Aṅgulimāla: A Monologue

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 54:49

I am amused when I look back on my life. To say I lived it wouldn't be the truth. To say I did not live it would be a lie. In the clarity and distance of old age, it seems a tale of another age, another person. Yet I remember it all as clear as day.

I was born at the beginning of the cold season, the Himalayan wind chilling the dying embers of a warm sun. My mother rejoiced, of course, as did the household of relatives and friends, but my father was more concerned with my horoscope, and he slipped away with colleagues to study the charts.

That next morning it was an anxious father who hurried to the palace to fulfil the morning rituals of a royal chaplain. There he found the king troubled and agitated.

"Ah, Gagaji, I was dozing after my evening meal when I woke into a living nightmare. All my armour was shaking, clattering, flashing."

"Oh, that would have been the time Mantani gave birth to us, Your Majesty, and... I'm afraid, into an inauspicious constellation."

"Inauspicious?" A worried king has no time for sympathetic joy.

"There are signs that show great promise indeed, and yet others that indicate something quite terrible."

"Something terrible, such as?" The king wanted precision.

"I can't say, Your Majesty." And at the king's growing frustration, he quickly added, "Perhaps it may be prudent to be rid of him."

My life hung on a thread. Thankfully, this king was not so easily frightened. Indeed, he was surprised my father should put such little value on my life.

"But he's born a Brahmin. Surely, properly educated and carefully nurtured, he'll overcome any evil tendencies, and that promise will shine through."

This was not the first time I was to owe my life to the compassion of this young, arrogant king, Pasenadi of Kosala.

My parents expressed their uneasy hope in naming me Ahimsaka, the Harmless One. My childhood was happy and untroubled. I was my mother's favorite. I do remember being offered all manner of bribes to be good—not that it had much effect. It seems I had an insatiable desire to chase mosquitoes, cockroaches,

frogs, anything that moved, and squash them.

However, there was one extraordinary incident that shook my usual happy composure. Suddenly, a gang of boys, all friends, playmates, stood around me. One of them, a big boy, Vajiro, began jeering at me.

"Creep, think you're better than all of us."

They all joined in. At first, I thought they were joking. Then they began to push me around. All of a sudden, everything went blank.

When I came to my senses, the children were staring at me. Before me lay Vajiro. One by one, they sidled away. When the big boy got up, his blood-stained lips flamed with implacable revenge.

"I'll get you for this!"

I laughed at his threat. I felt only the power and grandeur of a conqueror. But, more ominous, I was savouring the exquisite pleasure of drawing blood.

By young manhood, I was well practised in the arts of war, and showed such potential in my studies that my father sent me to Takasila, the foremost seat of learning. Such was my reputation that the most learned teacher wanted to see me.

Agamaha Pandita Abinyana, a small, rotund, elderly man, was revered for his incisive intellect. That, coupled with a stentorian voice, made him a formidable debater. He fired all manner of questions at me, jabbing them at me with his little finger that seemed to turn them into sharp needles. It was a trait that was to take on a sinister meaning for me.

"You'll outshine them all, even me," he announced with great delight.

I felt a great devotion to my guru. I began to treat him with a special veneration due to a natural father. I felt sure he saw me equally as a natural son. It was my devotion to learning and a desire to please my guru that caused me to excel.

Then, one day—I remember it too well—he glanced at me in a way that greatly disturbed me. There was suspicion in his eyes, a tightness to his face suggesting fear, or was it hatred? As the days passed, he grew more and more distant. During the final days, there were awkward silences and false smiles. I felt hurt by our loss of intimacy, too confused to ask what the matter was. I decided to put it all to one side, especially since my final exams were starting—the recitations, the public debates, the competitive games.

I performed very well. In fact, I was acclaimed foremost student of my year.

On the very day the results were given, my deepest anxieties were confirmed. My guru called me to see him. I expected praise. I wanted to express my unrequitable gratitude, and indeed that's what I did. But then he said, "You know, it is the duty of every student to offer a gift of homage to their guru."

"Oh, indeed!" I exclaimed. "Name it, Guruji."

What he asked for came as an utter shock. "For *dakshina*," he said with absolute authority, "bring me a little finger of one hundred people." His eyes demanded obedience.

"I can't do that," I remember stuttering.

He was silent, his glare insisting submission.

