

Letter From Mara

**Your first squadron is Sense-Desires,
Your second is called Boredom,
then Hunger and Thirst compose the third,
And Craving is the fourth in rank,
The fifth is Sloth and Accidy,
While Cowardice lines up as sixth,
Uncertainty is seventh,
the eighth Is Malice paired with Obstinacy;
Gain, Honour and Renown, besides,
And ill-won Notoriety, Self-Praise and Denigrating Others.
- These are your squadrons, Namuci;
These are the Black One's fighting squadrons;
None but the brave will conquer them To gain bliss by the victory.**

(Sutta Nipata III, 2 Nyanamoli translation "Life of the Buddha" p.20)

In a faraway realm there is the most intoxicatingly beautiful pleasure park in all the vast swarm of universes. Lovely maidens and carefree youths stroll through groves of ever-flowering trees. Golden leaves swayed by gentle breezes tinkle with soft and lazy melodies. Gorgeous birds and enormous butterflies flutter through the shady groves. The ground slopes up gently and in the distance a fairy castle is visible atop a craggy peak; a marvelous structure of twisting towers and intricate parapets. Its very geometry dazzles the senses, no need to speak of the jewel encrusted walls, the golden roofs or the gargoyles of alabaster and jade.

In the highest tower of this dazzling construction there is a large and tastefully appointed room; an office if you will. Behind a massive desk of rarest wood and cunning joinery there lounges an elegant figure in a comfortable leather chair. He is tall and handsome, impeccably dressed and groomed. His style is timeless yet fashionable, his demeanor polished and suave. A goddess of unearthly beauty sits beside him on a low stool, doing his nails. Another one sits across from him with a dictation pad on her lap.

The being behind the desk glances out the huge picture window with a smile of contentment. He watches the happy godlings at play with a paternal satisfaction. After a while he turns to the lovely goddess across from him, the heavenly secretary, and speaks; "I'll want to dictate a letter in a moment my dear -- in the meantime would you be a sweetheart and prepare a cup of coffee while I survey the state of my empire..." The manicurist gathers up her implements and exits with a smile and a wink.

As his secretary glides gracefully towards the celestial coffee-maker the Prince of the Sense-Realms allows himself the pleasure of a lascivious glance before getting down to business. His now perfectly manicured hand rests upon a computer mouse (unicorn ivory with a ruby button); with a few deft manoeuvres he reprograms the view in the window.

First he checks out the various heavens within his dominion; the worlds of pleasure where gods and goddesses sport in gardens and groves; wandering about in heavenly chariots they travel from party to party, from festival to feast. Clothed in gorgeous raiment and bedecked with garlands and jewels they are intoxicated with their own beauty. Heavenly musicians play constantly and celestial nymphs of bewitching loveliness dance for aeons without a pause. Of course every now and again one of these beings disappears - poof - like a Christmas tree light burning out. The others seem barely to notice; the more thoughtful may pause momentarily and blink once or twice but are soon diverted from any momentary melancholy.

"Ah...my children, how they do like to play! But some don't play as nicely as they might..." Another flick of the mouse and the window displays beings in the animal realm. Running and chasing, hunting and devouring, mating and giving birth. Caught in traps or dying through cold or heat, briefly they pass in and out of existence.

Again the view changes. The ghost realm appears, shadowy and dark. Beings move about moaning and wailing, misshapen beings coarse and ugly. Many have bloated bellies and tiny heads, some are like living skeletons, others creep pathetically around refuse piles.

Then the hells come into view. Realms of fire and pain. Worlds of unspeakable cruelty and horror. Beings impaled on red-hot iron stakes, beings thrown into pits of fire and fished out again with hooks. Beings boiled in cauldrons or skewered with knives.

The Prince's mouth curls into a faint frown of disgust. He receives his cup of steaming coffee gracefully as a swarm of writhing beings falls into a pit full of blazing coals. The secretary says with a divine pout "That's simply awful Mara sweetie, I don't know why you keep that place going." A black eyebrow is raised; "My goodness! As if it were my fault! Hell isn't exactly my favourite

subsidiary either. I'd much rather all these wretched beings had the good sense to live properly but they will carry on in that evil way of theirs, so what can I do about it? Heaven or hell, it's all their own doing you know; I just let us say facilitate matters by helping them to see the inestimable value of a sense realm existence...hmm excellent coffee as usual my dear." "You're wicked...do change the channel." With a frown Mara flicks the mouse.

The goddess laughs; "Oooh...the human world! So amusing, the silly little people." Mara frowns a little deeper and studies the flickering images. Crowds hurrying along a subway platform. A family mindlessly watching television. A young girl selling herself in the street. Soldiers burning a village.

He sips the coffee thoughtfully. "Very good. Most of this realm too is well and truly mine..." On the window now a dusty village street, some chickens run about and here and there a mangy dog. A boy walks by leading a buffalo by a rope through its nose. Some men lounge in the shade of a mango tree, smoking.

"But there is a small annoying ... leakage." And now around a bend there approaches a line of robed figures walking silently with eyes cast down. A few old women appear and reverently place lumps of sticky rice into the monks' bowls.

"Most annoying...fortunately the leak is a small one. But it does keep us busy trying to stop it. Can't have too many beings escape now can we? Where would we be if the Great Samsara exhausted itself? Well, time to work. Come here and sit in my lap while I dictate a circular memo to the department heads..."

A LETTER FROM MARA FROM HIS SUPREME EXCELLENCY THE MARA NAMUCI TO ALL SQUADRON LEADERS, OPERATIONAL AREA THE PLANET EARTH, SOLAR SYSTEM, HUMAN REALM REGARDING PRESENT SITUATION AND STATUS OF CURRENT PROJECTS DATED 26th CENTURY OF CURRENT BUDDHA-PERIOD.

