

# Moral Failing and Redemption

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One of my recent talks focused on morality. We've looked briefly at the Five Precepts – the Buddhist equivalent of the 10 Commandment if you will. Briefly, subscribing to these precepts means we cultivate the embracing of:

- Non-killing and non-harming
- Not stealing or taking what isn't ours
- Avoiding sexual and other forms of abusive in our relationships with others
- Being truthful and caring in our communications with others – speaking truthfully, kindly, mindful of timing and setting, and promoting unity and harmony; listening to others mindfully
- Avoiding the use of intoxicants – alcohol, drugs and so forth, that agitate or disrupt the clarity of our minds

I find the Buddha's formulation of morality special, because rather than stemming from external authority and legalistic rules it derives from understanding; understanding the role of our intentions and conduct in causing or alleviating suffering. Externally imposed morality inevitably devolves into laws that set limits on application of the moral principles. But derived from understanding, the Buddha's precepts are expansive. The more we grow in our wisdom and practice, the more far-reaching and subtler our morality becomes.

Today I want to talk about one of the Buddha's suttas that says some very interesting things about moral failing, redemption, and what we might come to see as the limits of redemption.

To kick this off, I have a little two-part exercise for you. It'll just take a few moments and you won't need to write anything down (which is good because my you may recall my pens are not so good):

- First, if you can, think of a time when you were mistreated or abused. I imagine something will come to mind rather quickly. Consider how long this went on, how you felt while this was happening and, if it has ceased, how you felt later, and now. Consider the impact this may well have had on you, and to what degree you have grown free of this?
- Now, consider a time when you mistreated or abused another, when you gave someone a raw deal or treated them unfairly. The mind may find this more difficult to recall, and it certainly need not be of the scale of your first recollection. Again, consider how long this went on, how you felt while this

was happening and, if it has ceased, how you felt later, and now. Did this have impact on you, and to what degree have you come to be free of this?

If we're honest, and recall that the precept of Right Speech asks that cultivate truthfulness, I suspect we all have experience not just with victimization but with our own moral failing. We experience the later – our own hurtful actions - in at least two contexts. The first is when we violate principles we believe we hold dearly.

- We may do this deliberately
  - We hold ourselves to be above the law or precept
  - We hold the circumstances to be special and feel that justifies our actions
  - We hold our intentions are pure, and believe this justifies whatever means are at our disposal
- We may do this inadvertently
  - We may be blind to or in deep denial about what we are doing and/or how it impacts others
  - Our well-intentioned actions may have unforeseen harmful consequences

This second kind of wrong-doing is especially interesting. Discovering our actions have caused harm unintentionally can be very disturbing or painful to us. One consequence of growing spiritually is that we may look back at our past actions and evaluate them in the light of wisdom we have attained only recently. Our actions may have seemed completely acceptable, maybe even wholesome or inspired, at the time; but now are seen as morally deficient. Likewise, we may look at the attitudes and actions of family, friends and colleagues all around us, and suddenly find these unwholesome or unskillful. How do we come to a place of wisdom and balance, that let's us view the world and act with deep and refined morality, while holding what we see with wisdom and compassion, rather than harsh judgments?

What does the Buddha have to say about all this?

Angulimāla Sutta: About Angulimāla (MN 86)  
translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

## **Background**

Angulimāla is a Pali word translated a “finger garland”. It was a nickname given to a man who have been given the birth name Ahimsaka. This name means "harmless one." The story is told that he was born under an astrological sign that

indicated he would become a robber and prone to violence. To counter this prophecy, his father named him Ahimsaka, and raised him to be well-groomed and well-educated.