"My family are all Brahmins. We live as harmlessly as possible, to the highest standards of one who is born of the mouth of Brahma."

"Those who refuse to pay the ceremonial gift of homage—a sacred duty to their guru—are to be detested. Such a person tramples on our time-honored tradition. All their learning will produce but sterile fruit. Is this the behavior of a son born of the mouth of Brahma?"

There was an inexplicable hardness to his tone, a sneer in his question. I simply had no response. I bowed, mumbling that I would follow his wishes. When I looked up, he'd turned away and was calling for his servant. I backed away, cowed and confused. The guru had a right to name his gift of homage, but why was mine so terrible? Why had he not asked similar of others? All he asked of them was fruit, clothing, medicine.

That night I fell into a heavy, disturbed sleep. I woke into a terrible night terror. Pointed fingers like darts burst upon me from every angle. I fought furiously with sword and shield, writhing in agony. When I came to my senses, I was lying on the floor, soaked in cold sweat and shaking, awake to the full horror of my duty.

In a daze, I got my belongings together and began to make my way homeward, a journey of two weeks or more—time to clear my head and cool my heart. I stayed in the villages en route, hardly talking to anyone, and all the time I was convincing myself of my duty. I must get one hundred fingers. How else could I possibly do so without killing? People aren't just going to let me walk off with their little finger. I have to kill. There's no other way. Such killing isn't murder. I have to fulfill my sacred duty. Who am I to renounce a time-honored tradition? I have to do it. I have to.

In this way, by the time I arrived at the dark and dense Jālini Forest on the border of my country, Kosala, I was steeled for my first killing. I found a cave on a hill that looked down on a stretch of road traveled by hunters, gatherers, and merchants. Water and forest food—banana, mango, rich papaya, various nuts—were all in abundance. And I spent my first day.

That evening, in the pearl-white silence of a full moon, soft with the scuffing of cicadas, I dug a fire pit to Kali Durga, Divine Mother, womb of all creation. It was into this cremation ground that I would offer the flesh of my victims to gain them her protection, and so sanctify my deeds.

I cut my little finger and into the sacrificial fire I offered my blood as libation. Staring at the flames, I began to develop a fierce concentration. It was going to take all the courage and strength I could muster. For all my battle skills, I had never yet killed an animal, never mind a human being.

In the dark dawn of early morning, I rubbed the sacred ash into my body. Filled with religious confidence, I made my way down to the path. There I hid, waiting. And sure enough, in that early hour, the shuffle of a wood-gatherer with his axe and bundles of rope.

I had imagined a swift dagger attack from behind, but instead pulled an arrow into the bow. A more easy prey there couldn't be. But I couldn't let that arrow fly. I continued to stalk him, all the time urging myself to fulfill my duty. And anyway, what had life left for this old, feeble man but a miserable diseased end? It was a mercy to kill him.

I took a deep breath. As quick as lightning, I thrust my sword. It seemed to penetrate like a knife through butter. His body startled, tensed, and suddenly slumped, dragging me downwards so that I tumbled onto him. There I looked into his face. His eyes glazed, empty and deaf. His mouth wide open, locked in shock.

Horrified, I leapt up, hardly able to catch my breath. Suddenly there were great cries. A small crowd of men were racing towards me, their axes shaking in the air. All went blank. I remember nothing but standing there with these same men strewn around me, twisted and bleeding.

As I realized what had happened, there came upon me a strange feeling of omnipotence. I stood towering above the slain bodies—the skill, the power, the glory of it. Like the all-conquering hero, I sliced off each little finger with a flourish. And I rejoiced. I've done it. I've done it. And it's easy, so easy. I danced for joy and relief.

I then hid the bodies. The more I could keep the killings secret, the easier would I capture my victims. I returned to my cave. There I cut what flesh I could from the fingers into the sacrificial pyre. I then threaded the bones with vine and tied them onto a branch. Once they were picked clean by birds or ants, I would hang it around my neck as a divine amulet.

Late that same afternoon, I heard in the distance a calling—names being called by many, over and over again. Intrigued, I went down. Of course, family and friends had come to look for the wood-gatherers. Again I stalked and pounced like a tiger. My attacks were swift and smooth, the blows of death precise, clean.

