

THE AṄGULIMĀLA-SUTTA: THE POWER OF THE FOURTH KAMMA

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Absract

This paper examines the difference in the content (stories and teachings) between the *Aṅgulimāla-sutta* and the Pali commentaries on it. 1) It presents several scholarly opinions of the purpose and relevance of the commentaries as well as on the meaning of the *sutta*. Commentarial and other retellings of the Aṅgulimāla story are discussed to show the evolution of Aṅgulimāla from a brutal killer to a fundamentally good person trapped into wrong doing. 2) The paper analyzes these retellings to show how they alter the role of *kamma* in the story and thus alter the teaching of the *sutta* itself. 3) The paper speculates on the functioning of *kamma* in light of the four types of *kamma* and how the commentaries change the *kamma* of Aṅgulimāla and thus the meaning and goal of the original *sutta*. Thus the commentaries do not explain the meaning of *sutta* rather they change it. 4) The paper argues that the *sutta* teaches a swift *jhānic* path to enlightenment and the commentaries teach a gradual *kammic* path to enlightenment.

Key Words: Buddhism, *kamma*, Angulimala, commentaries, ethics

Introduction

The *Aṅgulimāla-sutta* is one of the better-known *suttas* in Theravada Buddhism's Pali Canon. The story of a murderous bandit who attains *nibbāna* (Sanskrit, *nirvāṇa*) is quite intriguing and a popular *Paritta* has been developed from it. This paper focuses on the attainment of *nibbāna* by Aṅgulimāla and the teaching that everyone who follows the Noble Eight-fold Path to its end can attain *nibbāna* in a single lifetime, even a murderer. Aṅgulimāla is also found in the *Theragāthā* where the portion in verse in the *sutta* appears along with a few additional ones, but there is no prose narrative. There are two Pali commentaries on Aṅgulimāla, one on the *sutta* attributed to Buddhaghosa and the other on the verses spoken by Aṅgulimāla in the *Theragāthā* attributed to Dhammapāla (Gombrich,

2006, p. 137). The commentaries vary in some details but both focus on the main character, the murderer *Āṅgulimāla*, providing a biography of him, which adds details to his story, especially of his earlier life, that are not found in the *sutta*.

These biographies significantly alter his personality from the one presented in the original *sutta*. The commentary biographies present *Āṅgulimāla* as a good person forced to do bad and thus they contain the idea that past-life perfection and past good *kamma* (Sanskrit, karma), that is, past good volitional actions, allow one to practice the Path to *nibbāna*. The commentaries do recognize the role of the Noble Eight-fold Path, but the addition of the life story in my estimation serves to soften the *sutta* by making *Āṅgulimāla* a victim and a possessor of good past *kamma*, both of which make the idea of a murderer attaining *nibbāna* more tolerable as well as making Path practice more practicable.

The purpose of this paper is to show that the *Āṅgulimāla-sutta* testifies to the power of the Noble Eight-fold Path, that is, to the power of ‘*kamma* which leads to the destruction of *kamma*’ as sufficient for a person to attain *nibbāna* in a single lifetime. The paper contrasts this with the commentary, which presents past *kammic* goodness as seemingly necessary in practicing the Path. This paper argues that the *Āṅgulimāla-sutta* explicitly teaches that the attainment of *nibbāna* is possible in a single lifetime and is not contingent on past *kamma* whether good or bad. It also argues that the commentaries undermine, perhaps purposefully, this teaching. This argumentation is considered consistent with the Buddha’s statement, famously found in the *Siṃsapā Grove sutta* (Bodhi, 2000, p. 1857-1858), that he teaches only those things conducive to Path practice. All other knowledge may distract, confuse or otherwise hinder Path practice as I argue the commentarial biographies do. The *Āṅgulimāla-sutta* read on its own is a perfect example of Buddha’s teaching the efficacy of Path action, nothing more, nothing less.

Research Objectives:

1. Explore and analyze the *Āṅgulimāla-sutta* and its commentaries using comparative method, socio-historical critique and content analysis.
2. Demonstrate that the *Āṅgulimāla-sutta* contains a very different teaching than its commentaries.

3. Present several scholarly opinions on the purpose of the commentaries.
4. Speculate on the functioning of *kamma*.
5. Present conclusions on the why the commentaries tell a story that changes the meaning and goal of the teaching of the *Āṅgulimāla-sutta*.