Greetings to all my hard-working minions! As you are all well aware, our overall strategy seems to be working as smoothly as usual. The vast multitude of beings who wander in our little playground, the Great Samsara, are by and large oblivious of the true nature of their predicament. We must continue our unceasing efforts to maintain them in our power. It is quite true that one, shall we say, very clever fish escaped our net two and half millennia ago. I fully accept responsibility for that catastrophe. As you have all studied the history in basic training I need not go over it in great detail; remember I tried my very best. Even my daughters dancing for him didn't move him. Even my terrible aspect, which sometimes frightens even myself, had no effect. Worse, after he had penetrated the true nature of our little game I couldn't persuade him to keep it to himself; although I thought I almost had him convinced. Alas, what's done is done and there is a small hole in our net through which beings continue to escape. Happily all indications are the hole grows smaller with time. It is very hard for our little fishies to imagine that their true welfare lies outside the net; all we need to do is to divert them from thoughts of the canning plant! You, my loyal squadron leaders, are doing a fine job. Let's take this opportunity to review your departments one by one.

FIRST ARMY- The Host of Sense- Desires

You well deserve the honour of being my beloved First Host. In most cases your work alone is enough to keep beings in line. Your Five Divisions assault our victims with all the enchantments of sensory pleasure. Beings spend their lives coming to you. Your sacrificial victims come to the altar willingly, even eagerly.

But this is no reason to slacken in your efforts. There is always the danger that they will begin to see, let us be perfectly frank amongst ourselves, the shoddy nature of the goods. We know that sense pleasures are entirely unsatisfactory and illusory. In spite of all our inventiveness we have never come up with any pleasure that is completely satisfying, lasting or substantial. Fortunately the vast majority of humans don't realize this. The foolish little beggars all seem to imagine that only the pleasures they've had so far are like this; somewhere somehow they will find the magic trinket that will let them live happily ever after.

I know this sounds preposterous but most humans don't think these things through very carefully. They like what feels good and never mind the consequences. The only trick for us is to keep them diverted and entertained. We must keep coming up with new enticements as the old ones become tired. Although we have a few tried and true standards; sex and food primarily -- even here we need to keep coming up with new variations and twists.

So far my army you've been doing the job marvelously! Take sex for example, this has been our weapon of choice for about a billion years now. For a simple biological function it does allow for a great deal of creative possibilities. What a wonderful swindle it all is! All the weird and wonderful variations they get themselves so frenzied about all reduce to some tricky wiring and a simple bit of friction. In one sense it isn't sex itself that keeps us in business but all the peripheral things that go with it; all the expectations and preliminaries, all the accessories and emotional baggage. Fortunately there's enough of this stuff to keep most of them going for a lifetime; and one lifetime at a time is all we need to concern ourselves with. They'll keep coming back for more of the same.

Lately I must say we have been succeeding wonderfully in this area. Technology is such an asset. As soon as they got the daguerreotype working they were pointing it at naked women and of course now we have colour photography, cinema and video. Tantalizing images are easier and easier to come by. Recently they've been distributing all this stuff on the Internet, so they don't even have to go anywhere to find it. (Perhaps I ought to get a web page -- no it would only be redundant.) Technology itself is largely a product of sensual desire; beings create devices to make the acquisition of sensual pleasures easier or to avoid the

occurrence of sensory discomfort. This drives their whole economy and keeps them busy all their brief lives. They want, indeed they imagine they need, a car, a stereo, a computer and then a newer car, a newer stereo, etc. We must keep them in a state of desire for all these devices -- the more they work the less time they will have for reflection.

The teachings of our Great Adversary are the only serious obstacle to this project. He has pointed out to them again and again the dangers inherent in sensual desire. However we have, over the centuries, succeeded so well in muddling up this truth with various bogus teachings that it is becoming harder and harder for them to find the real Dharma. There are plenty of so-called "teachers" among them who are willing to speak our line in his name. Not merely soft-pedaling the idea of renunciation but proudly announcing that the "passions themselves are enlightenment." Of course there are plenty of fish who like the taste of that bait! If they do start to reflect or worse to practise renunciation and meditation then we mustn't give up. They are then getting dangerously close to finding a way out of our power. Once they discover that their true happiness is not based on our trickery then they may escape. We must use all the resources at our disposal to distract them. Although they may be sitting quietly their minds are still easily distracted for a long time. Fantasy is a great thing, especially as the mind with a bit of concentration can powerfully visualize and hold an object, even an unwholesome object. The thing we must not let them do is to contemplate the real nature of the body. You would think that any being of even moderate intelligence could see the inherently foul and unstable nature of those meat-machines they drag around. After all, they have to be constantly washing and perfuming the stinking things just to bear being in each other's company! But they don't see that and don't want to see it. We merely have to keep them looking at their bodies in a highly selective way, emphasizing those largely visual characteristics identified as "beautiful." It's an easy enough trick. And don't forget to whisper all the current buzz that keeps them from doing body-meditations. You know what I mean, meditation on the unlovely is "life-denying, uptight, repressive." It's easy enough to convince them because it's what they want to hear. Keep them imagining they can have their cake and eat it too and then we can stop worrying. Let them meditate all they want -- as long as they think they don't have to let anything go, we're still in control.

Mara folds his arms behind his head and sighs, composing the next letter in his mind. The secretary, sensing a break in the work slides off his lap and goes over to the window, the cordless mouse in her hand.

"Gee Mara, you'd sure think that First Army would be enough." Flicking the mouse she spies on all the gods and goddesses. She settles for a while on a scene of beautiful beings cavorting in a lotus pool as swans drift about, little barrels of intoxicating divine nectar about their delicate necks. Sometimes when a godling reaches for a draught the birds dart away playfully amid general splashing and hilarity. "You sure know how to throw a party!" Mara narrows his dark eyes. "Thank you my sweet. But even the mighty First needs some backup." He watches with a smile as she grows weary of the heavenly skinny dippers and begins flicking through the realms, faster and faster. "Come on, back to work..."

SECOND ARMY - Boredom

To my second army, the host of boredom, I extend greetings and congratulations. Your role is to act in coordination with my first host; you are, as it were, the artillery softening up the enemy's defenses for an infantry assault by sensory desire. We must keep beings in a state of dissatisfaction with the present reality. To be bored is primarily a state of aversion; the current input of the senses is not providing the desired kick of pleasure so the being is irritated with what he calls the dullness of his environment. He becomes "bored" and seeks to remedy the situation with new and exciting stimuli, which my first host is eager to provide. He becomes lost in sensuality and once again we have him where we want him; creating the basis of fresh becoming.

