

## The Story of Angulimala

*Theme: The possibility of transforming one's life and the difficulties involved in this*

This is what we have been told. At one time, when the Buddha was staying in the Jeta Wood near the town of Savatthi, there was a man living in the surrounding forest who was attacking all the people who passed along the roads. Not only did he rob them but he killed them as well; and in order to make people even more afraid of him, he cut a finger from each of his victims and always wore a necklace made from these fingers. This was why he was known as 'Angulimala'. ('*Mala*' means necklace and '*anguli*' means 'fingers'.) The people in the whole countryside were all so terrified that they fled from their villages and towns, leaving them deserted.

One day, the Buddha was setting off along a road that led past Angulimala's camp and a group of shepherds and farmers said to him, 'Don't go along that road; it leads to Angulimala's camp and he kills everyone who passes, even bands of thirty or forty men together. He shows no mercy to anyone. Please don't go.' The Buddha said nothing, but kept walking. They repeated their warnings three times, but still the Buddha, in silence, kept walking towards Angulimala's camp.

Angulimala saw the Buddha approaching and said to himself, 'This is amazing: I have killed thirty or forty men at a time, but this monk is coming along the road as though he hasn't a care in the world. I'll teach him that I am someone to be afraid of - I'll kill him and add one of his fingers to my necklace!' So he took up his sword, ran up behind the Buddha and shouted to him to stop.

But then something rather strange happened. Because although Angulimala was running as fast as he could and the Buddha was just walking along quite calmly, Angulimala felt as though he wasn't getting any closer to the Buddha. So he shouted again, 'Stop!' Hearing this, the Buddha turned and said, 'Angulimala, I *have* stopped. You are the one who needs to stop!' Angulimala, completely surprised by the Buddha's words, asked him what he meant.

The Buddha said, 'Angulimala, I have stopped all my feelings of anger and all violence towards other living beings. But you are still rushing around in anger and hatred, unable to stop your own violence. That's why I have stopped and you haven't.'

In that moment, Angulimala felt a great weight removed from his heart: he realised that here at last was someone who cared about him and wished to help him. He resolved to stop his life of greed and violence, threw his sword away into a deep pit nearby and, kneeling down at the Buddha's feet, asked to become one of his followers.

The Buddha simply replied, 'Come with me, friend.' And in that word Angulimala heard what he needed to hear.

So Angulimala joined the Buddha's followers and began to live with them in Jeta Wood, near the town of Savatthi. But a large crowd of people went to the palace of the king, King Pasenadi Kosala, and - full of terror - protested: 'Don't you realise that there is a terrible murderer living in your kingdom, your majesty, in the Jeta Wood. He has killed many people, laid waste to whole villages and towns and wears a necklace made of the fingers of his victims. Arrest him, kill him!'

So King Pasenadi Kosala, his hair standing on end with fear, went to the Jeta Wood with an army of five hundred horsemen, to arrest and kill Angulimala. Seeing him arrive, the Buddha said to him, 'What is the matter? Why are you afraid? Why have you come here with your army?'

'I have come here to arrest the dreadful murderer Angulimala, who has killed many people in my kingdom, laid waste to whole villages and towns, and wears a necklace of the fingers of his victims. Hand him over to me so that I may kill him.'

'But, said the Buddha, 'the man who *used to be* a dreadful murderer is now one of my followers and lives a life devoted to kindness and generosity, avoiding doing harm to any living being. See, there, that kindly-looking man over there: he *used to be* a man of violence, but is now a man of peace and gentleness. Don't be afraid: he no longer poses a danger to anyone.'

Then, seeing Angulimala sitting quietly in an attitude of kindness and tranquillity, King Pasenadi Kosala's fear subsided, his hair stopped standing on end, and he went up to Angulimala and said, 'May you live in peace.' And so saying, the king with his army of five hundred horsemen departed.

As a follower of the Buddha Angulimala now began to feel sorrow and pain at the sufferings of other people and he asked the Buddha, 'How can I help these people in their suffering, I who caused to much suffering to so many people? What have I to offer them?'

'What you have to offer them,' said the Buddha, 'is the knowledge that you were able to change your own life, the knowledge that you were able stop being a cause of pain to others. Understanding this will be of help to others in their suffering and will also be of help to you in your own suffering.'

Because, even though Angulimala had changed his life, he did continue to suffer. The people were no longer afraid of Angulimala now that he no longer carried a sword, but they still remembered all those he had killed; and as he went round Savatthi, trying to act in a kindly way towards all living beings, many of the townspeople shouted insults and threw stones and bricks at him.

Angulimala, his head cut open and dripping with his own blood, went to the Buddha and wept, saying, 'Surely, it's no use: the people will not believe that I have changed.' But the Buddha said, 'You must bear this. You did do wrong, and you must suffer, but if you keep trying to do good, then in the end your good deeds will bear fruit. Be strong, you must not despair.'

And Angulimala did keep trying, and in the end attained Enlightenment.

#### Questions:

1. Why do you think the Buddha was not afraid of Angulimala?
2. What did the Buddha mean when he said, 'I have stopped. You are the one who needs to stop'?
3. Why did Angulimala change his life so suddenly when the Buddha explained what he meant?
4. Does this story suggest how we might be able to help someone to stop being angry and violent?
5. What problems did Angulimala find when he tried to change his life from violence to kindness?
6. Did you feel sorry for Angulimala when the people threw stones and bricks at him?
7. What did Angulimala have to learn from this?

#### *Dharma Issues:*

- *The ever-present possibility of changing one's life*
- *The operation of karma*
- *The relationship between understanding and fearlessness*

*Based on 'Angulimala Sutta, in Majjhima Nikaya (The Buddha's Middle Length Discourses), Wisdom Books, 1995, pp. 710-717*