



## MĀRA – Recognising the voice of craving

### “Māra, I See You”: Navigating the ongoing journey

- ★ Māra - I can see you,
- ★ Māra - I can hear you,
- ★ Māra - I can smell you,
- ★ Māra - I can taste you,
- ★ Māra - I can feel you,
- ★ Māra - I know you!

### **Temptation and relapse: Guardrails against falling overboard**

*"Māra never vanishes; he is always there, lurking. But for those who have opened their eyes, his power is broken. They see him and know him, and he cannot deceive them."* Adapted from a Buddhist Commentary

As we continue our exploration within the 'R' for **Recognising** what it truly means to be human, we now turn our attention to a particularly cunning aspect of our inner world: Māra. You may have encountered tales of Māra in Buddhist teachings, often depicted as a personification of temptation and obstacles. Here, in the context of our recovery, Māra is the perfect metaphor for the *'addictive voice'* or the personification of compulsion itself—subtle, cunning, and persistently trying to pull us off course.

This isn't about battling some monstrous external force; instead, it's about learning to recognise, understand, and wisely relate to our internal patterns of thought, cravings, and compulsions. We can think of Māra as those persuasive whispers in our minds that try to convince us to give in to old habits, rationalise unhelpful actions, or create doubt about our path to freedom. These are the *hidden reefs and deceptive mirages* that threaten to scupper our raft on our journey towards lasting peace.

Just as a vigilant navigator must learn to identify hidden dangers, we must learn to recognise Māra's presence in his or her various disguises, if we are to steer our vessel to safety. What may have previously been unrecognised or subconscious urges and fears can now be clearly seen for what they are: the manifestations of Māra.

### **MĀRA: A mindful response**

When old urges or self-defeating thoughts arise, we can pause, name the pattern, and say: “*I see you, MĀRA.*” This empowers us to respond mindfully rather than react automatically. We use the acronym MĀRA as a guide for this practice:

- **Mindful:** We bring *present-moment-recollection* to our experience. *Remembering to remember* what we are doing and why we are doing it. This is the foundation of all mindful recovery. As mindfulness scholar Jon Kabat-Zinn notes, mindfulness is “moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness”.
- **Awareness:** We cultivate awareness of what is happening right now – the sensations in our body, the emotions arising, and the thoughts that swirl in our minds. This is where the *friendly curiosity* of investigation can truly take the wind out of our anxiety, cravings, and compulsions.
- **Respond:** Crucially, we learn to respond rather than merely react. We are not our urges. This practice creates a vital space between the impulse and our potential action.
- **Appropriately:** Our response should be wise and kind, both to ourselves and to the situation at hand. This often means meeting challenges with non-judgmental awareness and self-compassion rather than suppression or self-criticism. An appropriate response could be to engage a pre-planned coping strategy, seek support, or simply observe the urge without acting.

This act of recognition transforms our relationship with the craving, from being possessed by it, to simply observing it. It is the practice of seeing the

addiction for what it is – an impersonal, conditioned pattern, not our true self. When a craving arises, when self-doubt whispers *"You'll never change," "You've failed too many times"*, or when avoidance beckons *"You don't need this"*, we can mentally say, *"Ah, this is Māra. This is the addictive voice. I see you."* This naming restores our agency and reminds us that we are not our addiction.

*"Your adversary is the inner voice that whispers you cannot, or you must. It is the one that tells you lies to keep you in chains."* Anon

### **Gotama and Māra: A dynamic of recognition**

In the early Buddhist texts, Māra is the personification of temptation, delusion, and death – the one who tries, again and again, to obstruct awakening. To the recovering person, Māra is not an external demon, but the embodied force of addiction itself – appearing as craving, doubt, fear, denial, or distraction.