What a scam! We keep them craving always something exciting, something new.

As a result they keep running on in the Great Samsara like one of their wretched pet hamsters in an exercise wheel. If they ever catch on and realize how long they've been at it and how there really is nothing new or fresh to be experienced.

Of course we cannot let that happen. The trick is to keep them from paying attention to the present moment. Once they are fully present, here-and-now, then they cannot be bored. Lately we've managed to foster a social climate that positively discourages calmness and clarity. Their whole modern culture is fast and frenzied. Fashions in everything from music to clothing change rapidly and they are all eager to keep up with it. The mass of moderns prefers excitement to subtlety. The last half-century or so has seen many advances in our efforts to fracture the human attention span. Television was a great help but I think the single greatest advance in the triumph of boredom was the invention of the remote control. There are now many millions whose attention span is so pathetic that they cannot sit through a half-hour long story line; they cannot even be diverted that long by a single train of enticing images. Let alone sit quietly by themselves! We've succeeded so well in this department that being bored is considered one of the great evils of life. This of course never arose when they required all their physical energy just to survive. But now we have a generation of enervated dilettantes who cannot bear their own company (although one can scarcely blame them for that...) People create virtual hell realms of boredom for themselves. You can see them everywhere in the great modern cities -- riding the subways, waiting in lines, sitting in offices. The dull lethargic look on their faces, the glassy stare in their eyes betoken a mind that would rather be somewhere, anywhere else. Pathetic creatures! If they only realized that the only place they can ever be is here-and-now! Boredom is based on what our Great Adversary called vibhava tanha, the craving for non-being, in the vernacular. They find their current state of existence unbearable, chiefly because of their own mental state, and they wish to blot it out. In the purest form this leads to suicide and a consequent lower rebirth. In a milder form it leads to the petty annihilations of drink, drugs, sleep or mindless entertainment.

As long as we keep them trapped into these two strategies of sensuality and lethargy they will remain in our power. Should they stray close to the true escape, which of course lies in the Middle, then we must redouble our efforts. Whisper in their ears. Don't let them be still. Tell them again and again the good old lies; "This is really boring. Get out and enjoy life!"

"I'm thirsty Mara, can we take a Soma break?" the secretary pouts.

"All Beings are sustained by nutriment..." She pours herself a shining cup of sublime nectar from a crystal decanter. "What's that honey?" "Nothing...just something I read in a book a long time ago." "You're so intellectual..." she coos, climbing back into his lap and turning the page in her memo pad.

THIRD ARMY - Hunger and Thirst

My mighty and terrible Third! Greetings! Your methods may be crude compared to the refinements of my beloved First Army but they are nonetheless powerful. The cravings you engender are even more primeval than those of sex. Sex, after all, they only imagine they cannot live without. Food and drink they really do need to sustain the physical organism.

I will always remember that it was you, the minions of Hunger that lured the race now called human into my clutches in the first place. Ah! How long ago was it? A couple or three billion of their quick years? I remember it as if it were yesterday! The great earth was formless and void and the beings that dwelt therein were glorious, self-luminous and fed on jhanic bliss.* Bah! Not much we could do with them; a tedious state of affairs. So we caused the seas to develop a nutritious foam and then some of them became just a wee bit curious. Patiently and slyly we whispered in their godlike ears for many a millennium "mmm...tasty." One by one they dipped a fingertip and delicately licked. One by one they began absorbing the coarse physical stuff and their own forms coarsened. Gradually, imperceptibly they took on coarser and coarser forms and required more and grosser food. Ha ha! Now we have the fools lining up for greasy burgers!

[* Mara's discussion here is based on the cosmological myth found in the Agganna Sutta (Digha 27.) This discourse describes how human beings devolved from god-like entities. The beginning of this descent occurred when the entities tasted a primeval nutritive essence floating on the surface of the sea, causing them to develop coarse physical bodies.]

Of course the purely physiological response of an empty belly is not our real weapon; it's the imaginary hunger -- the greed for tastes, the lust for savours. They can become quite obsessed with food and the obsession can take many amusing forms. The gourmet who spends a small fortune on exotic dishes, the health-nut who makes a fetish of diet, the glutton who overloads his system with calories and the anorexic who starves herself with a pathological vanity -- all are in a state of delusion that exaggerates the importance of what is, when all is said and done, merely fuel for the organism. Very important also is the lack of fortitude in bearing with the bodily sensations. Beings want always to be satisfied; never let them suspect that that is precisely the one thing that is quite beyond our power to provide.

Nevertheless the cruder forms of hunger, the real need for food, serves our purposes as well. Driven by the need to sustain their bodies they perform actions in the world, working on farms and factories, and action is karma and karma drives sense-sphere becoming. You know this very well.

Our Great Adversary understood the dangers of the Third Army -- as always in his maddeningly direct way he taught a Middle Path through this swamp. He himself tried extreme fasting, which often serves our ends quite as well as gluttony, and rejected it as a method. His rule for the monks stipulates moderation in eating and a limited form of fasting; abstaining from food for half of each day. Nevertheless, you the Army of Hunger are one of my chief weapons against the monks in their efforts to escape. Often we can bedevil their minds and dreams with images of delicious food. Always remember with celibates that food is their chief outlet for sensuality. With the monks of orders outside his dispensation who do not keep the rules of Vinaya we have often had great success in this area, creating many a jolly Friar Tuck! The main thing to remember is to prevent them from eating mindfully. If a human keeps her wits about her and eats with awareness, contemplating the sensations and feelings aroused, then she can learn a lot. This is very dangerous for us. Fortunately this is a difficult exercise and we all know how little they like difficult exercises.

Surveying the state of the world today it seems you are succeeding splendidly. Half the world is starving and the other half obese. In both cases they are obsessed with food. Keep them that way and they will not turn their thoughts to things beyond our realm.

Mara swivels around in his chair, musing. He looks around at his well-appointed office, his beautiful secretary, his own well-groomed finger nails. How glad he is to be Mara!