Having taken the fingers of two men, moving around a bamboo coppice, there in front of me stood three women. Yes, I stopped. For a moment there was doubt. I felt something tight against my heart. But by now I was too committed. Two were dead before the other could turn. She stared at me, paralyzed in fear—and that was the face that fell into the embrace of soft grasses and wildflowers.

Did I feel pity? None. I was drunk with conquest. I could have easily killed the rest, but for a scream of

horror some distance from me. I was moving so fast I hadn't bothered to hide the bodies. The game was up. It was now a matter of stopping the news from travelling beyond the village.

I ran at maddening speed until I arrived at a large clearing. Many buildings nestled there among the palm trees, the place littered with busy chickens and scrawny dogs. I was certain that once the villagers returned, they would send a party off to the king at Sāvatthī. It was on that road I lay waiting.

And sure enough, a handful of men came bearing the usual crude weapons. I followed them until they had gone quite some way from the village and well out of earshot. It was then, full of the courage of invincibility, that I pounced on them. None of this low caste would have had my training. It was all becoming too easy.

I decided to take full advantage of the situation. I made my way back to the village, and in the early hours of the following morning, just when colour begins to seep into the shades, I crept into the first one-room hut. The air hung hot and stale with the exhausted slumber of grief. Husband and wife lay together, the children—seven, or maybe eight of them—snuggled in the opposite corner. Their pitiful defencelessness couldn't soften my cruel resolve.

I bathed myself in the blood of carnage. First the man, then the woman, then the children. Quietly and speedily, I slit their throats and stabbed their hearts. And so I savaged hut after hut. I could see streamlets of blood picking their way down the slope towards the well.

Suddenly, as I left a large wooden house—a scream. I lurched back inside and grabbed that child by the throat. A rage took me. I lifted the little body until it dangled in the air, its little arms flailing, mouth agape, eyes bulging in terror, its tiny fingers wrenched into my hand, its little feet kicking the air. My grip tightened until the tiny body seized and fell limp.

I stared at that beautiful little face as in a trance. I couldn't bear to acknowledge what I'd done. As I dropped the body to continue the slaughter, it was the one finger I left behind.

But that little child's cry had stirred the village. It was only because of the poor light that I was able to disappear unseen into the forest.

I arrived back at my hideout, exhausted. As I lay down, the child's face returned. I turned on my side and slept through the heat of midday. Late that afternoon, I woke refreshed and of a sudden decided to hunt animals. Each kill reaffirmed my command over life and death. In the cool of that evening, for the first time in my life, I sank my teeth into roasted boar. It was delicious. Again, I rejoiced.

Soon I'll have my hundred fingers. The debt will be paid. I'll return home in secret triumph and through my father's good offices enter into the service of the king. I'll marry a beautiful girl, inherit the farm, have many children, and my life will be a rolling countryside of nothing but contentment and joy. I danced in joy. I danced in gratitude. I danced for Kālī, my divine protectoress.

The following morning I woke in more sombre mood. I realised that even now a platoon of soldiers would be searching for me. There was only one thing for it—to keep on the move without coherent plan and to range as far as possible. In this way I could attack unwary travellers along any road, enter any unsuspecting village in the dark. The kill was easy so long as it remained unexpected. Even the soldiers proved useless defence. Such was their clatter, I could always hear them coming.

On one such outing, I overheard a conversation that first made me laugh, and then showed me to what depravity I had descended. I heard a small crowd talking about this madman who murdered for little fingers. A demon. Aṅgulimāla.

Me? I was Aṅgulimāla—Garland of Fingers.

Returning that evening, I caught my face in a pool of water, and what I saw truly shocked me. My black hair was tortured, spiking around my head. My face lay hidden beneath a matted, grubby beard. My eyes seemed to bulge. My lips and tongue were blood red from betel leaf, which I chewed to calm my nerves. My clothes hung torn, filthy, and bespattered with human blood.

And there, around my neck, the garland of fingers.

Yes, a demon.
A yakka.

Over this period of but a few weeks, as I gathered my tally of fingers, my bloodlust consumed me. My dreams were full of it. Daydreams addicted to it. To see the horror in their eyes, to hear their screams—this was my joy.

Yes, I remember. I remember it all, as clear as day.

I had now but one finger to go, and I thought to come full circle and return to the very spot on that road where I'd stabbed that poor old wood-gatherer. Then at last I would present this blood homage to my guru, against whom I'd built up a healthy hatred and often plotted how to avenge my humiliation.

