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Aṅgulimāla Sutta

The Discourse on Aṅgulimāla | M 86/2:97-105

Theme: The reformation of a serial murderer

Translated with notes by Piya Tan ©2003

1 Introduction

This event took place during the twentieth year of the Buddha’s ministry.¹ Aṅgulimāla’s story is found in the Majjhima Commentary (MA 3:304-319), the Dhammapada Commentary (DhA 3:169 f) and the Thera,gāthā Commentary (ThaA 3:54-64). Both these sources differ in some details, and his story is here summarized from the two versions.

“Aṅgulimāla” is not a proper name but an epithet meaning “finger (*aṅguli*) garland (*mālā*)”—it is said that at the height of his infamous career, the bandit Aṅgulimāla wore a bloody garland human fingers around his neck as he went around of a killing rampage. Born as the son of the Brahmin Bhaggava, a chaplain to Pasenadi, the rajah of Kosala, and the brahminee Mantāṇī, he was given the name of Ahimsaka, meaning “the non-violent one”.²

In due course, he went to Takkasilā,³ where through his diligence he became his teacher’s favourite pupil. His colleagues, being jealous of his position, told the teacher that he was having an affair with the teacher’s wife. The foolish teacher, intent on ruining Ahimsaka but fearing a public outcry against punishing such an exemplary student, plotted to a devious plan to destroy him. He demanded of Ahimsaka a thousand human right-hand fingers as an honorarium (*dakkhinā*).⁴

Unwillingly and unhappily, Ahimsaka went on to fulfill his teacher’s instruction. Thereupon, he waylaid travelers in the Jālinī forest⁵ of Kosala and having killed them, took a right-hand finger from each of them. In order to keep a proper tag on the fingers, he strung them up into a garland and hung it around his neck. Hence his name, Aṅgulimāla (“finger garland”).

As a result of his deeds, whole villages were deserted and travellers avoided the forest. In due course, king Pasenadi sent some men to capture the bandit whose name nobody knew—that is, except for his mother. Guessing the truth, she set out to warn him. By then, Aṅgulimāla lacked but one finger to complete his dreadful garland. At this feverish juncture, he was ready even to kill his own mother to complete his bloody task.

That very same morning, the Buddha seeing that Aṅgulimāla’s readiness (*upanissaya*) for conversion and also to prevent him from the heinous misdeed of killing his own mother, went to meet him in the forest some 30 yojanas (about 338 km = 210 mi). So in the 20th year of the Buddha’s ministry, Aṅgulimāla

¹ AA 2:125; Jinakālamālī 29-35; cf BA 3.

² ThaA says that he was initially called Himsaka (“the violent one”), but later named Ahimsaka (“the non-violent one”) (ThaA 3:55). See Tha:RD 323 n3.

³ Takka,silā (lit “stones that think: or “logic stones”) but the Skt name is Takṣa,śilā. It was the ancient capital of the kingdom of Gandhara. Historically, Taxila lay at the crossroads of three major trade routes: the royal highway from Pāṭaliputra; the north-western route through Bactria, Kāpiśa, and Puṣkalāvati (Peshawar); and the route from Kashmir and Central Asia, via Śrinigar, Mansehra, and the Haripur valley across the Khunjerab pass to the Silk Road (see R Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, 1961: 237). The ancient Takṣaśilā University boasted over 60 distinct arts and sciences taught by great masters, assisted by abler pupils, from at least the 7th century BCE until about mid-3rd century CE. Today it is called Taxila, located about 14 km (22 mi) NW of Rawalpindi, Pakistan. According to **Tela,pattā Jātaka** (J 96) and **Susīma Jātaka** (J 163), Takkasilā is “2000 leagues” (about 22,500 km or 14,000 mi!) from Benares (near where the Buddha taught the first discourse). As the crow flies, the actual distance is about 1609 km or 1000 mi. See BC Law, *Geography of Early Buddhism* (2nd ed) 1932: 4, 50, 49 f, 52; DPPN: Tak-kasilā; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taxila>.

⁴ This sad development is described in more detail in the Comys (above).

⁵ ThaA 3:55.

was converted and became a monk by the *ehi bhikkhu* (“Come, O monk!”) ordination⁶, while the populace was shouting for the bandit’s life at the king’s palace.⁷

Later, when the king met the Buddha in Jetavana, he presented the monk Aṅgulimāla to the king. Having overcome his initial shock, the king was filled with wonder and offered to provide Aṅgulimāla with all the monk’s requisites. Aṅgulimāla, however, having taken up the austere practice (*dhutāṅga*),⁸ turned down his offer.

Once, when Aṅgulimāla was in Sāvattihī seeking alms, a group of people recognized him and attacked him, physically wounding him. On the Buddha’s advice, he endured their wrath to let his karma run its course. According to the Dhammapada Commentary, Aṅgulimāla died soon after (DhA 3:169).

2 Aṅgulimāla’s significance

2.1 AṅGULIMĀLA’S POPULARITY. There is a popular story about how Aṅgulimāla’s meeting with a woman in difficult labour. Out of his compassion, he consulted the Buddha on how to help her. Following the Buddha’s instructions, Aṅgulimāla performed an “act of truth” (*sacca, kiriyā*) and the woman then proceeded to give an easy delivery. His verse is even today a popular mantra used for expectant women and women in labour [§15]. It should be noted however that this compassionate act of his is done before he is an arhat. He is probably still a streamwinner. He attains arhathood following this event [§16].

The Aṅgulimāla story (as found in the Aṅgulimāla Sutta) appears to be popular and is also preserved in the Sanskrit **Avadāna Śataka** (no 27). Aṅgulimāla’s conversion is often regarded as a most compassionate and miraculous act of the Buddha, for example, in the Sutasoma Jātaka (J 537), which was told in his connection.⁹ His story is an example of how good karma can overcome former evil karma (AA 2:218).