Ahimsaka grew to handsome, strong, athletic and smart. He was sent to a prominent school in Taxila to study under a well-known Brahmin guru. There he became something of a “Golden Child”, like a football player who excelled at everything, including his studies. He became the teacher's favorite student, enjoying special privileges in his teacher's house. However, the other students grew jealous of Ahimsaka's speedy progress and sought to turn his master against him. To that end, they made it seem as though Ahimsaka had seduced the master's wife and boasted that he was wiser than the guru. Unwilling, unable or too crafty to attack Ahimsaka directly (one commentator states that Ahimsaka was as "strong as seven elephants", while another states that the teacher worried that his business would suffer if he was found to have murdered a student), the teacher said that Ahimsaka's training was complete, but that he must provide the traditional final gift offered to a guru before the teacher would grant his approval. As his payment, the teacher demanded 1,000 fingers, each taken from a different victim, thinking that Angulimala would be killed in the course of seeking this grisly prize, or perhaps that he would be captured and executed.

Faced with such an outrageous demand, Ahimsaka first exclaimed: "O Master! How can I do that? My family never engaged in violence. They are harmless people." — "Well, if the science does not receive its due ceremonial homage, it will yield no fruit for you." Now Ahimsaka consented and, after worshipping his teacher, he left.

The commentaries do not explore Ahimsaka's motivation in taking up this perverse assignment. Perhaps he was indeed star-crossed, condemned by a genetic predisposition; but there is little for us to learn if take this as a complete answer. Reflecting in his acquiescence an instance of what I call “corruptions of loyalty”, or a bit more gently, we might call it “unexamined loyalty”.

The Buddha challenges blind, unconsidered allegiance – in a different but quite closely connected context – in the Kalamas Sutta, when he advises a group of people who ask him how to find the right spiritual path:

'Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, "This contemplative is our teacher." When you know for yourselves that, "These qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to harm & to suffering" — then you should abandon them.'

Alas, Ahimsaka, was neither exposed to these teachings nor came upon them on his own, and so became Angulimala.

## SECTION 1

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Savatthi at Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's monastery. And at that time in King Pasenadi's realm there was a bandit named Angulimala: 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 made of fingers.

Then the Blessed One, early in the morning, having put on his robes and carrying his outer robe & bowl, went into Savatthi for alms. Having wandered for alms in Savatthi and returning from his alms round after his meal, set his lodging in order. Carrying his robes & bowl, he went along the road to where Angulimala was staying. Cowherds, shepherds, & farmers saw him going along [that road] ... and on seeing him said to him, "Don't go along that road, contemplative, for on that road is Angulimala: ~~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 Angulimala'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 Angulimala's hands." When this was said, the Blessed One kept going in silence.

Then Angulimala 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 Angulimala, 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 Angulimala, though running with all his might, could not catch up with the Blessed One walking at normal pace. Then the thought occurred to Angulimala: "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, Angulimala. You stop."

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

So Angulimala 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, Angulimala,  
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."

[Angulimala:]  
"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 Savatthi with Ven. Angulimala as his attendant monk. After wandering by stages he reached Savatthi, and there he lived, near Savatthi, in Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's monastery.

The story continues, but I'm going to stop and offer a bit of commentary. There's a lot of food for reflection here.

The first thing that stands out for me is that even extensive harming can come to a complete stop, that wholesome intentions can begin asserting themselves at any point in our lives. We're never "too far gone". The past, even our own habits carried forward from the past, perhaps throughout our entire life, has no power in our present or future if we are willing to let it go, to relinquish it. In the Buddha's words, "to stop", and to become "restrained". There is a blessed aspect to the truth of impermanence. Every moment of our life, however conditioned the factors that led to its arising, is truly new. You can see this for yourself, first perhaps in your meditation, in the very unpredictability of your mind and its experience. We hold onto the past; the past doesn't hold us.

In this spirit, note that the Buddha accepted Angulimala immediately upon his awakening – he didn't stipulate terms of restitution, require a period of guilt or remorse, and even making amends. This is not to say these have no place for wholesome conduct in recovery, and as we hear later in the sutra Angulimala does not get a total free pass, but apparently for the Buddha, at least in this instance, going forward in awakened freedom, to pursue a wholesome life from this point on, was more useful than paying dues for the past. This too is worth reflecting upon.