As I hid in waiting, I began to hear a calling. Oh, my heart jumped into my throat.

"Ahimsaka! Ahimsaka!"

My mother. My mother calling me as she'd always done. How could she have known it was me? Her mother's intuition...

Mother or no, there raged inside me a desire to kill. A loud, clear "no" arose, yet against my will my legs began to move—nearer and nearer—until I saw her. I couldn't stop. I just kept advancing, my hand now taking the sword from the scabbard. I was all but ready to pounce when a tall, bald-headed monk suddenly appeared. My mother bowed to him. He must have said something to her, for my mother turned and walked back the way she came. He then continued along the road.

I was intrigued. I began to stalk this monk, moving faster and faster, yet the faster I moved, he seemed to be the same distance away. Finally, frustrated, I burst out of my hiding into the road and ran towards him. Faster and faster I ran, yet never getting any closer. He kept on walking at the very same easy pace.

Finally exhausted, I shouted out, "Stop!"

And he did.

While I panted, he turned round, quite unhurriedly, and replied, "I have stopped, Angulimala. It's you who haven't stopped."

I was full of rage and yet taken aback. He was smiling at me. We stood facing each other for what seemed a long time.

Finally, my curiosity—at his supernatural ability to walk faster than I could run, his obvious fearlessness, and this strange reply—brought the student out of me.

"You've stopped, but I haven't?" I shouted angrily.

"This vicious craving and enjoyment in making others suffer—do you think it will end with your hundred fingers? With the murder of your own mother?"

I was dumb.

"And the consequences, the karma. Don't you believe the torturer reaps in kind?"

Of course I did. Do harm, and surely harm will follow as a cart follows the ox.

"I'm fulfilling an ancient obligation to my guru," I offered in defense.

"Ha! Put yourself in the place of your victims. How would you like to be murdered, just so that some bright young Brahmin can offer your little finger as a present to his guru?"

The absurdity of my position hit me like a bolt of lightning. Why had it never occurred to me to take the victim's point of view?

"So come then," he said. "You may as well finish the job." He offered his hand. "You needn't kill me for it."

I stared at him in disbelief.

He was a big man, beyond his prime, but still strong enough to defend himself—and here he was, offering me his little finger. His fearless act of generosity made my own courage seem puny.

"You've been amazingly stupid," he continued. "What happened to your common sense? It just goes to show how brilliance can service the most ludicrous delusions." Then, not to despair, he added that this very dedication to my studies—and indeed to my murderings—was a virtue that would help perfect

contentment even in this very life.

His compassion had utterly exposed my callous logic. The full horror of what I had done was upon me. I could hardly bear to look into his kindly yet penetrating eyes. He indeed was a guru of another kind.

He asked me to take him to my hideout. We talked of how we'd both been brought up in the lap of luxury—he, the son of Suddhodana, king of the Sakyas, north of my own country. How even as a young man he'd become weary of courtly life. How he had an insatiable hunger to know the true destiny of a human being. Were we to wander around aimlessly from life to life, suffering this, enjoying that? Or was it simply death, annihilation? Or was there something else?

On the way I came across some jungle fowl. I grabbed an arrow, only to feel acute embarrassment. Such was his immediate effect upon me. I returned to gathering fruits and nuts. That midday, we ate together in silence.

It was late afternoon when I woke from a heavy sleep. Suddenly, seeing the monk again, I jumped and grabbed my dagger. He chuckled at my ferocious posturing. "Angulimala, when will you again be Ahimseka, the harmless one?"

He asked me to sit in meditation with him. "Just observe and feel anything that comes into your attention." I couldn't sit for long; I was so restless. "Walk up and down, slowly," he said, "but again, just to be aware of any thoughts and feelings." I would sit and walk in fits and starts—I just couldn't stand still.

"Patience," he said. "This is going to take some time. Don't worry, I'll stay with you till your future is clear." I immediately relaxed with this assurance.

It took a few days to calm down enough to sit still and watch. Again and again, I re-enacted my killings, endlessly working over the same old themes: the chase, the battle, the kill—and always the excitement, the enjoyment. I couldn't stop them from dominating me.