Research Methodologies

Documentary research, comparative method, socio-historical critique, textual interpretation (content analysis). Use documentary research and socio-historical critique to contextualize and format the *Āṅgulimāla-sutta* and its commentaries to produce a database. Analyze this database using 1) comparative method; 2) content analysis. Present the analysis and conclusions on the findings.

Research Results

The *Āṅgulimāla-sutta* tells of a murderous bandit who got his name *Āṅgulimāla*, Finger-necklace, because he cut a finger off each of his victims and placed it on a necklace. Though he worked alone, he had managed to terrorize entire towns and districts of Northern India. He boasts that he can hold his own in a fight against thirty or forty soldiers. One day the Buddha, who was in the area, set out for a walk on the road which *Āṅgulimāla* was then watching. *Āṅgulimāla* saw the Buddha, grabbed his weapons and went out after him. The Buddha performed a feat of meditative power by which, though he was only walking, *Āṅgulimāla* who was running could not catch up to him. Impressed, *Āṅgulimāla* wished to question this ascetic, so he stopped running and shouted to the Buddha to stop also. The Buddha replied that he had stopped and that *Āṅgulimāla* should stop too. Next comes the following exchange, which begins with *Āṅgulimāla* speaking.

“While you are walking, recluse, you tell me you have stopped;

But now, when I have stopped, you say I have not stopped [...]

How is it that you have stopped and I have not?”

“Aṅgulimāla, I have stopped forever,
 I abstain from violence towards living beings;
 But you have no restraint towards things that live:
 That is way you have not stopped”
 (Bodhi p.711; M ii 99).

Intrigued and grateful that someone has come to teach him and not to kill him, Aṅgulimāla renounces his murderous ways and is ordained as a Buddhist monk by the Buddha. In due time, living as a forest monk, Aṅgulimāla attains *nibbāna*. Then, while on his morning alms round, a few villagers threw things at him, cutting him and tearing his robes. On returning to the park where this group of *bhikkhus* are staying, the Buddha tells him to bear these injuries as he is suffering now for actions that would have normally caused suffering in an unpleasant state for thousands of years.

Now, Aṅgulimāla had to have amassed an enormous bad *kammic* package. Though the *sutta* gives no figures on how many people he killed, it suggests he killed tens if not hundreds of people. He also certainly committed numerous bad mental *kammas* of hate in wishing his victims dead; not to mention the many other bad *kammas* linked to his chosen life-style. Yet, he is still able to attain *nibbāna* and as an *arahant*, Aṅgulimāla has no more rebirths and could not suffer his *kammic* fruits in a future existence, so he had to experience them in that very life which amounted to only a few cuts and torn robes – nothing compared to what the normal results of such murderous *kamma* would have been. These two factors of attaining *nibbāna* despite enormous bad *kamma* and then suffering minimal *kammic* fruits demonstrate the effect of the Noble Eight-fold Path on *kamma*.

The Buddha describes *kamma*, volitional action, in several different ways, such as bad and good, unwholesome and wholesome, demeritorious and meritorious, etc. In the *Majjhima-nikāya* (Trenckner, 1888, p.389-391) and the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (Morris, 1976, p.230-237) the Buddha lists the four kinds of *kamma*:

1. There is dark *kamma* (*kammaṃ kanhaṃ*) with dark result.

2. There is bright *kamma* (*kammaṃ sukhaṃ*) with bright result.
3. There is dark-and-bright *kamma* (*kammaṃ kaṇhasukhaṃ*) with dark-and-bright result.
4. There is *kamma* that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, *kamma* that leads to the destruction of *kamma* (*kammakkhāya saṃvattati*).

The *Āṅguttara-nikāya*, which has the fullest description, defines “*kamma* which leads to the destruction of *kamma*” as the actions of the Eight-fold Path and equally as the Seven Factors of Enlightenment (*satta-bhojjaṅgā*) (Morris, 1976, p. 235-237). With the full development of these path actions, one attains *nibbāna*. Somehow the practice of the Eight-fold Path, and/or the Seven Factors of Enlightenment as a holistic practice destroys *kamma*. Notice it is the volition (*cetanā*) to stop *kamma*. Now, since *cetanā* and *kamma* are synonymous, the *cetanā* to stop *kamma* is the same as ‘*kamma* which leads to the destruction of *kamma*’ (in the case of dark *kamma* “*tatra, puṇṇa, yamidaṃ kammaṃ kaṇhaṃ kaṇhavipākaṃ tassa pahānāya yā cetanā*”) or ‘the *cetanā* which leads to the destruction of *cetanā*’.

