

Buddhist Scriptures

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A MURDERER BECOMES A MONK

The saṅgha grew through the Buddha's encounters with all manner of persons, to whom he taught the dharma. Not all listened. Among those who did, some became monks, some became lay disciples. Stories of these encounters form an important part of the tradition. Among these, perhaps none is more famous than the story of the murderer Aṅgulimāla. This story raises a number of points that bear consideration, including questions of criminal responsibility, the workings of the law of karma and the power of the truth. Commentaries provide a good deal more detail than the sutta itself, which appears below.

A son was born to the wife of Gagga, a minister at the court of King Pasenadi, a patron of the Buddha. The child's horoscope predicted a life of violence, so his parents named their child Ahimsaka ('Non-violent') in an effort to avert his destiny. He lived up to his name during his youth, until his teacher, deceived by other boys jealous of Ahimsaka's success, demanded a horrific gift from his student: the little fingers cut from the right hand of one thousand people. The devoted but credulous Ahimsaka set out to gather them, one by one, wearing his prizes strung around his neck. He soon came to be known by another name, Aṅgulimāla ('Finger Necklace').

The Buddha heard of this serial killer who had terrorized the populace and set out to find him. By that time, Aṅgulimāla had accumulated 999 fingers. When he saw the Buddha approaching, he thought he had found his final victim. However, the Buddha employed his magical powers to prevent Aṅgulimāla from approaching him, and admitted him to the order of monks,

where he eventually became an arhat. When King Pasenadi learned of Aṅgulimāla's presence in the saṅgha, he did not have him arrested, but instead offered to provide his robes and food. Others, however, apparently criticized the Buddha for allowing a criminal to escape into the ranks of the saṅgha. As mentioned in Chapter 25, the Buddha formulated specific rules in response to specific situations. The disapproval that resulted from the ordination of Aṅgulimāla led the Buddha to make a rule forbidding criminals from becoming monks or nuns. This rule, however, did not apply to Aṅgulimāla because it had not been in place at the time of his ordination.

Aṅgulimāla did not entirely avoid the consequences of his deeds, however. Those who recalled his earlier vocation would pelt him with sticks and stones while he was begging for alms, even after he became an arhat. The Buddha explained that the physical pain he suffered was a consequence of his violent past. This illustrates an important point in karmic theory – that even one who has destroyed the seeds of all future rebirths and who will enter nirvāṇa at death can experience physical (but not mental) pain in their last lifetime as a result of negative deeds done in the past.

The sutta below contains another famous episode. On his almsround, Aṅgulimāla is moved by the suffering of a mother and her newborn child. The Buddha recommends that Aṅgulimāla cure them by an 'act of truth', a declaration whose truth has supernatural powers, in this case, the power to heal. The Buddha first instructs him to say, 'Sister, since I was born, I do not recall that I have ever intentionally deprived a living being of life. By this truth, may you be well and may your infant be well!' When Aṅgulimāla politely points out that this is not entirely accurate, the Buddha amends the statement to begin, 'since I was born with noble birth'. The phrase 'noble birth' can be interpreted in a number of ways, but here it seems to mean 'since I became a monk'. When Aṅgulimāla speaks these words to the mother and her child, they are cured. Aṅgulimāla's statement has been repeated by monks to pregnant women over the centuries in the hope of assuring a successful birth.

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living in Sāvathī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park.

Now on that occasion there was a bandit in the realm of King Pasenadi of Kosala, named Aṅgulimāla, who was murderous, bloody-handed, given to blows and violence, merciless to living beings. Villages, towns and districts were laid waste by him. He was constantly murdering people and wore their fingers as a garland.