It was on Aṅgulimāla’s account that the Vinaya rule prohibiting the ordination of captured robbers was made.¹⁰ His Elder’s Verses are found at **Theragāthā** verses 866-891.

2.2 AṅGULIMĀLA’S CONVERSION. Once inside the forest to meet Aṅgulimāla, the Buddha could have well stood in wait for him, for Aṅgulimāla is well acquainted with every part of it. Once he sees the Buddha, he prepares to attack him. But no matter how hard he tries, the Buddha is simply some distance ahead. Legend has it that the Buddha makes the earth turn around¹¹ so that Aṅgulimāla is always behind the Buddha no matter how fast he runs (MA 3:332).

⁶ §6 = Tha 870. Vinaya Comy gives the full list of ehi-bhikshus: the 5 monks, Yasa, his 54 friends, the 30 youths, the 1000 matted hair ascetics (*purāṇa jaṭila*), the 2 foremost monks (Sāriputta & Moggallāna), their 250 wanderer followers, and Aṅgulimāla (totaling 1343 monks, according to the Commentary). Other ehi bhikshus, says Buddhaghosa (*evam ādāyo*), are Sela and his 300 attendants [M 2:112 = Sn p112], Mahā Kappina and his 1000 attendants [SA 2:245 f; AA 1:322; DhA 2:124; SnA 2:440; cf Vism 393], 10,000 Kapilavatthu youths [VA 1:241], and 16,000 *pārāyanika* brahmins (Bāvāri’s 16 disciples and their followers) [Sn 976-1149; SnA 2:575] (VA 1:240 f)

⁷ Tha 868-870.

⁸ “Austere practices,” *dhutāṅga*. There 13 such austere observances: 1. wearing patched-up robes of discarded pieces of cloth or rags (*pamsukūlik’āṅga*); 2. keeping only the three robes (*te, cīvarik’āṅga*); 3. going for alms (*piṇḍapātik’āṅga*); 4. not omitting any house when going on an alms-round (*sapadānik’āṅga*); 5. eating at one sitting (*ek’āsānik’āṅga*); 6. eating only from the bowl (*patta, piṇḍik’āṅga*); 7. refusing all further food (*khala, pacchā, bhattik’āṅga*); 8. living in the forest (*araññik’āṅga*); 9. living under a tree (*rukkha, mūlik’āṅga*); 10. living in the open air (*abbhokāsik’āṅga*); 11. living in a cemetery (*susānik’āṅga*); 12. being satisfied with whatever dwelling (*yathā, santhatik’āṅga*); sleeping in a sitting position, ie never lying down (*nesajjik’āṅga*) (M 5.9/1:30, 113.9-20/3:39-42; A 5.181-190/3:219 f). These 13 items are all found in the Suttas but not all together in one place. See Vism ch 2 & also **Bakkula S** (M 124) = SD 3.15 Intro.

⁹ J 5:456 f; also J 4:180; SnA 2:240; DhA 1:124.

¹⁰ V 1:74, cf V:H 4:93 n1 ad loc.

¹¹ Another occasion when the Buddha made the earth “turn” thus is when **Ānanda** stands right in front of the Buddha to prevent the intoxicated elephant Nālāgiri from trampling the Buddha. Ānanda remains where he is despite the Buddha forbidding him thrice. The Buddha “makes the earth turn around” to get Ānanda out of the way (J 533/-5:335 f; DhA 1.12/1:140 f).

Finally, like Kisā Gotamī at the end of her *Sisyphian walk*,¹² Aṅgulimāla, after failing to catch up with the Buddha, at the end of his *Sisyphian run*, tires and stops. His will is broken; the old self is weakened. Almost in desperation, he calls out to the Buddha to stop. The Buddha replies with the ego-shattering words, “I have stopped, Aṅgulimāla! You stop, too!”

Fascinated by the vaguely familiar words, Aṅgulimāla asks the Buddha to explain them, the Buddha does so. Before this, Aṅgulimāla is still under the spell of his foolish guru’s presence in the dark depths of his mind. The Buddha’s instruction effectively liberates him from the guru’s ghost. He is now free to be his true self, a true individual, a liberated being. [7.1]

The spiritual significance of Aṅgulimāla’s conversion is in no way diminished—indeed even enhanced—without the miraculous aspects, as noted by the German scholar monk, **Analayo**:

In fact, one might even imagine the whole scene without any magical feat, since the Buddha’s refusal to obey the brigand’s obey to stand still, and his fearless rebuttal, “I have stopped, you stop too!”, would fit in well at such a juncture and be sufficient to account for the subsequent denouement of events. (Analayo, 2008: 143)

Analayo admits that “[t]hough the miracle might have been introduced into the account of Aṅgulimāla’s conversion at a time early enough to be present in all versions, this remains evidently hypothetical, given all versions state that a miracle took place.” (id). However, he adds an interesting and important note: All the versions agree that what really change Aṅgulimāla are the words spoken by the Buddha,

since after the miracle he just commands the Buddha to stop, whereas after the words spoken by the Buddha he throws away his weapons and asks to be accepted as a monk. Moreover, after the magical feat, Aṅgulimāla still addresses the Buddha as “recluse,”¹³ a mode of address used in the early discourses by outsiders that have no particular relation to or confidence in the Buddha. After the words spoken by the Buddha, however, a change of attitude takes place, as he refers to the Buddha as “Sage,” “Blessed One” or “Venerable One.”¹⁴ These epithets express Aṅgulimāla’s appreciation of the wisdom underlying the Buddha’s explanation and probably also his respect for the Buddha’s fearless response when commanded to stand still by an armed brigand.¹⁵

(Analayo 2008: 143 f)

A vital theme that runs through all versions of the Kisā Gotamī stories is her *walk* in search of a handful of mustard seeds that would revive her dead son. This action represents a spiritual movement away from her old suffering self towards a new liberated self. We see a similar movement in the Buddha’s conversion of Aṅgulimāla, where he *runs* after the Buddha to kill him, but he could not catch up with the Buddha until he *calls* out to the Buddha. The ensuing dialogue marks the spiritual turning-point in Aṅgulimāla’s life.¹⁶

¹² See **Kisā Gotamī** = SD 43.2.