"Don't indulge these fantasies," he warned. "Take away their nourishment and they'll simply die away. Or else they'll drive you to further atrocity. And where will it all end? The king's prison? To be publicly tortured?" That sent a cold shiver up my spine. "And," he added, "undermine these overpowering cravings by considering how much your victims suffered."

That was hard. I still wanted to justify myself, make light of their suffering. Disheartened and weary, I stretched and looked into the dark emptiness of a starlit night, and there caught the first delicate arc of the new moon. I decided to meditate just once more. As if by magic, the focus of my fantasies began to change. Instead of relishing the chase and the kill, I began to see the pain and panic of my victims. It was with these images that I fell asleep.

It was still dark when I felt a hand rock my shoulder. I woke with a start. "Continue," he said. He must have felt the change in my heart. "Get up. Shake off the sloth of sleep." The voice was sharp, but his smile

completely disarmed my angry indignation. I had by now unwittingly become a disciple.

Like any good student, I obeyed. I splashed water on my face and began to sit in meditation. And there they came—the faces tortured in pain, weeping and pleading, vivid and alive as if risen from the dead. I began to feel their agonies, and there arose a remorse that began to shake my body, until it started to release: first in little spurts, then in cries, and then in loud moaning and weeping. I cried and cried and cried. I felt my very insides were being gouged out. Who knows how long I filled that jungle with my wailing.

"Excellent," said the monk, smiling. "Only when true remorse arises can the heart begin to heal."

I did find his joy in my discomfort a little disconcerting.

The images of my cruelty continued to haunt my every meditation, my every action, my every dream. Every moment was shame, guilt, and remorse. And I was so angry with myself. Why had I not seen the sheer idiocy of my guru's request? The gall I felt when I realized I could have said no! What had stopped me but vile servitude to custom, enslavement to tradition? And how was I ever going to compensate for such monstrous crimes? My remorse turned to despair when I saw they were too terrible to be forgiven.

"How can we compensate for murder, of all things?" this gentle monk asked. "What could replace the loss of grandparents, husband, wife, children? In such a case, we must simply bear the consequences. Isn't that enough? Do we have to punish ourselves as well?"

I began to realize that in the end, I would have to give myself up to the authorities. They would mete out a terrible, torturous death. My identity would be revealed, my family shamed and ruined, my mother... Oh, better for me to live wild, or go to another country far away, take my chances with uncivilized tribes—or better still, to commit suicide secretly, somewhere the body would be eaten by wild animals, so that I remained anonymous.

He listened to my ranting and raving. Then again, in a moment of calmness: "Do you want to be a fugitive or live like an animal all your life? And having murdered so many people, you now want to murder yourself? Is there no end to your stupidity? Past deeds cannot be altered, and they will produce present and future consequence. The true question is: do you have the courage to face it, to suffer it? For this is the only way you can drain the past of its effect."

His eyes looked steadily into mine.

I jumped up. I had to walk. The arguments went round and round, but the truth stood out. It was better to face the consequences. Surely the king would have sympathy for me—he'd known me since I was a baby. We'd even wrestled each other. He would understand my dilemma. What else could a disciple do but obey his guru? There was my father's influence, the standing of my family. Indeed, I could defend myself before the king as I defended my actions to my own self. And if I was shown no mercy, well, then I would have to

suffer the consequences. At least, as this teacher says, I'd wipe the slate clean.

I returned and told him of my decision to give myself up to the authorities. He nodded, as if in approval. There was a long silence in which we gazed into each other's eyes.

Then he said, "Would you not rather put an end to this whole weary round of births and deaths?"

"Is there an escape?" I asked.

His face shone with a smile, and he spoke with that absolute assurance of one who knows: "There is, Ahimsaka. That which is not born does not die."

It is not created, nor can it be found where there is earth, fire, water, or air. It cannot be seen or heard or in any way perceived. It is the deathless, the unconditioned. If this were not so, there would be no escape from birth, sickness, aging, and death, and the endless, endless rounds of rebirth.

Suddenly I heard myself asking, "You would accept me—Angulimala, a criminal, a murderer—as your disciple?"

"You can stop, Ahimsaka, as I have stopped," he replied.

A huge burden seemed to lift, and an enormous joy, born of hope, settled upon me.

"First," he said, "you must bury the tools of your abhorrent profession. You must no longer harm any living being, not even a cockroach."

