



The story of Angulimala

One day the Buddha found the village of Savatthi deserted. The local people were terrified and had shut themselves away in their houses because Angulimala was rumoured to be in those parts. Angulimala was known to be a ruthless mass murderer. He had cut off a finger from each of his victims and wore them in a necklace – hence his name which means ‘necklace of fingers.’ Some accounts claim that he wore 999 fingers in his necklace and others say it was 99.

Despite this the Buddha walked along the road as usual, and suddenly heard the sound of footsteps behind him.

Angulimala shouted out to him, “Stop, monk, stop!” The Buddha continued walking. When Angulimala had caught up with him he said, menacingly, “I told you to stop, monk. Why don’t you stop?”

“I stopped a long time ago. It is you who have not stopped,” replied the Buddha.

Angulimala was startled by the Buddha’s reply. He blocked his path and forced him to stop. The Buddha looked him straight in the eye like a friend or a brother. Angulimala had never met anyone who radiated such serenity and ease, and who did not run away from him in terror. His curiosity was aroused: why did this monk feel no fear? And what did he mean about stopping and not stopping?

The two men entered into conversation. The Buddha explained that what he had learned to do was to stop harming and causing suffering to others. Everyone is afraid of being injured or harmed, the duty of a monk is to heal others and care for them. And everyone is afraid of dying; the duty of a monk is to protect life, not destroy it.

Angulimala listened but he was cynical. “Human beings don’t love each other. They are cruel and deceptive. Why should I love other people?”

“There may be cruel people in this world, but there are also many kind people. My path can transform cruelty into kindness,” said the Buddha. “Right now you are on the path of hatred, but it is up to you: you can choose the path of love and forgiveness instead.” Angulimala was thrown into confusion, but he could sense that the Buddha spoke from love and was worthy of respect. “It is a great pity I did not meet you sooner,” he said. “I have gone too far, I can’t turn back.”

“No,” urged the Buddha, “it is never too late.”



Their discussion continued for some time, and in the end Angulimala knelt before the Buddha, vowed to change his evil ways and to follow him. He was ordained as a monk and tried very hard to practise meditation correctly and lead a disciplined life. Even the Buddha was amazed at the speed of his transformation. Just two weeks after becoming a monk he radiated serenity and stability and the other monks nicknamed him 'Ahimsaka' which means 'non-violent one.'