¹³ W Stede, “Aṅgulimāla and liberation,” BSOAS 20, 1957: 34, however, feels that “there can be little doubt that the account is true and that the miracle actually happened.”

¹⁴ SĀ 1077 = T2.280c29: 沙門; SĀ2 16 = T2.378b27: 沙門; M 86/2:99,17 and Th 866: *samaṇa*; T118 = T2.-509b2: 沙門; T119 = T2.510c26: 沙門; EĀ 38.6 = T2.720a18: 沙門; T212 = T4.703c15: 沙門. N Wagle, *Society at the Time of the Buddha*, Bombay, 1966: 56 explains that the use of the address *samaṇa* here “denotes a certain indifference.” (Analayo’s fn, normalized)

¹⁵ SĀ 1077 = T2.281a16: “Sage,” 牟尼; SĀ2 16 = T2. 378c15: “such a man,” 如此人 and “Blessed One,” 婆伽婆; M 86/2:100,1 and Tha 868: “Venerated Sage,” *mahesi*; T118 = T2.509b13: “Great Sage,” 大聖; EĀ 38.6 = T2.-720b16: “Venerable One,” 尊; and T212 = T4.704a6: “Great Sage,” 大聖. (Analayo’s fn, normalized).

¹⁶ **Aṅgulimāla S** (M 86.5/2:98 f) = SD 5.11.

3 Who was Aṅgulimāla?

RF Gombrich, in chapter 5 of his book, *How Buddhism Began*, deals with “Who was Aṅgulimāla?” (1996:135-164), where he recounts and discusses in detail the Aṅgulimāla story using materials from both the Majjhima and the Theragāthā Commentaries. By a reconstruction of a stanza from the Aṅgulimāla verses, Gombrich proposes that Aṅgulimāla was really a Tantric practitioner in the Śaivite/Śākta tradition. He explains that “his practice of collection fingers for a necklace is thus sure to be the result of a vow, in which the worshipper tries to attain the iconic form of this god” (1996:152).

The original Pali of Aṅgulimāla’s conversion verse runs as follows:

<i>cirassam vata mahito mahesi</i>	<i>mahā,vanam samano paccupādi</i>
<i>so ‘ham cajissāmi sahassa,pāpam</i>	<i>sutvāna gātham tava dhamma,yuttam</i>

Long have I revered the recluse, the mighty sage, who has entered the great forest,
Therefore, having heard your stanza on the Dharma, I will renounce a thousand evils.

(Tha 868 PTS ed)

Gombrich reconstructs it as

<i>ciram vata mahito maheso</i>	<i>mahā,vanam pāpuṇi saccavādī</i>
<i>so ‘ham cajissāmi sahassa,pāpam</i>	<i>sutvāna gātham tava dhamma,yuttam</i>

For a long time to fulfil a vow I have been honouring Śiva. You have arrived in the forest,
speaking truth. So I shall give up my thousand crimes, for I have heard your voice, which
teaches what is right.

(Gombrich 1996:154)

Gombrich’s proposal is, however, only hypothetical as he has not presented conclusive evidence to convince specialists in Śaivism such as Alexis Sanderson,¹⁷ and an extensive rebuttal in a book review by Maithrimurthi Mudagamuwa and Alexander von Rospatt.¹⁸

4 Significance of Aṅgulimāla today

In our own times, Aṅgulimāla is an inspiring figure in Buddhist social work and “engaged” Buddhism. It is the name for a Buddhist-initiated prison ministry in the UK (run by a Theravada monk of the Cittaviveka community) and has also inspired scholars like David Loy to write of a broader view of social justice.¹⁹

The point of this *sutta* is not difficult to see: we need only contrast the fate of Aṅgulimāla with what our retributive justice system would do to him. The importance of this story within the Buddhist tradition highlights the only reason that Buddhism accept for punishing an offender: to

¹⁷ See Gombrich 1996:152 n7.

¹⁸ Mudagamuwa & von Rospatt, 1998: 169-173. **Anālayo** further notes: “In regard to the address used by Aṅgulimāla in the different versions at this point [2.2n at end of Analayo quote], it may be worthwhile to note that none of them supports the emendation of *mahesi* to *maheso* suggested by Gombrich (1996: 151), based on which he then concludes that Aṅgulimāla could have been a ‘proto-Śaiva/Śākta.’ A similar suggestion was already made by Eitel ([1888] 2004: 13), who in his gloss on ‘Aṅgulimāliya’ speaks of a ‘Śivaitic sect of fanatics who practiced assassination as a religious act. One of them was converted by Śākyamuni’; by Legge ([1886] 1988: 56 n2), who suggests that ‘the Aṅgulimāliya were a sect of Śivaitic fanatics, who made assassination a religious act’; and by Soothill & Hodous ([1937] 2000: 454), who under the entry 鶯崛摩羅 *yāngjuémóluó* speaks of a ‘Śivaitic sect that wore... chaplets’ of finger-bones. Yet, as pointed out by Maitrimurthi & von Rospatt (1998: 170, 173), ‘there seems to be no testimony at all in the history of Indian religions to the practice of killing for decorating oneself with parts of the victim’s body’ and such a proto-Śaiva/Śākta would antedate ‘other known practitioners of Śaivic tantrism by a millennium.’”

