

Sutta Stories - Aṅgulimāla's Conversion

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Today I will continue to share the stories that exist in the ancient discourses. One of the more famous stories that involve the Buddha is his encounters with Aṅgulimāla. Aṅgulimāla was a mass murderer at the time of the Buddha. This encounter raises important questions about karma, retribution, punishment, and the possibility for people to be reformed. Can people leave their past or their terrible actions behind and start life anew? How much can people be transformed and changed?

The story of Aṅgulimāla begins with a description of him. He was a murderous, bloody man who struck and killed people. He would kill everyone in a village and devastate whole territories. Ten, 20, or 40 men would go after him, and he would slaughter them all.

Aṅgulimāla was his nickname. *Aṅguli* means finger and *mālā* is a necklace or rosary. He was called Aṅgulimāla because he wore a necklace made of the fingers of his victims. Aṅgulimāla was also surprisingly strong, athletic, and fast.

One day, the Buddha goes into town for his alms. He finishes his meal and puts everything away. Then he starts going into the forest where Aṅgulimāla is. The villagers and people on the road see him and say: “No! Do not go in there. There is a terrible murderer named Aṅgulimāla. He will kill you.”

The Buddha says nothing and keeps walking. Three times people say: “No! Do not go in there. Aṅgulimāla is there.” Again, the Buddha remains silent and continues walking into the forest where Aṅgulimāla is.

After some time, Aṅgulimāla sees the Buddha walking along the road. Aṅgulimāla says, “Wow, I am very strong, murderous, and capable. No matter how many men they send after me, I kill them all. Here comes a solitary monk.” Aṅgulimāla does not recognize the monk as the Buddha. He just sees a solitary monk with no weapon, walking undefended. “Oh, this is going to be easy for me,” he thinks, and he goes after the Buddha to kill him.

The Buddha walks calmly down the road, and Aṅgulimāla cannot catch up to him. Aṅgulimāla starts to run, and the Buddha continues to walk in a slow, meditative way. But Aṅgulimāla – who says he can run faster than any chariot, horse, or elephant – still cannot catch up to the Buddha. It is a supernatural event.

Aṅgulimāla finally yells out to the Buddha: “Stop! Stop!” The Buddha keeps walking, but he replies to Aṅgulimāla:

You should stop. I have already stopped.

Aṅgulimāla says to himself: “These monks never lie. They always speak the truth. What does he mean when he says, ‘You should stop, I have already stopped’?” He asks the Buddha, “What do you mean by this?” The Buddha replies:

I have fully stopped harming any living being, but you go on killing. You have no restraint.

The Buddha’s simple statement occurs in the context of this supernatural event where Aṅgulimāla cannot catch the Buddha. Aṅgulimāla understands that the Buddha is talking figuratively. The Buddha is not literally saying that he has stopped walking but that he has stopped killing and harming.

This gets the attention of Aṅgulimāla. He sees the light. He sees a different way. He realizes that he has been

living a life that is not worth living anymore. So Aṅgulimāla renounces his evil ways. He throws away his weapons, and he asks the Buddha for ordination as a monk.

Back in those days, ordination was quite simple. The Buddha simply says, “Come, monk.” “Come” and now you are a monk – that is all. So Aṅgulimāla becomes a monk and goes to live with the Buddha and the monks in the forest.

That is nice. For the murderous Aṅgulimāla to convert so simply is almost like a fairy tale.

The story continues. Aṅgulimāla, who now lives as a monk, goes out for alms one day. He comes across a house where a woman is giving birth. The birth is not progressing – the baby is possibly breech. He hears the screams and the struggles that are going on. He goes back to the Buddha and tells him what he saw. The Buddha says,

*Go back to the woman, make a statement of truth,
and the baby will be born.*

In ancient India, there was an idea that certain statements of truth were so powerful that they had an impact on the natural world. The Buddha says:

Go back to this woman and give her a statement of truth. Say this, “Never in my life, have I harmed anyone.”

Aṅgulimāla is surprised and says: “But I cannot say that. It is not true.” The Buddha replies:

No, say it! Ever since you entered your life as a monastic, you have not killed anyone.

Aṅgulimāla’s change was so radical that he can take a stand of truth on the fact that he does not harm anyone now. He has not harmed anyone in, maybe, a few days. Aṅgulimāla goes back, makes the statement of truth in the presence of the woman, and the baby is born.

I lived on the Farm, a large hippie commune in Tennessee, which was famous for its midwives. They wrote a book called “Spiritual Midwifery.” We heard a lot of stories from the midwives about the births they attended. Sometimes they would tell stories about how a baby would not be born until the couple had worked out the tension between them. They spoke the truth and cleared the air. Then the baby could come.

The story of Aṅgulimāla and his truth statement made a difference for the woman giving birth. The whole thing is a kind of fairy tale. It is a literary work. What is happening rhetorically is that there is a contrast between Aṅgulimāla who kills people and Aṅgulimāla

who supports or helps the birth of a new life. Aṅgulimāla who kills cannot stop, so the baby's birth is stopped. Aṅgulimāla, in his new life as a monastic, is able to support and help the birth of new life.

The story goes on. Aṅgulimāla goes into a town for alms. It is a town where people know about him and maybe were impacted by his murders. Understandably, people are pretty upset and angry with him. They throw rocks and yell at him. Some rocks hit and gash his head, and he is bleeding.

Aṅgulimāla comes back to the Buddha. The Buddha sees him bleeding and simply says to him:

You have to endure this kind of pain. This attack you are receiving – bear it. If you had not become a monk and changed your life radically, your punishment would have been eons and eons of living in the worst possible hells. A little cut on your head is not such a big deal. You have to endure it. Do not defend yourself. Do not justify yourself. This is your karma for all the things you have done.

This is a surprising teaching for people to hear – the idea that there is no retribution. Aṅgulimāla is not punished and does not go to jail. The worst that happens is he has some bloody cuts on his head. Is this okay? Is this right? Shouldn't there be some kind of

justice that requires more punishment or more impact on Aṅgulimāla?

In any case, Aṅgulimāla goes into the forest to engage in retreat and to practice meditation. He becomes fully awakened. As he is fully awakened, he gives his awakening poem. Interestingly, he mentions in the poem that before he got the nickname Aṅgulimāla, his given name was Ahiṃsa. He ends his life living up to his birth name.

Aṅgulimāla is a story rich in interpretations and challenges. It offers a mirror to look at our values, beliefs, and reactions. It is a fairy tale perhaps. But many people study the story, write about it, interpret it, and find it very valuable.

In England, there is a nonprofit organization called Angulimala. It is a group of Buddhist chaplains who go into prisons to minister to incarcerated people – with the idea that every human being has the capacity to be reformed.

Every human being has the capacity for a radical change of heart, and we can give them the opportunity to do so: Aṅgulimāla – Ahiṃsa. Finger Necklace – Non-harming.

May all of us find the tremendous truth, value, and impact on the world that a life of non-harming brings. Thank you.