Then, when it was morning, the Blessed One dressed and, taking his bowl and outer robe, went to Sāvathī for alms. When he had wandered for alms in Sāvathī and returned from his almsround, after his meal he set his resting place in order and, taking his bowl and outer robe, set out on the road leading towards Aṅgulimāla. Cowherds, shepherds and ploughmen passing by saw the Blessed One walking along the road leading towards Aṅgulimāla and told him: 'Do not take this road, recluse. On this road is the bandit Aṅgulimāla, who is murderous, bloody-handed, given to blows and violence, merciless to living beings. Villages, towns and districts have been laid waste by him. He is constantly murdering people and he wears their fingers as a garland. Men have come along this road in groups of ten, twenty, thirty and even forty, but still they have fallen into Aṅgulimāla's hands.' When this was said the Blessed One went on in silence.

For the second time . . . For the third time, the cowherds, shepherds and ploughmen told this to the Blessed One, but still the Blessed One went on in silence.

The bandit Aṅgulimāla saw the Blessed One coming in the distance. When he saw him, he thought: 'This is wonderful, it is marvellous! Men have come along this road in groups of ten, twenty, thirty and even forty, but still they have fallen into my hands. And now this recluse comes alone, unaccompanied, as if driven by fate. Why shouldn't I take this recluse's life?' Aṅgulimāla then took up his sword and shield, buckled on his bow and quiver, and followed close behind the Blessed One.

Then the Blessed One performed such a feat of supernormal power that the bandit Aṅgulimāla, though walking as fast as he could, could not catch up with the Blessed One, who was walking at his normal pace. Then the bandit Aṅgulimāla thought: 'It is wonderful, it is marvellous! Formerly I could

catch up even with a swift elephant and seize it; I could catch up even with a swift chariot and seize it; I could catch up even with a swift deer and seize it; but now, though I am walking as fast as I can, I cannot catch up with this recluse who is walking at normal pace!' He stopped and called out to the Blessed One: 'Stop, recluse! Stop, recluse!'

'I have stopped, Aṅgulimāla, you stop too.'

Then the bandit Aṅgulimāla thought: 'These recluses, sons of the Sakyans, speak truth, assert truth; but though this recluse is still walking, he says: "I have stopped, Aṅgulimāla, you stop too." Suppose I question this recluse.'

Then the bandit Aṅgulimāla addressed the Blessed One in stanzas thus:

'While you are walking, recluse, you tell me you have stopped;
But now, when you have stopped, you say I have not stopped.
I ask you now, O recluse, about the meaning:
How is it that you have stopped and I have not?'

'Aṅgulimāla, I have stopped for ever,
I abstain from violence towards living beings;
But you have no restraint towards things that live:
That is why I have stopped and you have not.'

'Oh, at long last this recluse, a venerated sage,
Has come to this great forest for my sake.
Having heard your stanza teaching me the *dhamma*,
I will indeed renounce evil for ever.'

So saying, the bandit took his sword and weapons
And flung them in a gaping chasm's pit;
The bandit worshipped the Sublime One's feet,
And then and there asked for the going forth.

The Enlightened One, the Sage of Great Compassion,
The Teacher of the world with [all] its gods,
Addressed him with these words, 'Come, *bhikkhu*.'
And that was how he came to be a *bhikkhu*.

Then the Blessed One set out to wander back to Sāvathī with Aṅgulimāla as his attendant. Wandering by stages, he eventually arrived at Sāvathī, and there he lived at Sāvathī in Jeta's grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park.

Now on that occasion great crowds were gathering at the gates of King Pasenadi's inner palace, very loud and noisy, crying: 'Sire, the bandit Aṅgulimāla is in your realm; he is murderous, bloody-handed, given to blows and violence, merciless to living beings! Villages, towns and districts have been laid waste by him! He is constantly murdering people and he wears their fingers as a garland! The king must put him down!'

Then in the middle of the day King Pasenadi of Kosala drove out of Sāvathī with a cavalry of five hundred men and set out for the park. He drove thus as far as the road was passable for carriages, and then he dismounted from his carriage and went forward on foot to the Blessed One. After paying homage to the Blessed One, he sat down at one side, and the Blessed One said to him: 'What is it, great king? Is King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha attacking you, or the Licchavis of Vesālī, or other hostile kings?'