What is striking is that Māra appears more often after the Gotama's (the Buddha) enlightenment than before. Why? Because awakening doesn't remove temptation; it reveals it. With clarity comes recognition. Gotama no longer struggled with Māra; he simply saw him clearly, and named him: *"I see you, Māra"*. This profound insight aligns with the observation that Gotama's heightened awareness after he woke up to the four realities, allowed him to perceive Māra in all his or her subtle disguises.

In recovery, this ability to see Māra – to name and disidentify from addictive urges and self-defeating thoughts – is essential. It is the difference between being caught in a loop and stepping out of one. This story offers a profound re-framing of our internal struggle with addiction. Instead of a battle against a monstrous, external force, it becomes a process of recognising, understanding, and wisely relating to an internal pattern of thought, craving, and compulsion.

### **Māra and our embodied awareness: The six lenses of mindfulness of body**

Over the previous few chapters, we've practiced *Mindfulness of the Body* and cultivated a stable base. We can use the six elements of Mindfulness of Body as powerful lenses to recognise Māra's subtle manifestations within our own experience:

1. **Mindfulness of breathing and Māra:** This foundational practice provides an immediate anchor, calming the inner agitation that Māra thrives on and helping us recognise the impermanent nature of cravings as they arise and pass. It helps us to see Māra's subtle arrival. How does Māra affect your breath? Does an urge or a self-defeating thought make your breathing shallow, fast, or tense? Noticing this physical shift through mindful breathing is often the first clue that Māra is present, trying to pull you into reactivity.
2. **Mindfulness of posture and Māra:** By cultivating awareness and stability in our physical posture, we create an embodied sense of groundedness that counters the restlessness and instability Māra often brings. Observe your posture. Do you slump when hopelessness whispers? Do your shoulders tense when craving arises? Your body posture can be a mirror reflecting Māra's subtle influence, indicating a shift in your internal state.
3. **Clear comprehension and Māra:** This skill directly supports our ability to say "*I see you, Māra.*" It allows us to pause and wisely choose how to respond to urges, rather than reacting automatically. We investigate cravings non-judgmentally, discerning their true nature. This is about seeing the *purpose* or *intention* behind Māra's visit. What is the addictive voice trying to achieve? Is it promising relief, escape, or validation that ultimately leads to suffering? Clear comprehension helps us to see through the illusion.
4. **Mindfulness of the reality of the body and Māra:** Grounding ourselves in the tangible sensations of our body helps dispel the mental foggy and delusions that Māra uses to obscure our path. How does Māra manifest as physical sensations? Does it create a false sense of need, discomfort, or emptiness that only our addiction promises to *fix*? By observing these sensations mindfully, we can recognise them as impermanent events, not urgent commands.
5. **Mindfulness of the elements and sensations of existence and Māra:** Cultivating an '*awareness of awareness*' helps us observe Māra's temptations, thoughts, and cravings as temporary mental events,

fostering a non-reactive stance towards them. Connect to the fundamental elemental qualities (solidity, fluidity, temperature and movement) within your body. When Māra arises, where do you feel the *heat* of anger, the *fluidity* of fear, or the *heaviness* of despair? Grounding ourselves in these basic sensations can prevent Māra from pulling us into mental narratives.

6. **Mindfulness of ageing/decay and Māra:** This practice cultivates *radical acceptance*. By seeing that Māra's temptations and all experiences are temporary, we reduce the clinging that fuels addiction, diminishing Māra's power over us. This is a deeper reflection. How does giving in to Māra accelerate the *decay* or suffering in your life – physically, mentally, or spiritually? This long-term perspective can disempower Māra's short-term promises by revealing their true cost.