FOURTH ARMY - Craving

To my busy legions of the Fourth Army: greetings and congratulations. This army has three divisions; the Division of Sensual Desire, the Division of Being and the Division of Non-Being. Since the First Division, Fourth Army duplicates the work of the Great First Army I'm enclosing a copy of the notes I sent to them.

The secretary asks "Shouldn't we do something about that redundancy?" "Why? This organization is the last in the universe that will have to consider downsizing! Now don't interrupt me again!" (Where was I? Oh yes...) The second division, those which promote the Craving-to-Be, has a vital role to play. Beings exist because of your work.

The technical details of this process have been explained by our Adversary in his Dependent Origination, and grudgingly we must admit the accuracy and clarity of the exposition. We needn't go into the details here, those of you who are so inclined can consult the relevant literature. Let us merely consider the idea from the practical angle; the beings in our power exist because they want to.

Be clear about this. They don't as a rule begin to understand what existence means; they are mostly not even fully conscious of this craving. You have done your work well and insidiously. The craving for being usually manifested in a cruder form; a second derivative as it were -- not as the simple will-to-be but the craving to be this or that thing in particular. To be loved, to be rich, to be healthy, to be the president of the United States.

Your attack should also be two-pronged. As long as it is possible to do so, keep feeding the secondary manifestation, the craving to be this or that. We have been doing quite well in this regard in recent times. Our possibilities were limited when society was hierarchical and stable. For the last few centuries the old certainties have become less and less effective. Society is now so open as to be almost totally chaotic. Not that this so-called "freedom" does them any real good; most of them never will be rock stars or presidents or any of those other ridiculous things they seem to crave so much. No matter. For our purposes it's good enough that they want it. Keep the dream alive! If things start looking too hopeless remind them to buy a lottery ticket.

Sometimes they truly may surprise us and get to be something, usually we can just up the ante. If one of them gets to be president, make sure he wants to be a great president. Nevertheless, in spite of our best efforts, they may occasionally come close to being satisfied; even in quite humble and ordinary circumstances. This is very dangerous. In such cases consider Plan B and bring them closer to the root craving for sheer existence.

Here, our principle weapon has always been the Eternity View. Tell them "You are, or can be, immortal. Your essence will continue forever." Don't let them think about death. This is easy because most of them don't want to anyway. Any version of this view will do for our purposes. It doesn't have to make too much sense, very few of them are willing to think these things through to their logical conclusions. There are a few good religions around that will serve up this soothing broth and these should be encouraged, but some of our other projects have resulted in increasing numbers of materialists and skeptics. Many of these will be better targets for the Third Division and Annihilationism, but a surprising number will still buy into a version of Eternalism.

Most of the simpler ones will be happy to keep artificially prolonging "youth" with facelifts and hair transplants but a few will require headier medicine. The myth of all powerful science, although quite silly really, is very seductive to these types. Many now believe that science will eventually prolong human life indefinitely. Some even get their carcasses frozen in liquid nitrogen. Remember the ancient Egyptians? I am having the boys in R & D do a feasibility study on starting up that game again.

But sooner or later, in spite of our best efforts, many of them will begin to lose the zest for existence. Life in the human realm is very often nasty, brutish and short and wishful thinking only goes so far. That's quite alright if we handle it properly; that is precisely why the Third Division, the forces of Craving-for-Not-Being are needed.

On a superficial level this can manifest as simple aversion; the craving not-to-be in debt, or the craving not-to-be married to that person next to them in bed, or the craving not-to-be whoever they are. Even more trivial forms are still useful; the craving not-to-be in the back of a long queue or not-to-be cold, etc., etc., ad infinitum. All these mind sets produce unsatisfactoriness and this keeps them within our power.

Remember your awful final weapon! When diversion fails to beguile, then despair can enthrall them. Having invested all their hopes in some pathetic illusion when this is at last punctured it only takes a short push from us to move them across the dangerous middle ground into hopelessness. Remember Hamlet? "To be or not to be..." sums up our programme nicely, whatever you do don't let them even suspect a third alternative.

Obviously it's not to our advantage to have any of our subjects actually cease to be, but we need not worry, suicides do not escape us. We can however promote the delusion that this is possible. The ideological basis for this is the annihilation view.* Historically, this has been a minority philosophical position, useful only for snaring a few intellectuals. However we've had great success in the last three or four hundred years in popularizing this doctrine. Some of you were skeptical when I launched "Project Descartes" but I think the results have proven my foresight. The scientists among them who work with issues related to mind and consciousness; neurologists, cognitive psychologists etc. are absolutely blinkered by the concept that Mind is an emergent property of the brain.

They have no proof at all of this (how could they?) but accept it absolutely as axiomatic, so much so that they mostly seem unaware that they are assuming anything at all. This attitude is starting to percolate down to the masses

[* The Annihilation View is one of the two principal false views. It is the idea that the living being is merely a product of matter in motion and consciousness is annihilated at death. Its opposite number is the Eternalist View which holds that the living being has a permanent self-entity ('atman' or "soul") which, being immortal, survives death of the body.]

The annihilation view underpins many modern trends; materialism, consumerism, secularism, science, anti-clericalism, etc. We have gotten many millions believing that their bodies and minds are nothing more than meat machines. This facilitates a breakdown in morality. Given the materialist world-view there is nothing to stop them from abortion, euthanasia, suicide (of course) or even genocide.

If they do take the final step and "destroy" themselves, well -- it's unfortunate I suppose but it does make work for the crew downstairs.

FIFTH ARMY - Sloth and Accidy

The secretary consults her notes; "The next army is 'sloth and accidy.' Mara, what's 'accidy?'" "You could look it up." She sighs, "Why bother?" Greetings to the dull grey heavy hordes of sloth and accidy! (Aside: "'accidy', an old spelling of 'acedia' a pathological mental or spiritual torpor." "Thanks sweetie!") I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but keep up the good work! It may seem as if your power is slipping; people have been working longer and longer hours ever since the industrial revolution but you and I know that the real spiritual laziness is more prevalent than ever before. The quick fix, the instant salvation is all they are interested in.