However, the *kammic* results (*kamma-vipāka*) already accumulated are not eradicated as the fruits of ones *kamma* must be experienced. But, as the case of *Āṅgulimāla* exemplifies, even the worst dark *kamma* can be reduced into minimal results by the power of the perfection of the fourth *kamma* in the attainment of *nibbāna*.

The commentary does provide some information on the functioning of the fourth *kamma*. At one point in the *sutta* *Āṅgulimāla* says:

While I did many deeds that lead
 To rebirth in evil realms,
 Yet their result has reached me now [...]
 (Bodhi, 1997 p.716).

In commenting on the verse “Yet their result has reached me now” (*phuṭṭho kammavipākena*), the commentary reads “Because, by active Path intention (*maggacetanāya*), *kamma* cooks, ripens, goes to decay, therefore

it is said “Yet their result has reached me now”. There is a problem though with the commentary’s explanation. The idea of ‘cooking’ or ‘ripening’ does suggest a hastening of the *kammic* result, and ‘decay’ suggests a reduction of the *kammic* result. But, it appears that the MN commentary is referring to Aṅgulimāla’s bad or dark *kamma* because Path practice also generates meritorious fruits and should a practitioner not attain *nibbāna* they will have a future existence as a king, in the higher planes of existence or they may attain the three lower *ariya puggala* and upon death be reborn in a favorable state (such as the Buddha explains in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* 2.6-7 (Walshe, 1999, p. 240-241). This means good *kammic* fruit cannot be cooked and decayed during practice because one who practices the Path and dies without attaining *nibbāna* would need a good *kammic* package ‘large’ enough to produce very favorable rebirths. I will leave this discussion here because to speculate in depth on *kamma* is beyond the scope of this paper and understanding the exact functioning of *kamma* is not necessary for the argumentation and goal of this paper, but this does point to inconsistencies in the commentaries.

Whatever the details of *kammic* functioning, the fact that Aṅgulimāla suffered only cuts and torn robes, for tens if not hundreds of murders, indicates the enormous effect that the perfection of the Noble Eight-fold Path has on *kamma* and its fruits. This means that a person practicing the Noble Eight-fold Path, particularly the Fourth Kind of *Kamma*, one performing *kamma* which leads to the destruction of *kamma*, can attain *nibbāna* in this very life, regardless of his past bad or good *kamma*.

For most Theravada Buddhists the *Aṅgulimāla-sutta* is conflated with the commentaries and it is the story from commentaries which Theravadans know as the story of Aṅgulimāla; evidenced in part by many retellings of the story I have heard by Theravadans. In the commentary stories we are told that Aṅgulimāla was an exceptional Brahman youth who surpassed his fellow students in their studies. Becoming jealous of him, his classmates lie to the master saying that Aṅgulimāla has slept with his wife. The master, wishing to ruin Aṅgulimāla, tells him that he must bring back a thousand fingers as proof of his loyalty. The story goes on to say that after having collected 999 fingers, Aṅgulimāla was going to kill the next person he saw. This would have been his mother had not the Buddha purposefully went there first to intervene. Matricide is one of the five actions

that necessarily damn one in the next existence.¹ The Buddha was said to have recognized Aṅgulimāla's potential to understand his teachings. It also relates that when the Buddha ordained him, Aṅgulimāla's robes and bowl spontaneously appeared due to his past good *kamma*. There are other details, but they will be brought up as necessary or do not concern this paper.²

What does this added detail tell us? David R. Loy states "The commentaries give a rather implausible account of how he [Aṅgulimāla] became a killer, obviously intended to persuade us that he was not such a bad guy after all" (2000, p. 150). As a good student forced to do wrong on the account of others, his bad actions are not really his fault. Making him not such a bad guy allows him to have had a store of good *kammic* fruits. This softens the perceived unfairness of a mass murderer attaining *nibbāna* and escaping worldly justice while the world is filled with decent people who cannot attain *nibbāna*, or, for that matter, attain any desired goal. Given the societal respect for ascetics, the fact that the villagers injure an ascetic and *arahant* is significant. It shows the contempt that many people still had for this unpunished criminal (Loy, p. 151). Indeed, in the *Vinaya-piṭaka*, *Mahāvagga 1* due to public outcry to a thief wearing a 'finger-garland' being ordained, the Buddha prohibits ordaining thieves who wear emblems (*dhaja-baddha*) (Oldenburg, 1997, p. 74).