¹⁹ See David Loy, “How to reform a serial killer: The Buddhist approach to restorative justice.” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 7 2000:145-168.

help reform his or her character. There is absolutely no reason to punish someone who has already reformed himself. (Loy, “How to reform a serial killer”, 2000:150)

In the same paper, Loy points out how karma “is essential to the Buddhist understanding of justice”:

One modern approach to *karma* is to understand it in terms of what Buddhism calls *saṅkhāras*, our habitual tendencies. These are best understood not as tendencies we have, but as tendencies we *are*: instead of being “my” habits, their interaction is what constitutes my sense of “me”.

The point of this interpretation is that we are punished not for our sins, but by them. People suffer or benefit not for what they have done, but for what they have become, and what we intentionally do is what makes us what we are. This conflation makes little sense if *karma* is understood dualistically as a kind of moral “dirt” attached to me, but it makes a great deal of sense if I am my habitual intentions, for then the important spiritual issue is the development of those intentions...If *karma* is the psychological truth about how we construct ourselves—about how my sense-of-self is constructed by “my” greed, ill will, and delusion—then we can no longer accept the juridical presupposition of a completely self-determined subject wholly responsible for its own actions. Again we can no longer justify punishment as retributive, but must shift the focus of criminal justice to education and reformation. (Loy, op cit, 2000:156 f)

In the same spirit, too, we find that Buddhism does not see conversion as a wholesale acceptance of an external agency by way of religious “conversion” but through *an inner spiritual realization*. The surrender of one’s will to an external authority, whatever one calls it, can easily lead to abuse by those who define what that authority is. The figure of the “finger bandit” has also been used to describe the minions of religious cult leaders who are

still wandering around today, obeying, zombie-like, the commands of their masters to seek thousands of fingers of converts. For every finger, a human individual must mentally die: those who surrender to fanaticism and bigotry of the cult lose that finger—and their minds—to the cult leader.

(Piyasilo, *Buddhist Culture*. Petaling Jaya (Malaysia): The Dharmafarers, 1988g:157; rev 2006)

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Discourse on Aṅgulimāla

M 86/2:97-105

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in Anāthapiṇḍika’s Park in Jeta’s grove near Sāvaththī.

THE CONVERSION OF AṅGULIMĀLA

The bandit of Jālinī forest

2 Now at that time, there was a bandit, in the realm of the rajah Pasenadi of Kosala, named Aṅgulimāla, who was murderous, bloody-handed, given to blows and violence, merciless to living beings. On his account, villages were no more villages, market towns were no more market towns, [98] and districts were no more districts. He was constantly murdering people and wore their fingers as a garland (*aṅguli-māla*).

3a Then, when it was morning, the Blessed One, having dressed himself and taking robe and bowl, entered Sāvaththī for alms. Then the Blessed One, having walked for alms in Sāvaththī and returned from

the alms-round, after his meal, and finished his meal, folded up his bedding,²⁰ and then taking his bowl and outer robe, set out on the road leading towards Aṅgulimāla.

3b Cowherds, shepherds, ploughmen and travellers 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, murderous, bloody-handed, violent and deadly,²¹ merciless to living beings. Villages are no more villages, market-towns are no more market-towns, the countryside is no more the countryside. He is always murdering people and wears their fingers as a garland. Men have come along this road in groups of ten, twenty and even forty, but still they have fallen into the bandit Aṅgulimāla’s hands.”

When this was said, the Blessed One went on in silence.

For the second time, the cowherds *and others warned him...*

For the third time, the cowherds *and others warned him...* but the Blessed One went on in silence.

The Buddha meets Aṅgulimāla

4 The bandit Aṅgulimāla saw the Blessed One coming in the distance. When he saw him, he thought:

“How strange! This cannot be!²² Men have come along in groups of ten, twenty, [99] thirty and even forty, but still they have fallen into my hands. But now this recluse comes alone, unaccompanied, as if compelled. Why shouldn’t I take this recluse’s life?”

Aṅgulimāla then took up his sword and shield, strapped on his bow and quiver, and followed close behind the Blessed One.

5 Then the Blessed One performed a feat of psychic power such that the bandit Aṅgulimāla, though going as fast as he could, could not catch up with the Blessed One who was walking at his normal pace.²³

Then the bandit Aṅgulimāla thought:

“How strange! This cannot be! Formerly I could catch up even with a swift elephant and seize it. I could catch up even with a swift horse and seize it. I could catch up with a swift chariot and seize it. I could catch up with a swift deer and seize it. But now, though I am going as fast as I can, I cannot catch up with this recluse, who is walking at his normal pace!”²⁴

He stopped and called out to the Blessed One:

“Stop, recluse! Stop, recluse!”²⁵

“I have stopped, Aṅgulimāla! You stop, too!” (*thito ahaṃ Aṅgulimāla, tvaṃ tiṭṭhā ti*)

Then the bandit Aṅgulimāla thought:

“These recluses, sons of the Sakyas, are those who speak the truth, who assert truth; but though this recluse is still walking, he says: ‘I have stopped, Aṅgulimāla! You stop, too!’ Let me question this recluse.”²⁶

²⁰ “Folded up his bedding,” *sen’āsanam saṃsāmetvā*, here probably refers to tidying up his resting-place (*sayana*), or perhaps the “residence” or “lodging,” which would be a cell-like hut or space of a forest monk.

²¹ “Violent and deadly,” *hata, pahate*, lit “killing and striking.”

²² “How strange! This cannot be!” *acchariyam vata bho, abbhutam vata bho*, usually rendered as “How wonderful! How marvellous!” which fails to fit the context here.