A third thought about this part of the story is that it has a good news/bad news flavor. The good news is that for most of us our wrongdoings do not reach the proportions of Angulimala's. If a monster like him can be redeemed, that speaks well for our chances. On the other hand, for most of us awakening is not an instantaneous one-time for all-time experience. We need to hear these teachings time and time again. Most of us come to change and growth in small increments. We walk our spiritual path taking baby steps. This may be frustrating, but in the long run it truly doesn't matter, so long as we keep going, and remain willing to learn and eager for discovery.

## SECTION 2

Now at that time a large crowd of people, loud & noisy, had gathered at the gates to King Pasenadi of Kosala's inner palace, [calling out,] "There is a bandit in your realm, sire, named Angulimala: 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 Savatthi 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, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, "What is it, great king? Has King Seniya Bimbisara of Magadha provoked you, or have the Licchavis of Vesali or some other hostile king?"

"No, lord. ~~King Seniya Bimbisara of Magadha hasn't provoked me, nor have the Licchavis of Vesali, nor has some other hostile king.~~ There is a bandit in my realm, lord, named Angulimala: ~~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."

"Great king, suppose you were to see Angulimala 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. Angulimala 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 Angulimala." 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. Angulimala and said, "Are you really Angulimala, 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 Mantani."

"Then may Master Gagga Mantaniputta 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. Angulimala 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, 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.

So, this second section makes the point that leaders and institutions can experience and acknowledge transformation, and forgive and can *themselves* be set free – the king says, “Cool, well I’ve got other things to do...”

### SECTION 3

Then Ven. Angulimala, early in the morning, having put on his robes and carrying his outer robe & bowl, went into Savatthi 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 wandered for alms in Savatthi 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 put on my robes and carrying my outer robe & bowl, I went into Savatthi 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, Angulimala, 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 well-being for you, well-being 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, Angulimala, 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 well-being for you, well-being for your fetus."

Responding, "As you say, lord," to the Blessed One, Angulimala 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 well-being for you, wellbeing for your fetus." And there was well-being for the woman, well-being for her fetus.

A ket point of this section is the idea that freed from harming, and freed from recrimination, the mind can grow more refined in its morality; and move from non-harming to caring - compassion, nurturing and protecting. And, this can be done without denying the past, albeit through not dwelling on it.

#### SECTION 4

Then Ven. Angulimala, 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. Angulimala became another one of the arahants.

This section makes the simple but profound point that our past actions need not limit our potential for spiritual growth.

#### SECTION 5

Then Ven. Angulimala, early in the morning, having put on his robes and carrying his outer robe & bowl, went into Savatthi for alms. Now at that time a clod thrown by one person hit Ven. Angulimala 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. Angulimala — 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!"

All of that notwithstanding, karma arising from past actions cannot be erased. It is, in essence, one of the inevitable factors that define existence.

This is one more thing we need to accept with equanimity, one of the things which denial and fighting against brings about suffering.

## SECTION 6

Then Ven. Angulimala, 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.**

**His evil-done deed  
is replaced with skillfulness:  
he brightens the world  
like the moon set free from a cloud.**

Time permitting, there is another whole way to look at this sutra. Taking Thich Nhat Hanh's view that each mind contains the seeds of all mind (i.e., every possible human trait), we can look at each section in this sutra and see that we possess the seeds if not the manifestation of every element we find:

### Section 1

- Angulimala
- Angulimala's victims
- The local farmers and all, obsessed with danger and preoccupied with giving warning
- The Buddha
- Angulimala transformed

### Section 2

- Angulimala transformed
- The Buddha

- The King
- The King's cavalry

### Section 3

- Angulimala, compassionate but not knowing how to manifest this skillfully
- The Buddha
- The woman in labor
- The unborn in distress
- Angulimala, compassionate, manifesting this skillfully

### Section 4

- Angulimala the arahant

### Section 5

- Angulimala the arahant, perhaps not comprehending karma
- The aggrieved and vengeful villagers
- The Buddha
- Angulimala the arahant, accepting karma with equanimity

Talk about how understanding that we are all of this and more can liberate us from self recrimination and other forms of reactivity, even in recognizing our limitations and even failures.