For the last time, I caressed the beautifully wrought weapons, especially the slender blade with its snake-embraced handle. I stabbed out a trench. There I placed these precious jewels, gleaming and glistening in the noonday sun. How difficult it is to give up an addiction, an obsession. I forced my hands to cover them with soil and placed heavy boulders on them until I felt sure that I had truly buried them, and for good.

Then he asked me to go in search of suitable robe cloth. The cemeteries—oh, disturbing places, those charnel grounds. Corpses steaming the air with their sickly, sweet, pungent stench. Dismembered limbs half-eaten by tigers, rodents, and vultures, strewn around the white shrouds that mourners had wrapped their dead in.

I was about to wash the cloth when my teacher told me I had not yet fully buried the past. I looked at him, puzzled. He pointed to a tree. There, hanging forgotten around my makeshift shrine to Kali, was the garland of finger bones, gently swaying in the sighing breeze, their chimes hollow and choked.

I laid them down in a circle, each finger pointing inward to the now empty pit. And on the burial mound over these sacred bones, I planted a frangipani tree, whose white, sweet, perfumed flowers would ever shower their sad grave. I watched over this cemetery, recalling their murders, begging forgiveness, until

sleep overpowered me.

The next day I washed the white cloth, and with my teacher's needle and thread made robes. He then shaved my head and beard, and finally all was ready for me to make my request.

"Bhagava, may you be my guide. I shall live dependent on the Bhagava."

"Come," he replied, "and conduct yourself diligently according to the customs of ascetics."

That evening, for the first time, bliss was the object of my meditation.

The following day, he wanted to return to his monastery in Savatthi. He sensed my fear.

"No one will recognize you," he assured me, knowing how different I looked.

When we arrived at the first village, there were shouts of recognition. "Bhagava Gotama!" A great thrill passed through my body. I had only heard of this great teacher. I could not believe my good fortune.

The villagers told their tales of Angulimala and how they thirsted for revenge.

"Ah," said the Bhagava, "your revenge makes you no better than he. Let the king deal with him according to the law of kamma. Better to live good lives and offer your merit to your departed loved ones. That is what they need."

None recognized me. As a young, clean-shaven disciple, it was proper for me to keep my eyes lowered and remain silent. He asked them to help me dye my robes.

That evening I approached the Bhagava in ochre robes. I knelt before him and asked him for a name.

"You shall be known by the name of your innocent childhood," he said.

I was to be known as Bhikkhu Ahimsaka, the Harmless One.

That day all the villagers took a day away from their labors. He talked both to the group and to the individual, calming and consoling them. And so we continued, staying at village after village, until we saw ahead of us the walls of the capital city, Savatthi.

The monastery on the outskirts of the city was a set of buildings with a large meditation hall, neat footpaths, bushes, flowers, and trees bordering well-kept lawns. Everyone stood waiting, hands joined before them in anjali. They greeted him with silence and smiles.

I was shown to a hut hidden in the tamed forest grove close by—a sturdy little bamboo affair covered in layers of banana leaves, no more than two good strides in length and one in breadth.

I had that strange feeling of coming home.

I lay there that night on the soft-plaited palm-leaf mat, listening to the crickets and the conversation of owls, musing how my life had so quickly turned around. Truly miraculous.

During the first few days I would constantly visit the Bhagava, but his attendant, the Elder Ananda, would always tell me to go back to my hut and practice. I felt annoyed and frustrated.

Then one day the Bhagava asked to see me. "Dear friend," he said, "it's not proper to develop an affection for the teacher. I can't bring about your deliverance from suffering. You must take refuge in the teachings and the practice, but above all in yourself. I can only point the way. So please don't come unless called."

That day I felt utterly dejected, abandoned. So much so, I even began to dream of being Angulimala, and all the pleasures of hunting assailed me. I was guided skillfully, and I came to realize that it was this craving to be teacher's best boy that had so angered my fellow students. I was a creep.

Then early one morning there were drums, and the occasional salute of trumpets. The king and his army were en route somewhere. To my horror, I suddenly realized they were coming to the monastery. You can imagine my alarm. I'd all but decided to run away when a young monk came and told me to come at once.

As I entered the Bhagava's room, he saw the look of anxiety on my face and smiled. With an insistent gesture, he motioned me to sit by him. We sat and waited as the marching footsteps approached us. And suddenly at the door stood the king—a short, stocky, heavily bearded man, the warrior in his eyes.