²³ *Atha kho bhagavā tathā, rūpaṃ iddhābhisaṅkhataṃ abhisaṅkhāsi yathā coro aṅguli, mālo bhagavantam paka-tiyā gacchantam sabbatthāmena gacchanta na sakkoti sampāpunitum*. Comy says that the Buddha makes the earth turn around so that he keeps appearing behind Aṅgulimāla whenever the latter reaches near him (MA 3:332).

²⁴ Comy says that when Aṅgulimāla approaches him, the Buddha “makes the earth turn around” so that Aṅgulimāla is always behind him (MA 3:332): see Intro (2.2).

²⁵ We have here a theme on *spiritual movement*: Aṅgulimāla *runs* after the Buddha to kill him, but he could not catch up with the Buddha until he *calls* out to the Buddha. The ensuing dialogue marks the spiritual turning-point in Aṅgulimāla’s life. A similar movement theme runs through the Kisā Gotamī story: she *walks* in search of a handful of mustard seeds that would revive her dead son. Such actions represent a spiritual movement away from the old suffering self towards the new liberated self. See **Kisā Gotamī** = SD 43.2.

6 Then the bandit Aṅgulimāla addressed the Blessed One in verse thus:

You are walking, O recluse, yet you say, ‘I stand still.’
And to me who stands still you say, ‘You stand not still.’
Therefore, recluse, I ask you this question:
‘How is it that you stand still, and I stand not still?’ [Tha 866]

**I stand still,²⁷ Aṅgulimāla, all the time,
To all beings, I have laid down the rod.
But you are unrestrained towards living beings.
Therefore I stand still and you stand not still. [100]** [Tha 867]

Long have I revered the recluse, the mighty sage, who has entered the great forest,
Therefore, having heard your stanza on the Dharma,
I will renounce a thousand evils.²⁸ [Tha 868]

So saying, the bandit flung sword and weapon over the chasm, down the precipice,
into the abyss.²⁹
The bandit bowed at the feet of the Sugata [Well-gone One], and there and then
requested for the going-forth.³⁰ [Tha 869]

Compassionate is the Buddha, the great sage, the Teacher of the world with its gods.
He said this to him: ‘Come, O monk!’³¹ and just this indeed made him a monk. [Tha 870]

7 Then the Blessed One set out on a journey back to Sāvattḥī with the venerable Aṅgulimāla as attendant monk, and after journeying from place to place, arrived in due course at Sāvattḥī. And there the Blessed One stayed in Anāthapiṇḍika’s Park in Jeta’s grove near Sāvattḥī.

Pasenadi seeks Aṅgulimāla

8 Now at that time a great crowd had assembled at king Pasenadi’s palace gate and raised a hue and cry:

“Your majesty, there is a robber in your kingdom named Aṅgulimāla. He is murderous, bloody-handed, violent and deadly, merciless to living beings. Villages are no more villages, market-towns are no more market-towns, the countryside is no more countryside. He is constantly murdering people and he wears their fingers as a garland. Let your majesty stop [subdue] him!”

9 Then early in the day,³² Pasenadi, the rajah of Kosala, set out of Sāvattḥī with 500 horses [with a cavalry of five hundred men], heading for the park [monastery]. Going in his carriage as far as the road was passable for a carriage, he alighted from his carriage, proceeding on foot, went up to where the Blessed One was. And having gone up to the Blessed One, [101] he saluted him and sat down at one side.

²⁶ See **Skillful Means** = SD 30.8 (3.4.1).

²⁷ While Aṅgulimāla’s question (prec verse) speaks on a worldly level, the Buddha’s answer here brings him up to the Dharma level, where “still” (*thito*, lit “standing”) means his mind has been stilled and no more creates new karma. But since, Aṅgulimāla has been killing, he is not still in the Dharma sense. For a study on religious language, see Intro (2.3) & **Two Levels of Religious Language** = SD 10.6.

²⁸ Here I follow Tha:PTS: *so ’haṃ cājissāmi sahassa,pāpaṃ*. M:ÑB has: “Oh, at long last this recluse, a venerated sage, | Has come to this great forest for my sake.” Comys say that at this point, Aṅgulimāla realizes that he was before the Buddha himself and who had come to the forest for the express purpose of helping him. (MA 3:333; ThaA 3:37 f). For Gombrich’s reconstruction, see Intro, above.

²⁹ “The abyss,” *narake*. A play on the word *naraka*, also meaning “hell,” is obvious here.

³⁰ “Requested for the going-forth,” *pabbajjam ayāci*, that is, requested to be admitted into the Order.

³¹ On *ehi,bhikkhu*, see Intro (1) n.

³² “Early in the day,” *divā,divassa*.

And as king Pasenadi sat there at one side, the Blessed One said to him:

“What is it, maharajah? Is Seniya Bimbisāra, the rajah of Magadha, upset with you? Or the Licchavīs of Vesālī? Or some other hostile kings?”

10 “Bhante, Seniya Bimbisāra, the rajah of Magadha, is not upset with me; nor the Licchavīs of Vesālī; nor any other hostile kings. Bhante, there is a bandit named Aṅgulimāla in my realm—he is murderous, bloody-handed, violent and deadly, merciless to living beings. Villages are no more villages, market-towns are no more market-towns, the countryside is no more the countryside. He is constantly murdering people and he wears their fingers as a garland. And, bhante, I cannot subdue him.”

11 “Now, maharajah, suppose you were to see Aṅgulimāla with his hair and beard shaven, clad in saffron robe, and gone forth from the household life into homelessness;

that he is abstaining from destroying life,
abstaining from taking the not-given and
abstaining from false speech;
that he is eating only one meal a day,
and is celibate, virtuous, of good character.

