

## Āṅgulimāla's significance

Source: **SD 5.11 Āṅgulimāla Sutta: the healing of a serial killer**<sup>1</sup> by Piya Tan © 2002, rev 2004.

### 1.2.2 The student Ahimsaka

**1.2.2.1** The adolescent Ahimsaka, “the non-violent one,”<sup>2</sup> was sent to be schooled in an ashram in Takkaśilā,<sup>3</sup> where, through his diligence, he became his teacher's favourite pupil. His colleagues, jealous of his position, gossiped to their teacher that he was having an affair with the teacher's wife [1.2.2.2]. The foolish gullible teacher, intent on ruining Ahimsaka, but fearing a public outcry against punishing such an exemplary student, plotted a devious plan to destroy him. He demanded of Ahimsaka *a thousand human right-hand fingers* as an honorarium (*dakkhiṇā*).

Unwillingly and unhappily, Ahimsaka went on to fulfill his teacher's instruction. Thereupon, he way-laid travellers in the Jālīnī forest<sup>4</sup> of Kosala and having killed them, took a right-hand finger from each of them. In order to keep a proper tag on the fingers, he strung them up into a garland and hung it around his neck. Hence, his name, Āṅgulimāla (“finger garland”).

### 1.2.3 The bandit Āṅgulimāla

As a result of his serial killing, whole villages outside the forest were deserted, and travellers avoided it. In due course, king Pasenadi was setting out with a troop of soldiers to capture the bandit whose name nobody knew—that is, except for his mother. Guessing the truth, she set out to warn him. By then, Āṅgulimāla lacked but one finger to complete his dreadful garland. At this feverish juncture, he was ready to kill even his own mother to complete his bloody task.

That very same morning, the Buddha, seeing Āṅgulimāla's readiness (*upanissaya*) for conversion, and also to prevent him from the heinous misdeed of killing his own mother, went to meet him in the forest some 30 yojanas (about 338 km = 210 mi) away. So in the 20<sup>th</sup> year of the Buddha's ministry,

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<sup>1</sup> SD 5.11, <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/5.11-Angulimala-S-m86-piya.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> ThaA says that he was initially called Himsaka (“the violent one”), but later named Ahimsaka (“the non-violent one”) (ThaA 3:55). See Tha:RD 323 n3.

<sup>3</sup> Takkaśilā (lit “stones that think: or “logic stones”) but the Skt name is Takṣaśilā. It was the ancient capital of the kingdom of Gandhara (see **Assalāyana S** (M 93) @ SD 40a.2 (3.3.2)). Historically, Taxila lay at the crossroads of three major trade routes: the royal highway from Pāṭaliputra; the north-western route through Bactria, Kāpiśa, and Puṣkalāvātī (Peshawar); and the route from Kashmir and Central Asia, via Śrinigar, Mansehra, and the Haripur valley across the Khunjerab pass to the Silk Road (see R Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, 1961:237). The ancient Takṣaśilā University boasted over 60 distinct arts and sciences taught by great masters, assisted by abler pupils, from at least the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE until about mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. Today it is called Taxila, located about 14 km (22 mi) NW of Rawalpindi, Pakistan. According to **Tela, pattā Jātaka** (J 96) and **Susīma Jātaka** (J 163), Takkaśilā is “2000 leagues” (about 22,500 km or 14,000 mi!) from Benares (near where the Buddha taught the first discourse). As the crow flies, the actual distance is about 1609 km or 1000 mi. See B C Law, *Geography of Early Buddhism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) 1932: 4, 50, 49 f, 52; DPPN: Takkaśilā; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taxila>.

<sup>4</sup> ThaA 3:55.