'Venerable sir, King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha is not attacking me, nor are the Licchavis of Vesālī, nor are other hostile kings. But there is a bandit in my realm named Aṅgulimāla, who is murderous, bloody-handed, given to blows and violence, merciless to living beings. Villages, towns and districts have been laid waste by him. He is constantly murdering people and he wears their fingers as a garland. I shall never be able to put him down, venerable sir.'

'Great king, suppose you were to see that Aṅgulimāla had shaved off his hair and beard, put on the yellow robe and gone forth from the home life into homelessness; that he was abstaining from killing living beings, from taking what is not given and from false speech; that he was refraining from eating at night, ate only in one part of the day, and was celibate, virtuous, of good character. If you were to see him thus, how would you treat him?'

'Venerable sire, we would pay homage to him, or rise up for him, or invite him to be seated; or we would invite him to accept

robes, almsfood, a resting place, or medicinal requisites; or we would arrange for him lawful guarding, defence and protection. But, venerable sir, he is an immoral man, one of evil character. How could he ever have such virtue and restraint?'

Now on that occasion the venerable Aṅgulimāla was sitting not far from the Blessed One. Then the Blessed One extended his right arm and said to King Pasenadi of Kosala: 'Great king, this is Aṅgulimāla.'

Then King Pasenadi was frightened, alarmed and terrified. Knowing this, the Blessed One told him: 'Do not be afraid, great king, do not be afraid. There is nothing for you to fear from him.'

Then the king's fear, alarm and terror subsided. He went over to the venerable Aṅgulimāla and said: 'Venerable sir, is the noble lord really Aṅgulimāla?'

'Yes, great king.'

'Venerable sir, of what family is the noble lord's father? Of what family is his mother?'

'My father is Gagga, great king; my mother is Mantāṇi.'

'Let the lord Gagga Mantāṇiputta rest content. I shall provide robes, almsfood, resting place and medicinal requisites for the noble lord Gagga Mantāṇiputta.'

Now at that time the venerable Aṅgulimāla was a forest dweller, an almsfood eater, a refuse-rag wearer, and restricted himself to three robes. He replied: 'Enough, great king, my triple robe is complete.'

King Pasenadi then returned to the Blessed One, and, after paying homage to him, he sat down at one side and said: 'It is wonderful, venerable sir, it is marvellous how the Blessed One tames the untamed, brings peace to the unpeaceful, and leads to *nibbāna* those who have not attained *nibbāna*. Venerable sir, we ourselves could not tame him with force and weapons, yet the Blessed One has tamed him without force and weapons. And now, venerable sir, we depart. We are busy and have much to do.'

'Now is the time, great king, to do as you think fit.'

Then King Pasenadi of Kosala rose from his seat and, after paying homage to the Blessed One, keeping him on his right, he departed.

Then, when it was morning, the venerable Aṅgulimāla dressed and, taking his bowl and outer robe, went into Sāvattḥī for alms. As he was wandering for alms from house to house in Sāvattḥī, he saw a certain woman giving birth to a deformed child. When he saw this, he thought: 'How beings are afflicted! Indeed, how beings are afflicted!'

When he had wandered for alms in Sāvattḥī and had returned from his almsround, after his meal he went to the Blessed One and, after paying homage to him, he sat down at one side and said: 'Venerable sir, in the morning I dressed and, taking my bowl and outer robe, went into Sāvattḥī for alms. As I was wandering for alms from house to house in Sāvattḥī, I saw a certain woman giving birth to a deformed child. When I saw that, I thought: "How beings are afflicted! Indeed, how beings are afflicted!"'

'In that case, Aṅgulimāla, go into Sāvattḥī and say to that woman: "Sister, since I was born, I do not recall that I have ever intentionally deprived a living being of life. By this truth, may you be well and may your infant be well!"'

'Venerable sir, wouldn't I be telling a deliberate lie, for I have intentionally deprived many living beings of life?'

