

News and Musings

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From Ven. Ajahn Khemadhammo OBE
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Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy



We launched Angulimala, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy, early in 1985 and we decided to call it after a great and amazing disciple of the Buddha. It is said that his name was originally Ahimsaka, which means the harmless one and he was the son of a high caste and well to do family. He went to study at Taxila, the then Oxbridge of India, where he excelled. But other students soon became jealous of his accomplishments and decided to spoil his reputation and set their teacher against him, which they did. The result was that the teacher demanded of his erstwhile star pupil a graduation fee of a thousand human right-hand little fingers. We can only suppose that he thought the boy would never be able to pay and that would be that. However, this lad was an exceptionally devoted and diligent student, who always did his best to please his Teacher, so off he went in search of fingers, only to discover that people are somewhat reluctant to part with their little-fingers and he had to resort to violence and to murder. Thus, in a short space of time a brilliant young man transformed into a formidable and terrifying, serial killer. And his collection of little fingers grew. But then, out there in the forest, miles from anywhere, how and where was he to store them? He tried hanging them in the trees, but the birds pinched them. Finally, he resorted to stringing them on a cord and hanging it round his neck and as this wreath of bloody fingers grew so people started calling him Angulimala, Finger Garland.

One morning, after his meal, the Buddha set off, walking in the direction of the great forest where Angulimala was living. Various people working in their fields seeing him going that way called out to warn him, but he ignored them and eventually entered the great forest. That day, Angulimala had just counted 999 human, right-hand, little-fingers on his garland! He needed only one more! Then all of a sudden, he spotted the Buddha. Pausing only to grab his weapons he dashed out to attack and kill the Buddha and get that last finger. But then strangely, try as he might, this powerful athletic man couldn't catch up with the Buddha, who appeared to still be walking quite calmly and serenely. Angry and frustrated he called out to the Buddha to stop, to which the Buddha, bothering neither to turn nor pause, quietly replied, "Angulimala, I have stopped, now you stop too."

Angulimala didn't get it, "How can you say, when you're still walking, that you've stopped?"

"Angulimala, I have stopped forever." said the Buddha. "I have stopped killing and harming. Now it's your turn to do the same."

Angulimala couldn't take this. He was used to people being frightened of him, used to them being angry and fighting him. But this was something else, this man, alone, unarmed had no fear, no anger; on the contrary he simply radiated stillness and loving-kindness. All the good buried deep in Angulimala's psyche for so long suddenly rushed to the surface and casting aside his weapons

he fell at the Buddha's feet and begged to be allowed to be a disciple and become a monk. The Buddha accepted him and Angulimala followed the Buddha back to the monastery.

Meanwhile, back in the city the crowds were gathering in front of the King's palace clamouring for something to be done about Angulimala. They, of course, didn't know what had just happened. Finally, the King rode out at the head of his cavalry determined to deal with Angulimala once and for all. Passing by the monastery, the King, who was very devoted to the Buddha, decided to call in and pay his respects. He found the Buddha seated in front of a great company of silent monks. He knelt down, bowed three times and then explained to the Buddha that he was in search of Angulimala, intent on capturing him and executing him. The Buddha then said to the King, "What would you do great King, what would you say, if I told you that Angulimala was here?" Well, such an idea seemed to the King to be utterly preposterous, but he dutifully said that of course if it were so he would pay his respects and make offerings. And then, the Buddha stretched forth his right arm and pointed. "Here Sire, here sits Angulimala." The books state that the King's knees knocked, and he suddenly remembered he had urgent business elsewhere. But before he left, he went and spoke to Angulimala and then said to the Buddha, "It is wonderful, it is marvellous! What we have failed to do with weapons and violence, you have achieved with neither weapons nor violence!" And he left, leaving Angulimala to work out his own salvation, which he did, by eventually becoming one of the Enlightened Ones.

Now this is a very remarkable story with very important messages for everyone. It's not just a Buddhist story about a murderer who came good. That's a part of it and certainly one of the reasons we chose Angulimala as the name of the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy.

Yes, he changed. That is true and that is the first important thing to register. We've all heard it haven't we – "They never change!" Well, you and I know that isn't true. People can and do change. And that means there is hope. If change is possible, there is hope. You don't always have to be what you are now.

You know we're all a mixture of good and bad. We've all done good things and we've all done bad things and a heck of a lot somewhere in between. I know that many of you who've ended up in prison and who I've met and known over the years, whatever you've done, you've shown me consideration, kindness, generosity. I've seen you helping others, looking out for each other. I've seen good people. You all have it in you. This precious human birth gives you the potential for Enlightenment, for true and lasting freedom. Don't waste it.

May you and all beings be well and happy. May you and all beings be free from all suffering. May you and all beings realise the secure peace of Nirvana