Aṅgulimāla was converted and became a monk by the *ehi bhikkhu* ("Come, O monk!") ordination,<sup>5</sup> while the populace was shouting for the bandit's end at the rajah's palace.<sup>6</sup> [§8]

## 2.1 AṅGULIMĀLA'S POPULARITY

There is a popular story about Aṅgulimāla's meeting with a woman in difficult labour. Out of his compassion, he consults the Buddha on how to help her. Following the Buddha's instructions, Aṅgulimāla performs an "act of truth" (*sacca, kiriya*) and the woman then undergoes an easy delivery. His verse is even today a popular mantra used for expectant women and women in labour [§15]. It should be noted however that his compassionate act is done before he is an arhat. He is probably still a streamwinner. He attains arhathood following this event [§16].

The Aṅgulimāla story (as found in the Aṅgulimāla Sutta) appears to be popular and is also preserved in the **Avadāna Śataka** (no 27) and other Sanskrit sources.<sup>7</sup> Aṅgulimāla's conversion is often regarded as a most compassionate and miraculous act of the Buddha, for example, in the Suta, soma Jātaka (J 537), which was told in this connection.<sup>8</sup> His story is an example of how good karma can overcome former bad karma (AA 2:218).

It was on Aṅgulimāla's account that the Vinaya rule prohibiting the ordination of captured robbers was made.<sup>9</sup> His Elder's Verses are found at **Theragāthā** verses 866-891.

## 2.2 AṅGULIMĀLA'S CONVERSION

**2.2.1** Once inside the forest to meet Aṅgulimāla, the Buddha could well have stood and waited for him; for, Aṅgulimāla is well acquainted with every part of it. Once he sees the Buddha, he decides to attack him. But no matter how hard he tries, the Buddha is always some distance ahead. Legend has it that the Buddha makes the earth turn around<sup>10</sup> so that Aṅgulimāla is always behind the Buddha no matter how fast he runs (MA 3:332).

Finally, like Kisā Gotamī at the end of her *Sisyphean walk*,<sup>11</sup> Aṅgulimāla, after failing to catch up with the Buddha, at the end of his **Sisyphean run**, tires and stops [§5]. His will is broken; the old self weakened. Almost in desperation, he calls out to the Buddha to stop. The Buddha replies with the ego-shattering words, "I have stopped, Aṅgulimāla! You stop, too!"

Fascinated by the vaguely familiar words, Aṅgulimāla asks the Buddha to explain them, the Buddha does so. Before this, Aṅgulimāla is still under the spell of his foolish guru in the dark depths of his mind. The Buddha's instruction effectively frees him from the guru's ghost. He is now free to be his true self, a true individual, a liberated being. [§6]

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<sup>5</sup> §6 = Tha 870. Vinaya Comy gives the foll list of ehi-bhikkhus: the 5 monks, Yasa, his 54 friends, the 30 youths, the 1,000 matted hair ascetics (*purāṇa jaṭila*), the 2 foremost monks (Sāriputta & Moggallāna), their 250 wanderer followers, and Aṅgulimāla (totaling 1343 monks, according to the Commentary). Other ehi bhikkhus, says Buddha-ghosa (*evam ādāyo*), are Sela and his 300 attendants [M 2:112 = Sn p112], Mahā Kappina and his 1000 attendants [SA 2:245 f; AA 1:322; DhA 2:124; SnA 2:440; cf Vism 393], 10,000 Kapilavatthu youths [VA 1:241], and 16,000 *pārāyanika* brahmins (Bāvēri's 16 disciples and their followers) [Sn 976-1149; SnA 2:575] (VA 1:240 f).

<sup>6</sup> Tha 868-870.

<sup>7</sup> For refs to Skt sources of Aṅgulimāla, see Hartmann 1997-98.

<sup>8</sup> J 5:456 f; also J 4:180; SnA 2:240; DhA 1:124.

<sup>9</sup> V 1:74, cf V:H 4:93 n1 ad loc.

<sup>10</sup> Another occasion when the Buddha made the earth "turn" thus is when **Ānanda** stands right in front of the Buddha to prevent the intoxicated elephant Nāḷāgiri from trampling the Buddha. Ānanda remains where he is despite the Buddha forbidding him thrice. The Buddha "makes the earth turn around" to get Ānanda out of the way (J 533/5:335 f; DhA 1.12/1:140 f).