If you were to see him thus, how would you treat him?”

12 “Bhante, we would salute him, or rise up to greet him, or invite him to be seated, or invite him to accept robes, almsfood, lodging or medicine and support for the sick; or we would provide him with guard, defence and protection in accordance with the law.³³ But, bhante, how could one of such an immoral and evil character ever have such virtue and restraint?”

Pasenadi meets Aṅgulimāla

13 Now at that time, the venerable Aṅgulimāla was sitting not far from the Blessed One. Then the Blessed One stretched forth his right arm and said to Pasenadi, the rajah of Kosala:

“Maharajah, this is Aṅgulimāla!”

Then king Pasenadi was stricken with fear, stiff with fear; he bristled with fear. Seeing Pasenadi, the rajah of Kosala, *thus fearful*, he said this to him:

“Fear not, maharajah, fear not! There is nothing for you to fear from him.”

Thereupon the king’s *fear* [102] subsided. Then Pasenadi, the rajah of Kosala, went up to the venerable Aṅgulimāla and said:

“Bhante, is our noble master³⁴ (really) Aṅgulimāla?”

“Yes, maharajah.”

“Bhante, of what family is the noble master’s father? Of what family is his mother?”

“My father, maharajah, is a Gagga; my mother is a Mantāṇī.”

“Bhante, if it pleases the noble master Gagga, mantāṇī,putta [son of Gagga and Mantāṇī], I shall provide you with robes, almsfood, lodging and medicine and support for the sick.”³⁵

14a Now at that time, the venerable Aṅgulimāla was a forest dweller, an almsfood eater, a refuse-rag wearer and restricted himself to three robes.³⁶ Then the venerable Aṅgulimāla said this to Pasenadi, the rajah of Kosala:

“I’ve enough, maharajah, my triple robes are complete.”³⁷

³³ The Buddha’s good-natured remark is a skillful means to elicit a positive and public reply that he would treat Aṅgulimāla well, now that he is a monk. Having *publicly* declared his good intentions, the rajah is bound by his noblesse oblige to keep it them! For a similar remark by the Buddha, where the Buddha elicits public support for renunciants from rajah Ajāta, sattu, see **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2.35-38/1:60-62) = SD 8.10.

³⁴ “Noble master,” *ayya* = *ariya* (Skt *arya*, *ārya*), “noble.”

³⁵ Here, Pasenadi volunteers to offer the monk’s 4 supports. See **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2.34-38/1:60 f) = SD 8.10.

³⁶ These are 4 of the voluntary ascetic practices (*dhutaṅga*). See Intro (1) above. For details, see **Bakkula S** (M 124) = SD 3.15 Intro (2).

³⁷ *Alaṃ mahāraja paripuṇṇaṃ me ticivivaraṇaṃ ti.*

Pasenadi rejoices in the Buddha

Pasenadi, the rajah of Kosala, then returned to the Blessed One, and after saluting him, sat down at one side, and said:

“How wonderful! How marvellous! How the Blessed One tames the untamed, brings peace to the unpeaceful, extinguish the unextinguished.

Bhante, we ourselves could not tame him with the rod and the sword [by fear and force], yet the Blessed One has tamed him with neither rod nor sword.³⁸

And now, bhante, we depart. We are busy and have much to do.”

“As you please, maharajah.”

Then Pasenadi, the rajah of Kosala, rose from his seat, and after paying homage to the Blessed One, keeping his right (to the Blessed One),³⁹ departed.

ANĠULIMĀLA’S COMPASSION

Aṅgulimāla and the woman in labour

14b Then, when it was morning, the venerable Aṅgulimāla dressed himself and, taking his bowl and outer robe, went into Sāvattḥī for alms. As he was going for alms on an unbroken round of the houses⁴⁰ in Sāvattḥī, he saw a certain woman in difficult and painful labour.⁴¹ [103] When he saw this, he thought:

“How beings suffer! Alas, how living beings suffer!”

When he had gone for alms in Sāvattḥī and had returned from his alms-round, after his meal, he went to the Blessed One. After saluting the Blessed One, he sat down at one side and said:

“Bhante, in the morning I dressed myself and, taking my bowl and outer robe, went into Sāvattḥī for alms. As I was going for alms on an unbroken round of the houses in Sāvattḥī, I saw a certain woman in difficult and painful labour. When I saw this, I thought: ‘How beings suffer! Alas, how living beings suffer!’”

15 “In that case, Aṅgulimāla, go into Sāvattḥī and say to that woman:

‘Sister, since I was born,⁴² I do not recall ever having intentionally deprived a living being of life. By this truth, may you be well, may your womb [your child] be well!’”

³⁸ That is, using fear of punishment and force of weapon. This is the best example of the Buddha’s “greatest miracle,” as taught in such discourses as (**Paṭijāriya**) **Saṅgārava S** (A 3.60.6c/1:172) = SD 16.10; see also **Mira-cles** = SD 27.5a (3.3). Cf Dh 129: “All tremble at the rod” (*sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa*). In **Dhamma,cetiya S** (M 89), the rajah Pasenadī similarly praises how the Sangha members are so well disciplined “with neither rod nor sword” (M 89.13/2:122). This is an example of the difference between the “wheel of power” (*āṇā,cakka*), ie the sphere of political power, and the “wheel of truth” (*dhamma,cakka*), the realm of the Dharma (VA 10 = KhA 1:95; MA 2:278; ThaA 3:48).

³⁹ “Keeping his right (to the Blessed One),” *padakkhiṇaṃ*, that is, going in a clockwise or sunwise manner around a sacred person or object.

⁴⁰ “Going for alms on an unbroken round of the houses,” *sapadānaṃ piṇḍāya caramāno*. This is the 4th of the 13 austere observances (*dhutāṅga*). See n4 (Intro).