## **MĀRA and the RAFT to Freedom framework**

The story of Māra offers us a profound framework for understanding and navigating our recovery journey, explicitly built on Buddhist principles. It underscores why the RAFT framework is so essential:

### **★ R – Recognise: "I See You, Māra"**

- **The Buddhist principle:** Gotama's primary advantage over Māra, especially after waking up to reality, was his ability to instantly recognise him or her in any disguise. By calmly stating, "*I see you, Māra,*" Gotama exposed the illusion and robbed it of its power. Importantly, he did not get angry or frightened; he simply acknowledged its presence.
- **Application in addiction recovery:** This is the foundational step of mindfulness in recovery. This workbook guides us to **Recognise** the craving or addictive thought as it arises, without judgment. Instead of being swept away by it, we can learn to mentally say, "*Ah, this is Māra. This is the addictive voice. I see you.*" This act of recognition creates a crucial space between impulse and action and changes our relationship from one of possession by the urge

to one of observation of the urge. It is the practice of seeing the addiction for what it is – an impersonal, conditioned pattern and not our true self.

★ **A – Abandon: understanding Māra's intentions so that we can ‘Let Go’**

- **The Buddhist Principle:** Gotama *defeated* Māra not by destroying him, but by understanding the nature of his tools – desire, aversion, doubt, fear – and thereby abandoning the mental confusion that Māra represents. He saw the intention behind the temptation and chose not to engage.
- **Application in addiction recovery:** This RAFT model focuses on **Abandoning** harmful cravings. The Māra story enriches this by showing us *how*. By understanding Māra's intentions to pull us back into suffering and delusion – to abandon ship and jump overboard – we can see the true intention of our addictive urge: it promises relief but delivers only more suffering. This insight is the motivation helping us to abandon the behaviour. It's not about *white-knuckling* through a craving, but about seeing its empty promise so clearly that the desire to follow it withers. We abandon the compulsion by abandoning the illusion that it offers a real solution.

★ **F – Freedom: The peace of non-engagement**

- **The Buddhist Principle:** After his awakening, Gotama was not free from Māra's visits, but he was free from being disturbed by them. His peace was unshakable because Māra had no power over his mind. This is the nature of **Freedom** (Nirvana) – not a place, but the extinguishing of the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion that Māra represents.
- **Application in addiction recovery:** The **F** in **RAFT** stands for **Freedom**, which is the direct experience of being free from craving's grip. The Māra narrative teaches us that freedom isn't the absence of triggers or addictive thoughts. Freedom is when

those thoughts arise, are recognised ("*I see you, Māra*"), and have no power over us. This workbook includes exercises that help us learn to savour and appreciate these moments of **Freedom** – the peace that comes from not acting on an urge. This builds a positive feedback loop, reinforcing our motivation to continue on our journey.

### ★ T – Train: the lifelong vigilance of mindfulness

- **The Buddhist principle:** Gotama's story shows that Māra never completely vanishes; he makes appearances throughout Gotama's life. This highlights that our path requires continuous cultivation and training. Gotama's consistent, calm awareness was his ongoing practice.
- **Application in addiction recovery:** RAFT concludes with **Train**, which involves using the *Eightfold Path* as a comprehensive programme for living. We will consider the Eightfold Path in detail further along our journey. The Māra story underscores why this training is essential. Recovery is not a one-time event but a continuous practice of training our heart and mind. We train in mindfulness to keep recognising Māra, train in wisdom to remember the consequences of following him or her, and train in ethical conduct to build a life where Māra finds less fertile ground to sprout. This perspective transforms *vigilance* from a stressful, hyper-alert state into a calm, patient, and compassionate practice of self-awareness.

### Inviting Māra to tea

A popular teaching from modern Buddhist psychology, inspired by this narrative, is *inviting Māra to tea*. Instead of fighting or suppressing our difficult emotions and cravings that Māra represents, we mindfully acknowledge their presence, allowing them to be there without acting on them, and investigating them with compassionate curiosity. This approach aligns well with Judson Brewer's insights on 'hacking the brain for habit change' and the idea of

responding with *‘that’s interesting’* rather than automatic reactions.

