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Dharma Reflection: Angulimala
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This is a very well-known story from the Pali Canon. I probably heard it first some time in the mid-1970s, and have heard it many more times off and on since then. I have never really given it that much thought, though. It seemed pretty straightforward: seemingly lost, hopelessly criminal murderer transformed by his encounter with the Buddha. Because the story seemed so simple, I did not go past the obvious lessons in it: no one is irredeemable, which illustrates how kamma works—each of us is constantly shaping who we are becoming, all the time—and it is ethically and spiritually powerful/transformational to encounter a Buddha. My favorite part of the story was his name, “Anguli (finger) + māla (necklace, garland),” and the artwork it has inspired, some of which I saw in temple murals when I lived in Thailand in 1976. That brought home how useful these teaching stories can be, perhaps even especially so for those who historically did not read them but who heard them told and saw them illustrated in murals. Villains in this kind of artwork are clearly horrific, and his habit of wearing a necklace of the fingers he cut from his victims made Angulimala a particularly popular subject in these depictions.

I think I didn’t give this story that much thought at least in part for the same reason I have not felt particularly drawn to prison chaplaincy. I did not relate to Angulimāla. What could I possibly have in common with a murderous criminal? Furthermore, it takes a Buddha to deal with a person so caught up in unwholesome (akusala) actions (kamma), right? The story as much as says so; everyone else in the story is powerless to escape from or help Angulimāla. Other stories held more interest for me, especially stories about Ānanda, who I like and relate to much better. As a scholar I have written about Ānanda, arguing that the role he plays in the suttas gives ordinary people someone to relate to—he makes mistakes and is approachable, especially for women, whereas the Buddha can be a bit too holy to relate to. The power of the Buddha is evident in this story in a minor way when he employs a supernormal power to get Angulimāla’s attention. But the major power of the Buddha that is evident in this story is his power to transform even the most hardened, actively violent criminal. How he does that exactly remains mysterious to me. According to the story, he uses that supernormal power to get Angulimāla’s attention. He recites some verses. Angulimāla realizes that the Buddha faced him alone in this forest in order to help him. Then he renounces his evil ways and the Buddha ordains him into the sangha. Wham, bam, done!

I think on some unconscious level I assumed I could no more do that kind of thing (that the Buddha does in this story) than I am a murderous criminal. So I passed it by, pretty much. But then we went to San Quentin State Prison and my reality shifted. Now when I think about this story, I see it really differently, more deeply, and as conveying something really relevant to me.

What if the Buddha had not shown up and the townspeople had managed to capture him and put him in a high-security prison? Would Angulimāla have signed up to participate in the GRIP program? What would he have identified as his original pain? The Pali commentaries offer a back-story for Angulimāla that includes a version of this, but I find it unsatisfactory, not that believable, really. I think there had to be more in Angulimāla’s past experiences than just getting framed by a fellow student and ethically betrayed by his teacher into having to collect a thousand fingers from a thousand murder victims in order to please him. I’m a great student and I’m all about pleasing the teacher, but seriously, this is going too far.

Whatever Angulimāla's original pain, his secondary suffering is evident to everyone in this story. He ruthlessly murders people, lots of people. But the Buddha comes along, a one-man rescue operation ensues, and Angulimāla is turned around. Does he ever have to "sit in the fire" of the emotional consequences of his murderous actions? Does he learn to STOP (stop to observe and process) before he acts? I think he probably had to, in order to get from being ordained to "in due time" becoming an arhant. But that's not described in the story. In the story, Angulimāla actually gets off pretty easily, with just one attack in the village that makes his head bleed and tears his robe. Not much, in comparison with the damage he did. In that sense, I can kind of relate to the townspeople, who were terrorized by this bandit and probably wonder what the heck the Buddha is doing, letting him just join the sangha, like that, easy as pie. They want to punish him, and so would I, honestly. But the perhaps deeper lesson in this story is that punishment doesn't work, or at least it doesn't change the criminal into someone who doesn't do those awful things any more. That takes something else, something a Buddha can pull off, and maybe other people can try to do, too.

How can I walk normally in the company of a threatening person, in such a way that that person's path of violence is slowed down, that the person's attention is diverted from violence to self-examination, self-awareness, ethical and spiritual transformation? Having been on the field trip to San Quentin, I now see this story really differently. It's just the opposite of where I was with it before, not being able to relate to either of the main characters in the story, maybe most closely relating to the ones who were afraid of Angulimāla and wanted to escape and punish him. Now I see that, like Ānanda in those gentler stories, Angulimāla is us. We are all Angulimāla—the violence in us, however it comes out, for many of us more occasionally in speech and in thought than in body. I am Angulimāla. I hope (and I practice so) that I can be not just the criminal Angulimāla but also Angulimāla after his transformation. AND as an aspiring chaplain, I am also the Buddha in this story. I'm still learning how, but when I am ministering to others who are suffering, the Buddha is my model. A significant part of this approach, for me, is to strive to see in those who are suffering both the Angulimāla and the Buddha that *they* are.