

This story reminds me of Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor's short story, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. In that story, a serial killer, "The Misfit," is rampaging along a southern road and runs across a family of characters whose selfish, self-righteous and fearful attitudes manifest in continual squabbling. The Misfit becomes the agent of The Grandmother's enlightenment.

Just before he shoots her dead, she says to him, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!"

And he comments, "She would of been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

Sometimes I feel like that grandmother, having come so late in life to Buddhist practice. Of course the possibility of death is there to "shoot us" every minute of our lives. I hope that, like The Grandmother, and also like my own father, at the moment of my death – and until then – I see all beings with the heart of a mother watching over her only child.

This feat of Buddha's "supernormal power" that amazed Angulimala is the human power of a great teacher, a Bodhisattva. Angulimala was stopped by the radiant embodiment of compassion and wisdom that Buddha's slow walk projected. It opened him to hear Buddha's words. Buddha is like a mirror. Also like a magnet.

Angulimala was lucky to have found Buddhism before getting his head bloodied. I have finally recovered so completely from past wounds that I am confident that I could now bear any such blows, physical or psychological. For this I am immensely grateful for the compassion of light-talking, slow-walking Buddhist teachers who have shown me how to heal myself, gently pointing out to me my racing heart. With a solemn vow to stop all violence toward living beings, I follow Buddha's path, emulating to my best his infinitely slow, infinitely swift pace. This is easier now that my heart has heard the supernormally gentle, supernormally demanding words, "Come monk."

Not believing in hell, nor in reincarnation, I don't see my own suffering as a "get out of jail" card to suffering after death. I believe karma to be cause and effect reaching backward and forward. I fully avow my ancient twisted karma, from beginningless greed, hate and delusion, born through body, speech and mind, throughout both unknowable and intensely remembered pasts. I practice to avoid deeds that would continue to twist and grow infinitely with evil effects unimaginable, and to trust my mindful intentions in their future unknowable effects.

I see my own present experiences of suffering as part of the privilege and responsibility I share with all beings, past, present and future, and feel able to bear them with equanimity. In due time, perhaps this confidence will be proven.

As I walk my path of Zen practice, many people call out to me, “Stop monk! Stop monk!” I believe that some of these people are/were intentionally trying to spare me karmic hell, cruelly and mistakenly inflicting wounds while yelling, “Bear it! Bear it!” Others wisely advise me to take backward steps in order to see. Still others seem disapproving, competitive – threatened somehow. All of them help me to slow my pace toward Buddha’s wondrous stopping of violence toward all beings. For example, I constantly examine any impulses toward “tough love” for my students, and more often choose openhearted welcome over any reprimand, overt or subtle. It is very important to note that the Buddha’s exhortation was delivered in oneness, without adding additional punishment to Angulimala’s suffering. I am sure, no matter how positive the intention behind it may be, cruelty has no place in Zen. However, if I can clearly see past cruelties – of others toward me or myself toward others – with compassion and resolution, they are bearable, maybe even amenable.

A lot of us misfits come to Zen. Here we learn that death is always present, in the midst of glorious life. We embrace it, and stay compassionately present with its presence in the lives of everyone we encounter – in every minute of our lives.

O’Connor’s Misfit, evildoer as he was, acted the part of the Buddha in opening The Grandmother’s heart of compassion, thus saving her from any real or imagined hells to come. If she had been able to experience this earlier, perhaps she could have been the one to open *his* heart. But perhaps in death, she actually did have that effect on him.

Afterward, he puts down his gun and takes off his bloody glasses. “Without his glasses,” O’Connor writes, The Misfit’s eyes were red-rimmed and defenseless-looking.” He no longer wants to join in with his buddy’s chortling.

I understand both *A Good Man is Hard to Find* and *Angulimala* as examples of how karma works through living beings. I would use the first part of the Angulimala story in a dharma talk, or contemplation, or conversation about slowing down to really stop and use the “Bear it! Bear it!” in those same contexts to illustrate how compassionate support can be very demanding. For the first time, I embrace a parallel Catholic story more than the Buddhist one. I see it as very useful in a deep discussion with Christians about grace, and a means of studying the continuing effects of action from an interfaith perspective. I look forward to such a discussion with a Mississippi sangha member who is a Dominican oblate.

*Up hill full speed eyes down,
Verdant green all round unseen,
Old Woman! Slow down!*

*--- I wrote this Haiku for my
shuso, then saw it applied to me!*