*"The difference between a habit and a choice is awareness. When you're aware, you have the power to choose. When you're not, you're just reacting."* Dr. Judson Brewer, *The Craving Mind*

Here's how you might approach this practice:

- **Role:** You are the calm host – your mindful, wise self.
- **Audience:** The unexpected visitor – the craving, the difficult emotion, the addictive voice itself.
- **Format:** This can be a written dialogue or a silent reflection.
- **Topic:** You might say or write, *"What do you want? What are you afraid of? I see you, and I will not let you take over, but I am willing to listen before I let you go"*.

**For Example:**

- **You (the host):** *"Welcome, Māra. I see you here, that familiar urge for a distraction. What brings you here today?"*
- **Māra (the urge):** *"I just want you to feel better. You're bored. This will make it go away, just for a little while."*
- **You (the host):** *"I understand you want me to feel better. I appreciate that impulse. But I know your 'solutions' lead to more pain. Thank you for visiting. I see you, and I choose to remain present."*

By incorporating the story of Gotama and Māra, the RAFT programme offers a deeply compassionate and empowering framework, shifting the paradigm from a war against ourselves to a journey of profound self-awareness and liberation.

**A short Māra meditation**

Sit quietly and let your breath settle. When a thought or craving arises, ask gently, *"Who is this?"* See if it has the quality of wanting, doubting, or fearing. Silently name it, *"Māra."* Smile inwardly, not with hatred, but with recognition. Say softly in your mind, ***"I see you, Māra."*** Then return to your breath.



This meditation restores power not by suppression, but by clear seeing.  
Recognition weakens addiction's hold.

### **Mindful Māra pause**

Next time an urge or unhelpful thought arises, follow these steps:

Pause, come into your body.

**Mindful** – recall the present moment.

**Awareness** – note any sensations, thoughts or emotions.

**Respond** – label it *MĀRA* or *addictive impulse*.

**Appropriately** – choose a wise response – take a few mindful breaths, call a friend, or do a body-scan.

### **Self-Reflections**

Approach these reflections gently, with self-compassion:

- ★ When I feel the pull of an old behaviour, what does MĀRA say to me?
- ★ What forms does temptation take in my life – pleasure, avoidance, self-pity, righteousness?
- ★ Do I sometimes believe the voice of MĀRA? What happens when I do?
- ★ How might I develop the capacity to say, “*I see you, MĀRA*”, and let go?
- ★ Do I remember mindfulness when cravings arise?
- ★ Where do I most often lose mind-body connection?
- ★ Using your body as an anchor and your mind as radar. What are you feeling, thinking, reacting to right now?
- ★ Where in my body do I feel an urge? (for example, chest tightness, butterflies, tension)
- ★ What thoughts or memories are tied to that sensation?
- ★ How often do I automatically react to discomfort?
- ★ What habits pull me back into addiction?
- ★ What is the most wise and compassionate choice right now?
- ★ Who or what helps me take that action (for example, a wise friend, a sponsor, meditation, walk)?

## Journaling Prompts

Explore these themes in writing, remembering to be kind to yourself:

- ★ *“I see you, MĀRA when...”*: List five recent times you noticed an urge, thought, or story pulling you off your recovery path.
- ★ **Māra’s Disguises**: Reflect on how addiction presents itself now. Is it craving, boredom, irritation, busyness, or superiority?
- ★ **Dialogue with Māra**: Write a short imagined dialogue between yourself and MĀRA. What does he or she say? How do you respond?
- ★ **Naming Your Inner Māra**: Give your addictive mind a name or identity. When it arises, how can you gently, playfully disarm it?
- ★ Write a moment from today when mindfulness saved you – or could have.
- ★ Describe a time you forgot to pause, and what happened then.
- ★ Record an urge’s location, intensity, and associated thoughts. Review patterns – when and where do urges typically arise?
- ★ List automatic reactions and consider alternative responses.
- ★ Practice defusion: rewrite a self-judging thought as *“I notice I’m having the thought that...”*
- ★ Design a ‘response toolkit’: 3-5 mindful tools you can use when MĀRA appears.
- ★ Reflect on a recent time you acted wisely – how did it feel?

## Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of MĀRA, the following overview highlights some key connections.

