About Aṅgulimāla

Aṅgulimāla Sutta (MN 86)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. And at that time in King Pasenadi's realm there was a bandit named Aṅgulimāla: brutal, bloody-handed, devoted to killing & slaying, showing no mercy to living beings. He turned villages into non-villages, towns into non-towns, settled countryside into unsettled countryside. Having repeatedly killed human beings, he wore a garland *[māla]* made of fingers *[aṅguli].*

Then the Blessed One, early in the morning, having adjusted his lower robe and taking his bowl & outer robe, went into Sāvatthī for alms. Having gone for alms in Sāvatthī and returning from his alms round after his meal, he set his lodging in order. Carrying his bowl & robe, he went along the road to where Aṅgulimāla was staying. Cowherds, shepherds, & farmers saw him going along the road to where Aṅgulimāla was staying, and on seeing him said to him, "Don't go along that road, contemplative, for on that road is Aṅgulimāla: brutal, bloody-handed, devoted to killing & slaying, showing no mercy to living beings. He has turned villages into non-villages, towns into non-towns, settled countryside into unsettled countryside. Having repeatedly killed human beings, he wears a garland made of fingers. Groups of ten, twenty, thirty, & forty men have gone along that road, and even they have fallen into Aṅgulimāla's hands." When this was said, the Blessed One kept going in silence.

A second time.... A third time, cowherds, shepherds, & farmers said to the Blessed One, "Don't go along that road, contemplative.... Groups of ten, twenty, thirty, & forty men have gone along that road, and even they have fallen into Aṅgulimāla's hands." When this was said, the Blessed One kept going in silence.

Then Aṅgulimāla saw the Blessed One coming from afar and on seeing him, this thought occurred to him: "Isn't it amazing! Isn't it astounding! Groups of ten, twenty, thirty, & forty men have gone along this road, and even they have fallen into my hands, and yet now this contemplative comes attacking, as it were, alone and without a companion. Why don't I kill him?" So Aṅgulimāla, taking up his sword & shield, buckling on his bow & quiver, followed right behind the Blessed One.

Then the Blessed One willed a feat of psychic power such that Aṅgulimāla, though running with all his might, could not catch up with the Blessed One walking at normal pace. Then the thought occurred to Aṅgulimāla: "Isn't it amazing! Isn't it astounding! In the past I've chased & seized even a swift-running elephant, a swift-running horse, a swift-running chariot, a swift-running deer. But now, even though I'm running with all my might, I can't catch up with this contemplative walking at normal pace." So he stopped and called out to the Blessed One, "Stop, contemplative! Stop!"

"I *have* stopped, Aṅgulimāla. *You* stop."

Then the thought occurred to Aṅgulimāla, "These Sakyan contemplatives are speakers of the truth, asserters of the truths, and yet this contemplative, even while walking, says, 'I have stopped, Aṅgulimāla. *You* stop.' Why don't I question him?"

So Aṅgulimāla the bandit addressed this verse to the Blessed One:

> "While walking, contemplative,
> you say, 'I have stopped.'
> But when *I* have stopped
> you say I haven't.
> I ask you the meaning of this:
> How have you stopped?
> How haven't I?"

The Buddha:

"I have stopped, Aṅgulimāla,
once & for all,
having cast off violence
toward all living beings.
You, though,
are unrestrained toward beings.
That's how I've stopped
and you haven't."

Aṅgulimāla:

"At long last a greatly revered great seer
for my sake
has come to the great forest.
Having heard your verse
in line with the Dhamma,
I will go about
having abandoned evil."

So saying, the bandit
hurled his sword & weapons
over a cliff
into a chasm,
a pit.

Then the bandit paid homage
to the feet of the One Well-Gone,
and right there requested the Going-forth.

The Awakened One,
the compassionate great seer,
the teacher of the world, along with its devas,
said to him then:
"Come, bhikkhu."
That in itself
was bhikkhuhood for him.

Then the Blessed One set out wandering toward Sāvatthī with Ven. Aṅgulimāla as his attendant monk. After wandering by stages he reached Sāvatthī, and there he lived near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery.

Now at that time a large crowd of people, loud & noisy, had gathered at the gates to King Pasenadi Kosala's inner palace, (calling out,) "There is a bandit in your realm, sire, named Aṅgulimāla: brutal, bloody-handed, devoted to killing & slaying, showing no mercy to living beings. He has turned villages into non-villages, towns into non-towns, settled countryside into unsettled countryside. Having repeatedly killed human beings, he wears a garland made of fingers. The king must stamp him out!"