Nature has made our work simple. The fundamental cosmic law of entropy is our greatest ally. In the sphere of mental life, this means that the spark of consciousness is always engaged in a struggle to keep from sinking back into the darkness of unknowing. Let them but relax the effort, a simple and inviting temptation, and the level of mind will inevitably decline.

That Teacher of theirs, the one who sadly escaped my grasp, has often praised effort and diligence. This emphasis has done much to undercut the real popularity of his teachings over the centuries. I seem to recall one of his own monks who broke with the order and declared that the teaching was no good because it only worked if you followed it. We would do well to endorse the reasonableness of this view.

Every one of us engaged in the work of this organization is aware of the great complexity of the maze we have built for our "clients." Layer upon layer of delusion has carefully and methodically been constructed. It is not an easy task for the worldling to cut through this timeless tangle. Not easy by any means, but regretfully still just possible. So redouble your own efforts and take the wind out of theirs! They will not cut through with a dull blade.

Let us review the techniques that have worked well in the past. Remember, the qualities we want to foster are dullness, heaviness, lethargy, idleness and mindlessness. The oldest and still very profitable method is sleep. Lots of it; in big soft comfy beds. Not hard to persuade them to roll over in the morning! Let them lie in bed more than six hours and they're ours! Another wonderful tool is the whole pharmacopoeia of dulling and befuddling agents that so many of them like to pop into their mouths, lungs and veins.

You almost can't beat the old perennial standard ethyl alcohol for reducing them to a sub-human level, but these days we have a much wider range of intelligence reducing agents readily available -- both natural and synthetic. Better living through chemistry! Many of them are so eager to drown their wits that they will even inhale various toxic byproducts of the industrial revolution. (Now that was a great idea with all sorts of unexpected benefits!) Speaking of technology I cannot praise the use of television highly enough.

It requires no thought or effort of any kind and completely stultifies the brain with a panorama of sensually enticing images. 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.

"That's why you make the big bucks, Mara!" "Don't interrupt when I'm bragging. Now where was I?" Don't neglect the simpler dodges either. Procrastination is a wonderful vice. They can diddle away several lifetimes if properly guided. Over-eating is an effective measure; the full belly makes for a dull mind. Bad posture, soft furniture, lack of exercise are all to be encouraged.

Perhaps most fundamental of all is the fostering of an attitude of hopelessness. Let them think that the spiritual life is too hard for the ordinary person. The goal too far away, the effort too daunting. A sense of dull grey ennui is a miasma that chokes the spirit of contemporary humanity and keeps them in our sway. When economic times are good, they are befuddled with empty luxuries; when times are bad they descend into the pit of despair and turn on each other with petty nastiness. Underlying all the cycles is the spirit of hollowness and futility that is our greatest contribution to the modern age.

There is a timid knock on the polished mahogany door. Silently it swings open on the oiled hinges. With his head bowed and his hands shaking a young demon scurries into the room, clutching a sheaf of papers. He holds them out to Mara and stands quaking before the desk.

With a brusque gesture, Mara snatches the papers and ruffles through them. A glint of awful fire appears in his eyes.

"You miserable worm! You call this a status report!" He flings the papers at the junior officer who, paralyzed with fear, fails to catch them, letting them scatter around the floor.

"PICK THEM UP AND GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!!!!" Mara's terrible voice booms like a thunderstorm. The demon whimpers as he frantically gathers the papers and then bolts from the room. The secretary is shocked. "Mara, you're horrible."

He calmly sips his coffee. "When I want to be, my dear, when I want to be."

SIXTH ARMY - Cowardice

My sixth army, you have a special place in the task of keeping beings in a state of bondage. You weaken the beings whom you attack and render them vulnerable to my terrible aspect. I prefer to charm and delight, but will brook no opposition and those few who fail to be seduced must be terrorized into submission! Physical cowardice is useful in its place but it is the spiritual and moral type that is most suitable for our purposes. Beings must be cajoled into clutching at a sense of security. This is the trick we must play. Of course, you and I know that there is no security in my realm. All beings are subject to the awful realities of birth, sickness, old-age and death. Their goods and chattels, their relations, friends and mates are all as ephemeral as chaff in the wind. No matter. The dream of security may be a hopeless one, but it is powerful. Beings everywhere are afraid to risk what they have, and can be reduced to spiritual impotence by that fear.

Encourage them often not to take risks. If they risk they may grow, and if they grow they may waken. Teach them to cling to the flimsy raft of their life until it is washed over the cataract. They may be kept in this state of fear for countless cycles of birth-and-death. Their folk wisdom has it that a coward dies many times, a brave man but once. Few indeed realize the deeper truth hidden in that trite proverb.

We can use this cowardice to keep them from facing the reality of existence.

Even to think about it is too scary. The idea of examining it in a methodical way, as for instance in a meditation retreat, is just too much to bear. If they do come to the point of sitting down, they will need courage to finally break through the veil. If they manage to get past the petty anxieties of their life dramas, they will encounter the real primal fears.

It takes great courage to plunge into the Voidness and this we can undermine. This is, after all, the golden age of cowardice. No one wants to take a chance. This manifests in a host of symptoms. As their numbers increase and the pressure on the earth's resources mounts, those who have a generous portion grow mean and afraid of those that have nothing. Their culture is one based on delightful lies of our devising and the ugly realities are hidden away. The sick and the old are hidden from view and the dead are never seen. Insurance companies grow fat on the people's futile attempts to prevent the unpreventable.

Keep them afraid to leave the pathetic ruts of their little lives. Keep them afraid to think, to love, to give, to dare the unknown. Should they find the courage to question it is the beginning of the end.

We can encourage them to make a virtue of their cowardice. Call it prudence. Call it responsibility. "Be sensible. Why ask for trouble? Leave well enough alone." They will get up every morning and put on their hats and take the subway to their dull grind of a job and carefully plan for their retirement.

By that time, they will be so beaten down that they will slide easily and thoughtlessly the rest of the way to the grave.

What we have to watch are the ones who have a little gumption left; they may start thinking of going on a pilgrimage or worse, to a monastery. Whisper about the dangers. "Why throw away your job in these tough economic times? Be sensible, hang in there, only twenty more years to your pension!"