⁴¹ “Difficult and painful labour,” *mūḷha,gabbhaṃ visāta,gabbhaṃ*. The Majjhima Ṭīkā says that *mūḷha,gabbha* means that the foetus had only partly turned around in the womb, keeping a horizontal position, so that it is unable to pass through the birth-canal (*Gabbho hi paripakko sampajjamāno vijāyana,kāle kamma,javātehi sañcāletvā parivat-tito uddhaṃ,pādo adho,sīso hutvā yoni,mukhābhimukho hoti, evaṃ so kassaci alaggo sotthinā bahi nikkhamati, vipajjamāno pana vipari,vattana,vasena yoni,maggaṃ pidahitvā tiriyaṃ nipajjati, tathā yassā yoni,maggo pidahati, sā tatha kamma,javātehi aparāparaṃ parivattamānā vyākulā mūḷha,gabbhā’ti vuccati, taṃ sandhāya vuttam ‘gabbha,mūḷhan ti.*) (MAṬ:VRI 2:155)

⁴² “Sister, since I was born,” *yato’haṃ bhagini jāto*. Here the Buddha is actually referring to Aṅgulimāla’s spiritual birth, but Aṅgulimāla, not yet an arhat, still recalling his past violence, misunderstood. In reply, the Buddha then refers to “birth amongst the noble ones” (*ariyāya jātiyā*).

“Bhante, wouldn’t I be telling a deliberate lie, for I have intentionally deprived many living beings of life?”

The Aṅgulimāla paritta

“Then, Aṅgulimāla, go into Sāvattihī and say to that woman:

*Yato ’ham bhagini ariyāya jātiyā jāto nābhijānāmi sañcicca pāṇaṃ jīvita voropetā
Tena saccena sotthi te hotu sotthi gabbhassa,*

“Sister, since I was born amongst the noble ones,⁴³ I do not recall ever having intentionally deprived a living being of life.

By this truth, may you be well, may your child be well!”

“Yes, bhante,” the venerable Aṅgulimāla replied in assent to the Blessed One, and having gone into Sāvattihī, said to the woman:

“Sister, since I was born amongst the noble ones, I do not recall ever having intentionally deprived a living being of life. By this truth, may you be well, may your child be well!”

Then the woman and the child in her womb became well.⁴⁴

ĀṄGULIMĀLA’S AWAKENING

Aṅgulimāla’s arhathood

16 Before long, dwelling alone, aloof, diligent, exertive, and resolute, the venerable Aṅgulimāla, by realizing for himself with direct knowledge here and now attain and abide in that supreme goal of the holy life for the sake of which sons of family rightly go forth from the household life into the homeless life.

He directly knew: “Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done what had to be done, there is no more for this state of being.” [104]

And the venerable Aṅgulimāla became one of the arhats

Aṅgulimāla’s past karma ripens

17 Then, when it was morning, the venerable Aṅgulimāla dressed himself and, taking his bowl and outer robe, went into Sāvattihī for alms. Now on that occasion, someone threw a clod and hit the venerable Aṅgulimāla’s body; someone else threw a stick and hit the venerable Aṅgulimāla’s body; someone else threw a potsherd and hit the venerable Aṅgulimāla’s body.⁴⁵

Then, with blood streaming 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.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Note here that this refers not to his being an arhat, but a *learner* (*sekha*), at least a streamwinner. His attaining arhathood follows later.

⁴⁴ Cf the story of Suppavāsā: DhA 31.3/4:192-194; J 100/1:407 f; U 2.8.15-18. See DhA:B 3:12 n1.

⁴⁵ Comy explains that these objects were thrown at marauding crows, dogs and pigs but hit the elder (MA 3:338).

⁴⁶ Comy explains that any karma is capable of bringing three kinds of result: a result to be experienced here and now, ie in the same life as it was committed; a result to be experienced in the next existence; and a result to be experienced in any subsequent to the next one, as long as one continues in this cyclic life. As an arhat, Aṅgulimāla freed himself from the latter two types of karmic result but the first remains, since even arhats may experience the present results of deeds done before attaining arhathood. (MA 3:339 f). See **Sañcetanika S** (A 10.206/5:292-297) = SD 3.9.

18 Then, while the venerable Aṅgulimāla was alone in retreat enjoying the bliss of liberation, he uttered these verses of uplift:

[Thera,gātha 871-886]

- 871 Who was heedless before, but heedless no more,
Brightens this world like the cloud-free moon. (Dh 172)
- 872 Whose past evil deeds are blocked off by good deeds
Brightens this world like the cloud-free moon. (Dh 173)
- 873 The young monk who devotes himself to the Buddha’s Teaching
Brightens this world like the cloud-free moon. (Dh 382)
- 874 Let even my enemies hear the teaching of the Dharma;⁴⁷
Let them be devoted to the Buddha’s Teaching
Let even my enemies associate with those people
Who, being good, lead others to accept the Dharma. [105]
- 875 Let my enemies in due time hear the Dharma from speakers of patience
Who praise harmony, and may they act accordingly.
- 876 For, surely then he would not wish me harm nor harm other beings—
He would gain supreme peace: he would protect all, the moving and the still.⁴⁸
- 877 Ditch-diggers guide water; fletchers bend the bow;
Carpenters bend wood—but the wise tame themselves. (Dh 80, cf 145)
- 878 Some tame with the rod; some with hooks, others with whips;
But I was tamed by the one who has neither rod nor sword.

⁴⁷ Comy says that vv 874-876 were spoken by Aṅgulimāla after he had been injured during his alms-round.