Then King Pasenadi Kosala, with a cavalry of roughly 500 horsemen, drove out of Sāvatthī in the middle of the day and entered the monastery. Driving as far as the ground was passable for chariots, he got down from his chariot and went on foot to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, "What is it, great king? Has King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha provoked you, or have the Licchavis of Vesālī or some other hostile king?"

"No, lord. King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha hasn't provoked me, nor have the Licchavis of Vesālī, nor has some other hostile king. There is a bandit in my realm, lord, named Aṅgulimāla: brutal, bloody-handed, devoted to killing & slaying, showing no mercy to living beings. He has turned villages into non-villages, towns into non-towns, settled countryside into unsettled countryside. Having repeatedly killed human beings, he wears a garland made of fingers. I am going to stamp him out."[1]

“Great king, suppose you were to see Aṅgulimāla with his hair & beard shaved off, wearing the ochre robe, having gone forth from the home life into homelessness, refraining from killing living beings, refraining from taking what is not given, refraining from telling lies, living the holy life on one meal a day, virtuous & of fine character: what would you do to him?”

“We would bow down to him, lord, or rise up to greet him, or offer him a seat, or offer him robes, almsfood, lodgings, or medicinal requisites for curing illness; or we would arrange a lawful guard, protection, & defense. But how could there be such virtue & restraint in an unvirtuous, evil character?”

Now at that time Ven. Aṅgulimāla was sitting not far from the Blessed One. So the Blessed One, pointing with his right arm, said to King Pasenadi Kosala, “That, great king, is Aṅgulimāla.” Then King Pasenadi Kosala was frightened, terrified, his hair standing on end. So the Blessed One, sensing the king’s fear & hair-raising awe, said to him, “Don’t be afraid, great king. Don’t be afraid. He poses no danger to you.

Then the king’s fear, his terror, his hair-standing-on-end subsided. He went over to Ven. Aṅgulimāla and said, “Are you really Aṅgulimāla, lord?”

“Yes, great king.”

“What is your father’s clan? What is your mother’s clan?”

“My father is a Gagga, great king, and my mother a Mantāṇi.”

“Then may Master Gagga Mantāṇiputta delight (in staying here). I will be responsible for your robes, almsfood, lodgings, & medicinal requisites for curing illness.”

Now it so happened that at that time Ven. Aṅgulimāla was a wilderness-dweller, an alms-goer, wearing one set of the triple robe made of cast-off cloth. So he said to King Pasenadi Kosala, “Enough, great king. My triple robe is complete.”

So King Pasenadi Kosala went to the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One, “It’s amazing, lord. It’s astounding, how the Blessed One has tamed the untamed, pacified the unpeaceful, and brought to unbinding those who were not unbound. For what we could not tame even with blunt or bladed weapons, the Blessed One has tamed without blunt or bladed weapons. Now, lord, we must go. Many are our duties, many our responsibilities.”

“Then do, great king, what you think it is now time to do.”

Then King Pasenadi Kosala got up from his seat, bowed down to the Blessed One and—keeping him to his right—departed.

Then Ven. Aṅgulimāla, early in the morning, having adjusted his lower robe and taking his bowl & outer robe, went into Sāvatthī for alms. As he was going from house to house for alms, he saw a woman suffering a breech birth. On seeing her, the thought occurred to him: “How tormented are living beings! How tormented are living beings!” Then, having gone for alms in Sāvatthī and returning from his alms round after his meal, he went to the Blessed One. On arrival, having bowed down to him, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One, “Just now, lord, early in the morning, having adjusted my lower robe and taking my bowl & outer robe, I went into Sāvatthī for alms. As I was going from house to house for alms, I saw a woman suffering a breech birth. On seeing her, the thought occurred to me: ‘How tormented are living beings! How tormented are living beings!’”

“In that case, Aṅgulimāla, go to that woman and on arrival say to her, ‘Sister, since I was born I do not recall intentionally killing a living being. Through this truth may there be wellbeing for you, wellbeing for your fetus.’”

“But, lord, wouldn’t that be a lie for me? For I have intentionally killed many living beings.”

“Then in that case, Aṅgulimāla, go to that woman and on arrival say to her, ‘Sister, since I was born in the noble birth, I do not recall intentionally killing a living being. Through this truth may there be wellbeing for you, wellbeing for your fetus.’”[2]

Responding, “As you say, lord,” to the Blessed One, Aṅgulimāla went to that woman and on arrival said to her, “Sister, since I was born in the noble birth, I do not recall intentionally killing a living being.