Mara pauses in his work and strolls thoughtfully towards the picture window, his hands clasped behind his back. He watches an image of a huge city. The walls of the buildings form gigantic twisty caverns, at street level they are covered in lurid posters and glaring neon slogans. Noise and smoky fumes fill the air. Gaunt figures scurry aimlessly hither and thither through the maze like witless ants.

"Mara, is that on earth or in one of your dreary hells?"

"Six of one, half dozen of the other."

SEVENTH ARMY - Uncertainty

The role of my seventh is to paralyze with doubt. You are to work closely with my Forces of Fear; with your attacks consolidated we can keep beings in the wretched state of a deer mesmerized by oncoming headlights.

This is a generation of doubters. Whereas at one time your resources were limited and we made more use of the opposite vice, credulity, now we have whole masses of people with no sure beliefs at all. The old certainties in religion, society, politics and even that johnny-come-lately science have all been kicked away. They rejoice in what they call their "freedom" and are unable to advance in any direction. If we maintain them in this state of confusion they can never escape our grip.

Doubt has been compared to wandering in the desert without map or guide.

This comparison is very apt, although I am loath to admit it, considering the source. When beings have no faith, there is no basis for morality and they will fall into all manner of delicious and loathsome vices. We can see this in the present day, which in this respect is very much like late antiquity, a period I greatly enjoyed. In the Imperial Roman period, the old religion was openly scoffed at, virtue considered a weakness and the only object in life the selfish pursuit of personal gratification. Indeed, a marvelous party. True, the destruction of beings was frightful, but that was a sacrifice I was willing to make.

Again today we have gotten them to believe that a thoughtless skepticism is clever and chic. It bears repeating that the inevitable result of this is a destruction of morality. When beings don't understand that actions have results, in other words, when they disbelieve in the Law of Karma, then they will have no restraint upon their appetites (which my other departments are so admirably stirring up!) The really useful detail, from our point-of-view, is that their foolish disbelief has no effect at all upon the operative effectiveness of that law. (But don't let them know that!) They will proceed happily upon their debaucheries and violence and after death they will continue in our service, albeit in a somewhat less salutary capacity.

Another result of the widespread skepticism of the age is that should they begin to question the facts of their existence, as regrettably many of them do, they will not be able to find an effective way out, or to stick with it should they stumble upon it. In all skeptical ages we see a proliferation of sects and cults. The poor wretch seeking to find his way out of the maze will stumble from priest to guru to psychic and back again, without ever exploring any path long enough to gain real insight into his predicament.

Many will abandon the whole enterprise as a hopeless fraud and lose themselves in sense pleasures, which at least offer a momentary diversion from the grim facts.

Encourage in them this cynical and dissolute frame of mind. Teach them to scoff at ancient wisdom and to place their reliance on the new and fashionable whimsies of the day. It is especially easy to undermine any teaching that puts a restraint upon their greed or lust. The doubt that keeps them lost they call rationality, but don't make the same mistake they do. A real rationality is very dangerous for our interests. A truly critical examination of the phenomena of existence is precisely the method by which a bothersome few penetrate our web of deceit. Make sure their "critical thought" is guided by desire; don't let them ask the real questions.

If they are managed properly they can manifest the most amusing contradictions. They will scoff at religion but believe implicitly in the daily horoscope. They will pretend that Karma is superstition even as they avoid stepping on cracks in the pavement. When they wish to justify an abortion, then a human organism is simply a mass of cells and electric impulses but when they want a lottery number they will consult a channeler and traffic with the hungry ghosts. Although they are proud of their modern rationality most of them are quite ridiculous in their superstitions. The scientifically trained ones are often the worst of the lot; they are quite dogmatically attached to the materialist delusion even in the face of evidence to the contrary. (Although I must admit we have been having some difficulties with the physicists lately -- I am beginning to suspect a leak...) To sum up; keep them guessing! Confuse them with a multitude of options and let them wander about life aimlessly. Call morality regimentation and restraint repression. Praise a shallow scoffing attitude as penetrating intelligence. Belittle the timeless verities and praise only the fashionable. Let them be too clever by half. By the time they begin to clear the muddle, it will be too late and we'll have them for another ride on the carousel.

As Mara pauses to review some data on his desktop monitor there is a soft knock on the office door and another young ravishing goddess enters with a platter full of sweetmeats.

"Snack time!" As Mara eyes her appreciatively, the secretary's eyes narrow. She snaps her fingers as the younger goddess leaves, causing her to grow a pair of donkey's ears.

Mara raises an elegant eyebrow. "My dear! I'm shocked and appalled." "I hate the bitch." She hisses.

"Mmmm. Have one of these dainties, they're literally divine!".

EIGHTH ARMY - Malice and Obstinacy

My Eighth Army is the negative image of the First. It is your duty to see to it that beings fall into the mental habits of aversion, ill-will, anger, hatred and spite.

The theory is elementary in our trade, but let us review it briefly.

Whenever a being makes contact with a sense object, that is at each and every conscious moment, then an associated feeling arises. This feeling may be one of pleasure or displeasure, or so subtle as to be for all practical purposes neutral. These feelings are an extremely rudimentary level of mental life and are for the most part completely natural and automatic. The simplest beings could not maintain existence without a liking for good tasting food and a disliking for harmful conditions. These basic feelings are not of our doing; we can however use them to lure beings on to the next step.

In the case of happy feelings, the job is well left to the able ministrations of the First Army. It is your job to develop mental proliferation around the unhappy feelings. If the being in question is not mindfully aware of his own mental processes (and few of them are even marginally aware) then we can turn this simple unpleasant feeling into a whole complex of aversion and resentment. The raw feeling is a momentary thing of little significance, in and of itself, but oh! What fun we can have with it.

It is of course true that by developing these negative proliferations beings are adding completely unnecessary suffering to whatever unavoidable physical unpleasantness they may be enduring. This is their problem, not ours. We have a job to do.

A being engrossed in unhappiness or anger is unable to see things clearly.