<sup>11</sup> See **Kisā Gotamī**, SD 43.2.

**2.2.2** The spiritual significance of Aṅgulimāla's conversion is in no way diminished—indeed even enhanced—without the miraculous aspects, as noted by the German scholar monk, **Analayo**:

In fact, one might even imagine the whole scene without any magical feat, since the Buddha's refusal to obey the brigand's obey to stand still, and his fearless rebuttal, "I have stopped, you stop too!", would fit in well at such a juncture and be sufficient to account for the subsequent denouement of events. (Analayo, 2008: 143)

Analayo admits that "[t]hough the miracle might have been introduced into the account of Aṅgulimāla's conversion at a time early enough to be present in all versions, this remains evidently hypothetical, given all versions state that a miracle took place." (id). However, he adds an interesting and important note: All the versions agree that what really change Aṅgulimāla are the words spoken by the Buddha:

since after the miracle he just commands the Buddha to stop, whereas after the words spoken by the Buddha he throws away his weapons and asks to be accepted as a monk. Moreover, after the magical feat, Aṅgulimāla still addresses the Buddha as "recluse,"<sup>12</sup> a mode of address used in the early discourses by outsiders that have no particular relation to or confidence in the Buddha. After the words spoken by the Buddha, however, a change of attitude takes place, as he refers to the Buddha as "Sage," "Blessed One" or "Venerable One."<sup>13</sup> These epithets express Aṅgulimāla's appreciation of the wisdom underlying the Buddha's explanation and probably also his respect for the Buddha's fearless response when commanded to stand still by an armed brigand.<sup>14</sup> (Analayo 2008: 143 f)

**2.2.3** A vital theme that runs through all versions of the Kisā Gotamī story is her *walk* in search of a handful of mustard seeds that would revive her dead son. This action represents a spiritual movement away from her old suffering self towards a new liberated self. We see a similar movement in the Buddha's conversion of Aṅgulimāla, where he *runs* after the Buddha to kill him, but he could not catch up with the Buddha until he *calls* out to the Buddha. The ensuing dialogue marks the spiritual turning-point in Aṅgulimāla's life.<sup>15</sup>

Elizabeth Harris aptly describes Aṅgulimāla's transformation upon hearing the Buddha's words, thus: "Aṅgulimāla is forced into the realization that his life has been a futile chase, a fretful searching, without peace and fulfilment. The tranquillity of the Buddha contrasts sharply with his own turbulence and the destructive state of his mind. The contrasts make him see the nature of his mind. A revolution—in its true sense of a complete turning around—takes place." (1990:36)

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<sup>12</sup> W Stede, "Aṅgulimāla and liberation," BSOAS 20, 1957: 34, however, feels that "there can be little doubt that the account is true and that the miracle actually happened."

<sup>13</sup> 沙門 *shā mén* throughout: SĀ 1077/T2.280c29; SĀ 2 16/T2.378b27; M 86/2:99,17 and Tha 866: *samaṇa*; T118/-T2.509b2; T119/T2.510c26; EĀ 38.6/T2.720a18; T212/T4.703c15. N Wagle, *Society at the Time of the Buddha*, Bombay, 1966:56 explains that the use of the address *samaṇa* here "denotes a certain indifference." (Analayo's n, normalized)

<sup>14</sup> SĀ 1077/T2.281a16: "sage," 牟尼 *móu ní*; SĀ 2 16/T2. 378c15: "such a man," 如此人 *rǔ cǐ rén* and "blessed one," 婆伽婆 *pó jiā pó*; M 86/2:100,1 and Tha 868: "great sage," *mahēsi*; T118/T2.509b13: "great sage," 大聖 *dà shèng*; EĀ 38.6/T2.720b16: "venerable one," 尊 *zūn*; T212/T4.704a6: "great sage," 大聖 *dà shèng*. (Analayo's fn, normalized).

<sup>15</sup> **Aṅgulimāla S** (M 86,5/2:98 f), SD 5.11.