Through this may there be wellbeing for you, wellbeing for your fetus." And there was wellbeing for the woman, wellbeing for her fetus.

Then Ven. Aṅgulimāla, dwelling alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, & resolute, in no long time reached & remained in the supreme goal of the holy life for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing & realizing it for himself in the here & now. He knew: "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world." And thus Ven. Aṅgulimāla became another one of the arahants.

Then Ven. Aṅgulimāla, early in the morning, having adjusted his lower robe and taking his bowl & outer robe, went into Sāvatthī for alms. Now at that time a clod thrown by one person hit Ven. Aṅgulimāla on the body, a stone thrown by another person hit him on the body, and a potsherd thrown by still another person hit him on the body. So Ven. Aṅgulimāla—his head broken open and dripping with blood, his bowl broken, and his outer robe ripped to shreds—went to the Blessed One. The Blessed One saw him coming from afar and on seeing him said to him: "Bear with it, brahman! Bear with it! The fruit of the kamma that would have burned you in hell for many years, many hundreds of years, many thousands of years, you are now experiencing in the here & now!"[3]

Then Ven. Aṅgulimāla, having gone alone into seclusion, experienced the bliss of release. At that time he exclaimed:

> Who once was heedless,
> but later is not,
> brightens the world
> like the moon set free from a cloud.[4]
>
> His evil-done deed
> is replaced with skillfulness:
> he brightens the world
> like the moon set free from a cloud.[5]
>
> Whatever young monk
> devotes himself
> to the Buddha's bidding:
> he brightens the world
> like the moon set free from a cloud.
>
> May even my enemies
> hear talk of the Dhamma.
> May even my enemies
> devote themselves
> to the Buddha's bidding.
>
> May even my enemies
> associate with those people
> who—peaceful, good—
> get others to accept the Dhamma.
>
> May even my enemies
> hear the Dhamma time & again
> from those who advise
> endurance,
> forbearance,
> who praise non-opposition,
> and may they follow it.
>
> For surely he wouldn't harm me,
> or anyone else;
> he would attain the

foremost peace,
would protect the
feeble & firm.

Irrigators guide the water.
Fletchers shape the arrow shaft.
Carpenters shape
the wood.
The wise control
themselves.[6]

Some tame with a blunt stick,
with hooks, & with whips
But without blunt or bladed weapons
I was tamed by the one who is Such.

"Doer of No Harm" is my name,
but I used to be a doer of harm.
Today I am true to my name,
for I harm no one at all.

A bandit
I used to be,
renowned as Aṅgulimāla.
Swept along by a great flood,
I went to the Buddha as refuge.

Bloody-handed
I used to be,
renowned as Aṅgulimāla.
See my going for refuge!
Uprooted is [craving],
the guide to becoming.

Having done the type of kamma
that would lead to many
bad destinations,
touched by the fruit of (that) kamma,
unindebted, I eat my food.[7]
They're addicted to heedlessness
—dullards, fools—
while one who is wise
cherishes heedfulness
as his highest wealth.[8]
Don't give way to heedlessness
or to intimacy
with sensual delight—
for a heedful person,
absorbed in jhāna,
attains an abundant bliss.[9]

This[10] has come well & not gone away,
it was not badly thought through for me.
From among well-analyzed qualities,
I have obtained
the best.

This has come well & not gone away,

it was not badly thought through for me.
    The three knowledges
    have been attained;
    the Buddha's bidding,
            done.

Notes

1. The PTS reading here, followed in *MLS* and *MLDB*—"I will not stamp him out"—is surely a mistake. I follow the Thai reading on this passage, even though it is somewhat ungrammatical. There are passages in MN 90 where King Pasenadi's sentences don't quite parse, and perhaps this is another example of his brusque language.
2. This blessing is often chanted at house blessings in Theravāda countries.
3. This incident illustrates the kammic principle stated in AN 3:101.
4. This verse = Dhp 172.
5. This verse = Dhp 173.
6. This verse = Dhp 80.
7. This verse is another illustration of the principle stated in AN 3:101.
8. This verse = Dhp 26.
9. This verse = Dhp 27.
10. "This" apparently refers to the abundant bliss mentioned in the previous verse.

See also: DN 11; SN 41:4