They cannot see their true situation and they cannot begin to work out the escape. There are many tricks we can use to encourage them in their delusions. One of the most amusing is "righteous" anger. Feed the negative mental proliferation by justifying it. "He hurt me, he robbed me, he threw me down and beat me!" This has the added twist of building up the ego image.

We have made some excellent progress in this area lately, their popular psychology now praises the "empowering" aspect of such anger. Let it remain our little secret just who is empowered by this method.

A related syndrome is to encourage a victimized feeling. "Poor me" is a marvelous way to entrench the concept "me." All types of ill-will work by causing the being to understand the universe in reference to her own arbitrary ego position. They cannot begin to see clearly so long as they operate from such an assumption.

We have a wide spectrum of emotions to work with. There is the very mild and temporary flicker of aversion towards the driver ahead of you on the highway, who is taking too long to make a left turn. There is the smoldering resentment towards the inconsiderate boss at work. There is the bitter lifelong ethnic hatred that can enflame whole nations. All of these are grist for our mill. All of these are manifestations of the same thing.

They can even be made to feel ill-will towards inanimate objects; particularly their own creations. Nothing is more amusing than to see a human work himself into a frenzy of anger directed at some malfunctioning machinery. The senseless of it hardly deters them at all.

Obstinacy is the pig-headed refusal to change. This is a tendency many of them have to continue throwing good money after bad, in a manner of speaking. Once having invested some emotional energy in a grudge, it seems a defeat to let it go. Somewhat like admitting how foolish they've been all along, and that would never do.

Our position in this department is quite sound. As they multiply themselves upon the face of the earth, they crowd into each other more and more and get on each others' nerves. Nevertheless, we must be vigilant against the one credible antidote to ill-will. That is the emotion of universal loving-kindness. You shudder at the name, my minions, but name it I must. In the old Pali it is metta, to the Greeks it was called agape. This is the one force against which we cannot stand. So stop it before it is cultivated.

Discredit it as weakness. This is becoming easy, as compassion is losing its stand amongst them. It has become quite unfashionable to pity the poor, for example. Little do they know that it requires real courage of spirit to practise universal goodwill. Luckily for us few of them possess the requisite mettle.

Should any of them begin to practise mental culture, as for example by meditating, then it is time to redouble our efforts, because here is one that might get away. I have touched upon this issue in my notes to some of the other armies, but in your specialty you have many opportunities to attack the meditator. Attack him through the body. It is inevitable that the effort to remain motionless will cause the squirmy little beggars some discomfort. It takes only a little prodding from us to turn this into aggravation or self-pity. The nuances are endless; it can take them a very long time to realize that whereas the bodily aspect of pain is inevitable, this mental self-torment is entirely superfluous. We can also encourage resentments against the teacher, the practice, the food, the weather and numerous other external factors. They can wallow in these petty miseries for hours and hours. Lets not let any of them get away!

The secretary again fiddles with the remote control and the picture window fades into a view of a darkly handsome singer wailing into a microphone as he does a loose-hipped dance. The near-hysterical roar of the crowd is plainly audible behind the plaintive song.

"Ooooh! I just love Elvis!" Mara gets the mouse and gives it the merest flick. The famous performer is seen some years later, bloated and pasty faced he fumbles shakily in a bed-side drawer, searching amongst the unsorted rubbish for his barbiturates.

NINTH ARMY - Honour, Renown and Notoriety

It is hard to understand, from a rational point-of-view why humans crave fame. It seems to destroy so many of the most gifted amongst them. The pathological inflation of the ego-illusion becomes too much for the merely mortal shell. And yet crave it they do. The prudent may say that "the wise man seeks no notoriety" but their counsel is drowned by the crowd singing "there's no thrill that'll getcha..." etcetera.

We should be clear as to the psychological basis of this syndrome. The ego illusion is very dear to them. Nevertheless, since it is in reality a mere phantasm, it is in fact quite hard to maintain and generally requires a tremendous investment of energy. Energy that, needless to say, is not available for anything useful. If this insubstantial ego can be pumped up with external sources of energy, as the adulation of the crowd, then it can be experienced as a net-gain. Of course, it is all still illusory and very dangerous to the individual but it is very intoxicating.

Our resources in this department have been quite limited until quite recently. In antiquity, fame generally meant being well known amongst the inhabitants of one's own city-state, although we could do a bit better with the occasional emperor or what-not. Now however the stakes are much higher.

With the invention of technology to transmit images from place to place it has become possible for one individual's features to be globally recognizable.

Together with the technological possibility there has arisen a powerful cult of celebrity. The masses seek to improve their dreary existence by living vicariously through their idols. This is a marvelous system of mutual self-destruction. The common TV addicts are able to escape having a real life of their own, instead remaining trapped in an ersatz astral plane existence. Futile and pathetic, but well-suited to our purposes. And in the not so long term they end by turning on and devouring the former objects of their worship. We win both ways.

Of course, this level of fame is necessarily restricted to the few. But we still have the older antique type of fame that can ensnare many more. This is the desire, which can be inflated to a positive obsession, to be well-known and well-regarded in one's own petty sphere. This is a simple way of stoking the fires of ego. As long as they are concerned about their reputations at work, amongst their friends and associates, then they are still trapped in the idea of themselves as real entities. When Joe hears that everyone says "Joe is the best diesel mechanic in the plant" then Joe is reassured of the reality of the concept "Joe, the diesel mechanic." It works just as well if everyone says, "Joe is the sloppiest excuse for a mechanic we've ever seen." Generally they define themselves according to the way in which others see them. This is the "persona," the public mask. Becoming obsessed with putting on a good front they can eventually fool themselves and lose track of who they really are. As long as they are looking out they are not within, and the outward direction is our territory.

Further, Praise and Blame are yet another potent source of pleasure and pain. Let me reiterate that these are the carrot and stick by which we drive the donkeys down the garden path. It hardly seems to matter that the objects here are such ephemeral ones. The drive for recognition is a powerful source of craving and stimulates the process of becoming quite as well as more "substantial" rewards.

Praise and Blame are called the worldly winds. They are among our most useful tricks. The fact that they are utterly void of substance is amusing to us, but unapparent to them. Keep these winds gusting, they can blow beings round and round sangsara for a long, long time!