The king and his officers paid homage to the Bhagava. I knew all of them, though none recognized me. In mind, I did keep my head low. After the usual pleasantries were exchanged, the king explained. They had come for the Bhagava's blessing. "It's this Angulimala. I've sent out dozens of platoons, but to no avail. He's murdered hundreds, wiped out whole villages. Extraordinary. But how to deal with a deranged madman? Why is he collecting fingers?"

There came a burst of suggestions. He's possessed. A demon. A lunatic.

When the excitement had calmed, the Bhagava said, "What would you say, your majesty, if such a dark-hearted murderer were to become a monk?"

I could feel the panic rising in me.

"What?" shouted the king, his mouth agape with incredulity. A chorus of scoffing supported his scorn.

"Don't be so dismissive," urged the Bhagava. "Even this Angulimala can transform himself."

"Transform himself?" The king continued to shout. "When I catch him, I'll transform him. I'll have him roasted alive."

There were great guffaws and equally delicious torments suggested. But one especially made my hair stand on end: "I'd have him slowly cut to pieces so that he could watch his body being eaten by dogs."

It wasn't the horror of it, but the voice. It was that childhood enemy, Vajiro, now an officer in the king's guard.

The Bhagava spoke. "Do you really think that revenge can ever be satisfied? Whatever you do, the bereaved will complain it wasn't harsh enough. Violence breeds violence. It can only be appeased by compassion."

This is an ancient law.

There was an uneasy silence.

"You did come for my advice."

Again that smile.

The king looked around at his company. Everyone was baffled.

"So you want us to catch him and bring him to you, Bhagavā?" suggested the king.

"No need for that." And turning to me, the Bhagavā cheerfully announced, "Here he is—Angulimala, now Bhikkhu Ahimsaka."

The whole company, to a man including the king, instinctively grabbed their swords. There was a stunned silence.

"Perhaps you know him?" asked the Bhagavā.

I looked up in surprise. The king glared at me.

"Ahimsaka," he said at first in shock, and then in growing surprise. "Ahimsaka, son of Gaga and Montani."

He related the circumstances of my birth. "But why," he asked, "why the fingers?"

I then told him about the gift demanded by my guru. Realizing my predicament, a sympathy grew towards me among the king and his company. Indeed, I could see sadness shadow the king's face.

After a long pause in which the king kept looking at me and then to the Bhagavā, he said, "You're a lucky man, Bhikkhu Ahimsaka. A very lucky man."

With that they began to leave. But the king, as he reached the door, turned and warned me not to leave the Bhagavā's Order.

We listened to the marching steps. The Bhagavā turned to me and smiled. I took a very deep breath.

The very next morning, as I was preparing to go on alms round, there was a knock at my door. I opened it to find what I most dreaded standing before me.

My mother.

Was a basket of food enough for an elephant? Here and then I began to sob, to sob uncontrollably. No doubt she thought it was remorse for the shame I had brought upon the family. Not so. Not so many days ago, I was stalking this very woman, intent on stabbing her through the heart, slicing off her finger. This woman—my mother—who bore me, suckled me, tended to my every care.

My heart cramped into a solid spasm of agony. If ever I were to describe hell, it would be the heart-wrenching compunction I felt that day.

Happily, even hell passes. But this was the bloodiest of daggers I had pierced into my own heart.

I told her my tale, and of the king's stipulation not to leave the Order, and that I needed time to cure the festering in my heart. I sensed her disappointment. She had wanted grandchildren and all that.

And as for my father—he wasn't surprised, of course. Hadn't he foretold it? It was that I had become a disciple of someone who wasn't a Brahmin that he found offensive. Eventually, he offered me his blessing.

Not everyone came to accept me, of course. On alms round, children poked fun at me, making up silly songs about Angulimala. But more serious, people threw stones at me, some bouncing off my head. I would just walk on. They would eventually tire.

But I was attacked viciously once. A few of the aggrieved families whipped up a crowd to such a righteous frenzy that they beat me with sticks and were taking me out of the city to kill me, when the guards at the gates stopped them. Ironically, it was Vajiro in command of the post. With a great look of disdain, he ordered a platoon of soldiers to escort me back to the monastery.