'Then, Aṅgulimāla, go to Sāvattḥī and say to that woman: "Sister, since I was born with the noble birth, I do not recall that I have ever intentionally deprived a living being of life. By this truth, may you be well and may your infant be well."'

'Yes, venerable sir,' the venerable Aṅgulimāla replied, and, having gone into Sāvattḥī, he told that woman: 'Sister, since I was born with the noble birth, I do not recall that I have ever intentionally deprived a living being of life. By this truth, may you be well and may your infant be well!' Then the woman and the infant became well.

Before long, dwelling alone, withdrawn, diligent, ardent and resolute, the venerable Aṅgulimāla, by realizing for himself with direct knowledge, here and now entered upon and abided in that supreme goal of the holy life for the sake of which clansmen rightly go forth from the home life into homelessness. He directly knew: 'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state

of being.' And the venerable Aṅgulimāla became one of the *arahants*.

Then, when it was morning, the venerable Aṅgulimāla dressed and, taking his bowl and outer robe, went into Sāvattḥī for alms. Now on that occasion someone threw a clod and hit the venerable Aṅgulimāla's body, someone else threw a stick and hit his body, and someone else threw a potsherd and hit his body. Then, with blood running from his cut head, with his bowl broken and with his outer robe torn, the venerable Aṅgulimāla went to the Blessed One. The Blessed One saw him coming in the distance and told him: 'Bear it, brahmin! Bear it, brahmin! You are experiencing here and now the result of deeds because of which you might have been tortured in hell for many years, for many hundreds of years, for many thousands of years.'

Then, while the venerable Aṅgulimāla was alone in retreat experiencing the bliss of deliverance, he uttered this exclamation:

'Who once did live in negligence
And then is negligent no more,
He illuminates the world
Like the moon freed from a cloud.

'Who checks the evil deeds he did
By doing wholesome deeds instead,
He illuminates the world
Like the moon freed from a cloud.

'The youthful *bhikkhu* who devotes
His efforts to the Buddha's teaching,
He illuminates the world
Like the moon freed from a cloud.

'Let my enemies hear the discourse on the *dhamma*,
Let them be devoted to the Buddha's teaching,
Let my enemies wait on those good people
Who lead others to accept the *dhamma*.

'Let my enemies give ear from time to time
And hear the *dhamma* of those who preach forbearance,
Of those who speak as well in praise of kindness,
And let them follow up that *dhamma* with kind deeds.

'For surely then they would not wish to harm me,
Nor would they think of harming other beings,
So those who would protect all, frail or strong,
Let them attain the all-surpassing peace.

'Conduit-makers guide the water,
Fletchers straighten out the arrow-shaft,
Carpenters straighten out the timber,
But wise men seek to tame themselves.

'There are some that tame with beatings,
Some with goads and some with whips;
But I was tamed by such alone
Who has no rod or any weapon.

'"Harmless" is the name I bear,
Though I was dangerous in the past.
The name I bear today is true:
I hurt no living being at all.

'And though I once lived as a bandit
With the name of "Finger-garland",
One whom the great flood swept along,
I went for refuge to the Buddha.

'And though I once was bloody-handed
With the name of "Finger-garland",
See the refuge I have found:
The bond of being has been cut.

'While I did many deeds that lead
To rebirth in the evil realms,
Yet their result has reached me now,
So I eat free from debt.

'They are fools and have no sense
Who give themselves to negligence,
But those of wisdom guard diligence
And treat it as their greatest good.

'Do not give away negligence
Nor seek delight in sensual pleasures,
But meditate with diligence
So as to reach perfect bliss.

'So welcome to that choice of mine
And let it stand, it was not ill made;
Of all the *dharmas* known to men
I have come to the very best.

'So welcome to that choice of mine
And let it stand, it was not ill made;
I have attained the triple knowledge
And done all that the Buddha teaches.'

Āṅgulimāla Sutta, *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN ii 97–105), in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), pp. 710–17.