### ★ **Neuroscience: The hijacked brain and recognition**

- Neuroscience shows that cravings activate specific brain regions like the insula and anterior cingulate – areas tied to interoception (awareness of internal bodily states) and urges.
- The **addicted brain as a hijacked system**: Dopaminergic systems in the brain respond intensely to cues associated with addiction, even without the substance present. Māra is that anticipatory

signal – the mental formation preceding relapse.

- **Default Mode Network (DMN) and Māra's self-delusions:** The DMN (associated with self-referential thought) is hyperactive in rumination, craving, and story-making. Māra often appears with stories: “*You’ll never recover,*” “*You’re not like them,*” “*One last time...*”
- **Clinical alignment:** In Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP), practitioners learn to notice triggers and choose new responses. In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), we *defuse* thoughts – seeing them as mere mental events, not truths. Neuroimaging further shows that mindfulness reduces activation in craving-related brain areas.

### ★ **Psychology: Māra as the Survival Brain**

- **Evolutionary Psychology:** From an evolutionary perspective, craving is wired into the limbic system to ensure survival through food, sex, and social belonging. Māra exploits these ancestral tendencies in modern environments with supernormal stimuli (for example, drugs, alcohol, pornography, gambling). Our brains evolved to seek safety and pleasure – Māra hijacks that mechanism with modern stimuli. Freedom arises when we choose deliberate action over instinctive reactivity.

### ★ **Philosophy: Māra as the Denial of Freedom**

- Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard described a pervasive ‘*sickness of despair*’ – not knowing one’s true self – which, seen through a Buddhist lens, is Māra’s domain.
- In Buddhist terms, Māra is the fear of letting go of the false self – of freedom itself. This philosophical perspective reinforces the idea that Māra's power lies in keeping us trapped in patterns of self-deception and attachment to what is familiar, even if it causes suffering.

## **Closing Remarks**

Recognising Māra, the voice of addiction and compulsion, is a crucial step in our RAFT to Freedom journey. It's about developing the wisdom to read our inner map accurately, identify these *hazards* when they appear, and learn

skillful means to avoid being shipwrecked by them. By patiently and persistently consulting our internal map through mindful awareness and using our navigational skills, we learn to sail through these hazardous waters towards the calm harbour of freedom.

This chapter has equipped us with powerful ways to recognise Māra's subtle influence, to greet it with the clear, empowering phrase, "***I see you, Māra,***" and to choose our response wisely. This ongoing vigilance, supported by our growing awareness and compassion, is a vital guardrail against falling overboard. It allows us to strengthen our raft and ensure we continue on our purposeful journey towards the safe shore.

### **Remember to remember**

Māra is not something to fight but someone to see. His or her power is invisibility or disguise. Gotama didn't destroy Māra; he disempowered him by naming him – again and again. You, too, can learn this art: To say, "*I see you, Māra*" and walk on. As the Persian poet Rumi said,

*"The moment you recognise your cage, you are already free. The rest is simply walking out."*

### **Sutta References**

- ★ **Samyutta Nikaya 4.1:** Contains the phrase "I see you, Evil One," referring to the Buddha's recognition of Māra.
- ★ **Majjhima Nikaya 105 (Salha Sutta):** Uses the simile of the surgeon's probe and knife to illustrate the roles of mindfulness and wisdom in removing craving and ignorance.
- ★ **Majjhima Nikaya 19 (Dvedhavitakka Sutta):** Discusses cultivating wholesome thoughts and abandoning unwholesome ones. It implies the need for mindful awareness to distinguish and act skillfully.
- ★ **Samyutta Nikaya 46.55:** Compares the overcoming of hindrances (which Māra represents) to overcoming debt, sickness, prison, slavery, and a perilous wilderness, leading to rejoicing and gladness.

★ **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10):** Guides us to use mindfulness to know when hindrances (like craving, ill-will, sloth, restlessness, doubt, all aspects of Māra

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