Mara leans back in his chair with his hands behind his head.

"Sometimes I amaze myself. I mean, where would this organization be without me? If I wasn't so modest I'd be damned near perfect!" "I've always thought so, Mara. And those armies of yours are sure deadly!" "What!? Those incompetent bums! If I didn't play the nurse maid over them constantly they'd be fouling things up all over the universe! It's so hard to get decent help these days! But never mind..."

TENTH ARMY - Self - Praise and Denigration of Others

To my bold and powerful Tenth, greetings! Your task is crucial, but fortunately for us it is also easy. Generally humans have a most unreasonable attitude of taking themselves quite seriously. They seem quite unable to mentally disengage from the ego perspective. One way to reinforce this primary cognitive illusion is to foster an attitude of self-praise. Let them think of themselves as truly wonderful and righteous; fill them up with pride. This is the task of the first division of the Tenth Army.

Self-praise fuels all the defilements. Its is a masterwork of delusion; they look into the mirror with rose coloured glasses. They become quite unable to see their own faults and bristle with indignation whenever these are pointed out to them. Self-praise of course also fuels attachment and sensuality; after all doesn't someone as wonderful as Me deserve a little fun? It also fires up anger, the fierce anger of the self-righteous who knows their views and opinions are correct and everyone else is an idiot. It is so amusing to watch two human egos clash.

The forces of the Tenth have a special role to play in those difficult cases where an individual shows signs of spiritual progress. If they begin to free themselves from the coarser snares of my other armies we can often use their own victories against them by encouraging a spiritual pride and arrogance.

Whisper in their ear about what wonderful spiritual beings they are; "look at me, the great holy man!" This is a trap that has caught many fish.

Don't be overly concerned about the accuracy of their grandiose opinions; they are capable of the most ludicrous self-delusion concerning their own merits. Very few of them after all ever develop a knack for introspection and even fewer are truly capable of self-criticism.

However you should be aware that there will also be a large number of them that have a very negative self-image. If handled properly, this should cause no concern. Negative or positive, a self- image is a self-image and it is the fundamental perceptual hallucination of a self-perspective that keeps them in bondage. Both the positive and the negative versions suit our purposes quite well. If you cannot convince them that they are wonderful then encourage them to kick themselves for being such losers. Remember there are three kinds of conceit; "I am better than you, I am worse than you and I am equal to you." Any one of these is still a conceit and still reinforces duality.

In fact, there are signs that in the modern culture the negative form has become predominant. A great many humans don't like themselves very much.

(Not that I can really blame them....) This is a complicated phenomenon but is ultimately rooted in the rise of materialism. When a human being denies the fundamental spiritual level of being then life becomes quite hollow.

Don't let them guess that this is the problem; encourage them instead in the opinion that they are, as individuals, inadequate. The post-modern environment is quite promising for this tendency. Since the industrial revolution they have been seeking to create a materialist paradise with their machines, and now their own inventions are rendering them redundant by the million.

The second division of the Tenth Army has the job of promoting the denigration of others; this is the complement of self-praise. Many are the beings who will seek to puff themselves up by pulling others down. They don't care that this is an illogical practice; never mind that it always makes matters worse -- they still do it. It is far easier to criticize someone else's defilements than to work on your own. You have many weapons and tactics; scolding, gossip, judgment and so forth. You are a primary vehicle for the stirring up of ill-will and conflict.

It has often been noted that the defects people are most ready to criticize are precisely the ones they themselves are infected with. It is really quite amusing to watch but they almost never see it when they are caught up in it.

All forms of denigration of others are based on a delusion of self-righteousness. Gossip is a popular form of this vice. Everyone loves a scandal and never mind whether its really true so long as its juicy! How righteous they feel as they cluck over someone else's peccadilloes! This is a petty vice that you can stir up anywhere humans gather, school, work, clubs, families etc.

We have found by long experience that this is a great corrupter of monasteries and other spiritual communities.

But don't forget the nastier forms of criticism. Vicious personal attacks can ruin a person's life. But even more destructive is the form called prejudice where the hostility is based on non-personal criteria like language or skin colour. As absurd as it may sound to a rational being, humans can get so worked up over these stupidities that whole nations can be plunged into the chaos of war. War, of course, is an activity to be encouraged as it is a great devourer of all spiritual values.

Subtler and profounder than all the other damage it does though, is the fundamental fact that so long as one is looking for faults outside, then one is not looking within. And that is the one thing we must never, ever let them do.

"Sign it Mara, the Lord of Birth and Death, the Devourer of Beings and the Spinner of the Wheel etc., etc., and so forth. Send one copy to each of my Army Chiefs and one to my attorney." The secretary leaves now with a giggle and a wink. Mara closes the day's business by quickly surveying his far-flung empire. He watches the screen and scans the cosmos, observing beings as they pass in and out of existence.

The moral he watches die and reappear in heaven; the immoral drop to hell.

From hell and heaven beings finish their time and reappear on earth... round and round in fruitless circles they go blasted by the winds of desire; winds fanned by Mara's efforts through the ages.

But there, on the screen -- in a small bamboo hut an old woman lies down to die. She is wearing robes and her head is shaved. With quiet dignity she stretches her frail body out on the thin woven mat, lying on her right side.

Mara watches with distaste -- he knows and fears what is coming but cannot look away, it is as painful and as compulsive as probing a rotten tooth with your tongue. The nun quietly and peacefully expires and the screen flickers; the automatic software searches quickly through all the realms of existence and comes back with the dreaded error message; "Being Not Found." "Bah! Fortunately we don't lose many that way." Mara doesn't allow himself to speculate too long on the whereabouts of the old nun - - the idea is vaguely disturbing. He continues to review the many, many more manageable cases that remain within his jurisdiction. Round and round they go; up and down the big ferris wheel.

So Mara has been busily at work for millennia -- but Mara too is caught in his own web...as he relaxes now with the day's tasks done he pulls a comb from his vest pocket. The elegant demon-god combs his shiny black hair reflectively, vanity of course being one of his vices. After a few minutes he glances at the platinum and tiger-bone comb and his eyes narrow, his breath stops and he gets a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Among the black is one grey hair...

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