called "mystic East" in general. In either case, through these examples of a re-imagined, perhaps reinvigorated Māra, we are witnesses to the ever-shifting, ever-changing nature of Buddhist narrative.

NOTES

1. This article is an adaptation of a paper originally delivered at the Numata Symposium "Narrative in Buddhist Texts, Practice, and Transmission" (Institute of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley, CA, April 2014). I would like to thank David Matsumoto and Scott Mitchell for the opportunity to participate in this conference and my fellow panelists Charles Hallisey and Richard Payne for comments and insights that greatly assisted the revisions to the original paper.

2. For instance, see (respectively) James Boyd, *Satan and Māra: Christian and Buddhist Symbold of Evil* (Leipzig: E.J. Brill, 1975); and John Strong, *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

3. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey Howard Mahan, "Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey Howard Mahan, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 4.

4. Edmund Leach, "Myth as Justification for Faction and Social Change," in *Studies on Mythology*, ed. Robert Georges (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1968), 198.

5. James Liszka, *The Semiotic of Myth: A Critical Study of the Symbol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 202.

6. Literary theorist Northrop Frye, in *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1963), makes a similar point about myth, which he categorizes as an art, in opposition to the physical sciences: "Like art, and unlike sciences, [myth] deals, not with the world [humans] contemplate, but with the world [humans] create" (31).

7. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (orig. pub. 1942; New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1961).

8. David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6–7.

9. Ibid., 172–173.

10. For this and other biographical information, see the website for Punnadhammo's hermitage retreat, www.arrowriver.ca/center.html.

11. http://www.arrowriver.ca/maraidx.html, accessed December 15, 2014.

12. Ibid.

13. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, xi.

14. See the *Padhāna-sutta* of the *Sutta-nipāta*, ed. Dines Anderson and Helmer Smith (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997), 74–78.

15. Ajahn Puṇṇadhammo, *Letter from Māra* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2006), 2.

16. Ibid., 13, 18, 25.

17. Ibid., 11.

18. Ibid., 32.

19. Ibid., 23, 26, 33.

20. Ibid., 48–49.

21. Ibid., 30.

22. Ibid., 34.

23. Ibid., 58–59.

24. Ibid., 60.

25. "The Making of 'Kinda' " (BBC Home Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

26. Jane Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

27. For all references and quotations from "Snakedance," see John Nathan-Turner (Producer) and Fiona Turner (Director), *Snakedance* (BBC Television, 1983 [2011]), DVD.

28. "The Making of 'Snakedance' " (BBC Home Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

29. Catherine Albanese, "Religion and Popular Culture: An Introductory Essay," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 4 (Winter 19991): 740.

30. Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 69.

31. Stephen Batchelor, *Living with the Devil: A Meditation on Good and Evil* (New York: Riverhead Trade, 2005), 5.

32. Ibid., 36.

33. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 12–13.

34. Ibid., 58–59.

35. Liszka *The Semiotic of Myth*, 71.

36. Ibid., 32.

37. Ibid., 16.

38. *Padhāna-sutta*, 78 (III.2.25).

39. *Mārasaṃyutta*, in *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, ed. Leon Feer (Lancaster: Pali Text Society, 2006), 124 (I.4.4.11).