⁴⁸ “The moving and the still,” *tasa, thāvara*. This is one of the most problematic of Pali expressions. PED: The term *tasa* is metaphorically used of people who are in fear and trembling, as distinguished from *thāvara*, a self-possessed and firm being (= arhat, KhA 245) [n4:23c.1]. In this sense, *tasa* is derived from *tasati* both in the sense of: (1) Skt *tr̥syati*, to be thirsty; fig: to crave (S 2:13, Miln 254), and (2) Ved *trasati*, to tremble, shake, to have fear, to be frightened (Sn 394, Nc 479, KhA 245). Andersen equates *tasa* with Skt *trasa*, and explains it as “moving, trembling, feeble” (*Pali Glossary* 111). PED also says that *thāvara* is always used in connection with *tasa*, contrasting or comprising the movable beings (animal world) and the immovable (vegetable world), and quotes as examples Sn 394 [Sn:P n26:24d], It 31 f. (Cf M 2:105 & M:H 2:290.4, SnA 2:468 493 & esp Kh:N 285.40.) Most traditional translators render *tasā vā thāvarā vā* (Sn 146b) as “the frail or the firm” or such like, and interpret it as referring to those who still have craving (*tasā*) and the arhats (*thāvarā*) respectively, in keeping with Comy (KhA 245). These beings are to be included in our lovingkindness. Unawakened beings may need our lovingkindness; but do arhats need our thoughts that they may “be happy-minded” (Sn 147d)? Arhats are beyond good and evil, and have transcended happiness and sorrow. However, we certainly should not regard them with ill will, as lovingkindness is an all-inclusive positive emotion. On the other hand, arhats (like the Buddha) are not “beings” (*sattā*), as they have gone beyond classification (Sn 209d). Scholars like KR Norman and L Schmithausen take the expression in the sense of “(all beings) moving and unmoving”; Schmithausen however believes that, from a historical viewpoint, the expression refers to “animals and plants” (“Status of Plants in Earliest Buddhism,” 1990). [Cf Mvst 1:207 *jaṅgama-sthāvara* (Mvst:J 1:164 “animal or plant”), 2:10 *calaṃ sthāvara* (Mvst:J 2:10 “animal or plant”). Norman’s etym: *tasa* < Skt *trasa*, “moving,” ie “the collective body of moving or living beings” [syn: *jaṅgama, cala*] as opposed to *sthāvara*, “standing still, stationary, not moving, fixed, stable, immovable” (SED svv) [cf *sthāvara* → P *thera*, “elder monk”]. See Sn:P n8:4b for further details.

- 879 ‘Non-violent’ [Ahimsaka]⁴⁹ is my name; in the past I was violent.
Today I am truly named: for I violate no living being at all.
- 880 In the past a bandit was I, known as “Finger-garland [Aṅguli,māla],”
Being carried away by a mighty flood, I found refuge in the Buddha.
- 881 In the past bloody-handed was I, known as “Finger-garland [Aṅguli,māla],”
See the refuge I have found! That which leads to new existence⁵⁰ has been removed.
- 882 Having done many evil deeds that lead to evil realms,
Touched by karmic fruits, I eat my food debt-free!⁵¹
- 883 The foolish, the unwise, give themselves up to negligence
But the wise one guards diligence as his⁵² greatest treasure. (S 1:25; Dh 26)
- 884 Give not yourselves up to negligence nor delight in sensual pleasures,
The wise who meditate gain happiness in abundance. (S 1:25; Dh 27)
- 885 Welcome,⁵³ not unwelcome, no bad counsel, is this for me:
Amongst the things shared out,⁵⁴ I’ve found the best. (Tha 9)
- 886 Welcome, not unwelcome, no bad counsel, is this for me:
The three knowledges⁵⁵ are won, done is the Buddha’s Teaching!

— evaṃ —

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⁴⁹ MA 3:329 says that as a student his name was *Ahimsaka*. ThaA 3:55 on the other hand says that *Himsaka* (“the violent one”) was his original name. See Tha:RD 323 n3.

⁵⁰ “That which leads to a new existence,” *bhava.netti*. MA 3:342 glosses this as *bhava,rajju*, the rope called “craving” (*taṇhā*): “The mind of beings are bound like cattle with a rope tied to their necks and are led on (*niyanti*) to various existence.”

⁵¹ Cf Tha 789. Comys say that there are **4 ways of using the monk’s requisites**: (1) by theft (*theyya,paribhoga*), the use made by a morally depraved monk (It 3.5.2(10*)/90); (2) as a debt (*iṇa,paribhoga*), the unreflective use made by a virtuous monk (cf S 16.11/2:211, where it simply refers to Maha Kassapas’s pre-arhat state); (3) as a heritage (*dāyajja,paribhoga*), the use made by the seven learners (*sekha*) (excluding one with the fruit of arhathood); (4) as an owner (*sāmi,paribhoga*) or “debt-free” (M 86.18/2:105* = Tha 882), the use made by an arhat. (MA 3:343, 5:32; SA 2:199; J 5:253; Vism 1.125-127/43).

⁵² Notice here that the “foolish” (*bālā*) is pl, but the wise (*medhāvī...rakkhati*) is sg.

⁵³ “Welcome,” *svāgataṃ* means either (a) “my coming to the Buddha” or (b) the Buddha’s coming to the forest. (ThaA 1:55)

⁵⁴ “Amongst the things shared out,” *paṭibhatesu dhammesu*. Here I follow Norman (Tha:N 885).

⁵⁵ The three knowledges (*te,vijjā*) are: (1) the recollection of past lives; (2) clairvoyance (the divine eye) or knowledge of karma; (3) the knowledge of the destruction of mental influxes or “inflows” (*āsava-k,khaya,ñāna*) (the *asavā* are sense-desire, existence, views and ignorance): see **Tevijja S** (D 13) = SD 1.8 Intro 2.2.

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