It took days for the bruises to heal, but luckily there were no broken bones. I said to myself, if this is all the karma I have to suffer, how fortunate indeed.

It was on one of these alms rounds that something quite remarkable happened. I had stopped in front of a house in case someone should want to offer food, when I heard great cries.

A man came out, looking desperate, saw me, and shouted, "This is no time to come begging! Can't you hear my wife?"

Her cries resurrected the screams of my victims. I was so depressed by this that I went to see the Bhagava.

"Go back and offer this blessing," he said. "Say: By the power of a harmless life, let that mother's pain cease and the child be born safe."

"Harmless life?" I said incredulously.

"Since your spiritual life began," the Bhagava replied. "From the day of your ordination."

Yes, I thought, at least I could make an offering of my harmless life, albeit a little short. How wonderful if I could actually assist a birth—I who had assisted so many deaths.

She was still crying out and praying to the gods. Quite a crowd had gathered outside the house. I stood at the gates and offered my blessing: "Sister, since I was born into the noble life, I do not recall having ever intentionally killed a living being. By this truth, may you be well, and may your child be safe."

Everyone began to scoff and jeer. I could feel the anger rising. I left at once.

That evening, the clamour of a crowd approached my hut and called for me. I began to panic again. I took a deep breath and opened the door. And there before me stood a man holding a baby. There were shouts of "Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu! Well done!" Presents were laid before me, and a garland of the most beautiful white frangipani was placed around my neck. They told me that almost immediately after my blessing, the baby was born, and both mother and child were well. I was to be honoured guest at the feast.

It was all I could do to blubber my thanks.

Oh, to my surprise, my chant has become a magical mantra for mothers-to-be. And from that day on, the children stopped poking fun. Coarse words became kindly greetings, and the stones turned into flowers, incense, and sweets. My heart ached with relief and joy at their forgiveness.

After many years, once I felt sure enough in my practice, I decided to go to the neighbouring kingdom of Magadha, where no one would recognise me, in order to live a more solitary life. I found a secluded forest not far from the prosperous capital of Rājagaha. It was the dry, hot season, so I made my home beneath a great shady fig tree. In time, the villagers generously built me a hut.

There I continued to work—work hard—through all the mental anguish. There were the burning hurts and scorching revenge towards my enemies, especially my guru. It stung to know, to find out, that he had believed the malicious slander that I had been scheming to have him removed so that I could take his prestigious post, and that he had given me such a heinous obligation out of hateful spite. Then there was the nauseous guilt and agonising remorse towards my victims, as well as all the usual unquenchable lusts, paralysing fears, and so on. Oh, I thought they would never end.

And yet, over the years, everything began to subside. And in the clearings, it became so obvious: no one had actually ever made me suffer. No one. Not the plots of my enemies, not the punches of Vajiro, not even the vicious malevolence of my guru. All the ensuing hurt and hate was of my own making. Was it not my own befuddled thinking that led me to murder? The demonic delight I took in killing—was that not mine to develop? And all the self-pity, self-hatred, guilt, remorse, and so on, and so on, and so on—was that not all direct consequence? All the time I was blaming, unwittingly I was creating my own hell.

And so it was that since none had actually caused me to suffer, I lost all reason, all need, to forgive anyone.

And it was then I saw as clear as day: but for mistaken understanding, deluded reasoning, I had never

actually meant any harm, never meant to cause anyone any suffering whatsoever. And so it was that I lost all reason, all need, to be forgiven.

I was like a man who, wandering through a forest, kicks a crooked stick only to disturb a viper. Just because he is mistaken does not mean he and others will not be bitten. Is this not a great paradox of human life—that we are at once responsible for our moral behaviour, yet because we are fundamentally not immoral, not bad, not evil, but ignorant, mistaken, deluded, we are therefore intrinsically innocent?

Indeed, if this were not so, how could we ever attain purity? And without purity, there can be no liberation from suffering.

These insights came early one morning. From my hut, perched on the side of a wooded valley, I watched the sun rising through the golden air, full of sweet early monsoon blossom and the trill of songbirds. And there arose in me such relief and release.

And I remembered how the Bhagavan had answered me on the killing road: "I have stopped, Angulimala."

Now, I've stopped too. I've done what had to be done. My heart is purified of all defilements, and I live in utter contentment and peace.

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