Richard Gombrich also thinks the commentary entirely mistaken, but states that he finds the *sutta* on its own lacking in full meaning, he wants to know who was Aṅgulimāla and why was he killing people (2006, p. 135-164). Gombrich presents a long proof to show that Aṅgulimāla was a follower of tantric Shaivism in the style of Kali, thus he was killing as part of his worship of Shiva. I find this argument compelling for its historical import and it could show, as Gombrich states, the general conversion to Buddhism of this tantric Shaivite sect (p. 164). However, I do not think this added detail important to the basic concept of the *sutta* that liberation is open to a murderer who is exactly the type of person one thinks cannot and even should not attain liberation. In fact, it could be argued that just like the commentaries shift the blame from Aṅgulimāla, Gombrich's explanation does the same, though to a lesser extent, by showing

¹ The five are: wounding a Buddha, killing an *arahant*, matricide, patricide and causing a schism in the *saṅgha*.

² There are several summaries of the commentary, but I do not know of a full translation in English (see Bodhi, 1995, p. 1289; Sao Htun Hmat Win, 1991, p. 74-75; accessstoinight.org: search Angulimala).

that Aṅgulimāla was mistaken in his religious belief (a *micchaditṭhi* which is detrimental) and so he is not pure evil after all. Further, it can be argued that it breaks the rule of the *Simsapā sutta* in that this additional historical context distracts reader/listener from central message of the Path.

A modern retelling of the story found in a beautifully done Thai graphic novel (in the Thai language) aimed at children and adolescents follows the tradition of presenting the commentarial stories as the story of Aṅgulimāla. In both the prelude and the concluding comments it is stated that the story of Aṅgulimāla shows that a person *doing* evil can change his life and become good, including practicing the *dhamma* (Aum Rachawet, 2554, p. 3, 116). I do not know if the writers intended to make a distinction between a fundamentally good person doing evil and a purely evil person, but the graphic novel presents Aṅgulimāla before his fall as Ahimsāka (Harmless), and as an even better person than the one portrayed in the commentaries. It states that he does not want to kill innocent people so he chooses to go to dangerous areas and kill thieves and the like (p. 55). It shows him sparing the life of a man because his young daughter says Aṅgulimāla must kill her too if he kills her father, and Aṅgulimāla saves a woman from being raped by two men – Aṅgulimāla does kill the two men (p. 60-61, p. 90-93). So in this Thai graphic novel we really do find a good man forced to do evil and even more so than in the commentaries the teaching that an evil person, not just a person doing evil, can attain *nibbāna* is lost.

Discussion

The commentary, wishing to make the original *sutta* more acceptable to human sentiments (and perhaps Gombrich too), shifts the blame for the killings away from Aṅgulimāla and it explains his monk-hood as a by-product of past good *kamma*, demonstrated convincingly by the spontaneous appearance of his robes and bowl as the commentary states. K. R. Norman states that Early Buddhism always had a *jhānic* way to *nibbāna* which usually means living as a *bhikkhu* and practicing meditation and a *kammic* way which is following the Noble Eightfold Path and improving one's *kamma* over many lifetimes until one can successfully practice the *jhānic* path (1997, p. 44). One can dispute whether it is possible to separate meditation from the Noble Eight Fold Path, but two paths of *jhānic* and *kammic* are useful here, for I argue that the *Aṅgulimāla-sutta* teaches the *jhānic*

way out of *samsāra* and the commentaries teach the *kammic* way out. In effect the commentaries pull the *sutta* out of a *nibbānic* context and brings it back into *samsāra*, the cycle of rebirth, where people with *samsāric* mindsets can appreciate it. Gombrich does much the same concentrating on the historical and thus he concentrates on the *samsāric* meaning rather than on the *nibbānic* meaning. The *sutta*, on its own, presents a truth that is beyond good and evil, right and wrong, and beyond history precisely because it is beyond *samsāra*. The Buddha did not treat Aṅgulimāla as an evil sinner to be judged and punished, as a person who must necessarily be reborn in a hell, or as a follower of a religious sect that must be reformed. He saw a person capable of attaining *nibbāna*, and so he caught his attention with a *dhamma* sound bite and convinced him to change his ways.

As the Second Noble Truth explains, human nature desires. We crave a better *samsāra* not release from it. We wish to eliminate suffering from *samsāra* through magic, medicine, and machines while retaining its pleasures rather than cut off the desire that makes the magic, medicine and machines necessary. We do not seek to liberate ourselves from the bonds of *samsāra*; we in fact tighten them. In this view, the Noble Eight-fold Path becomes a tool for improving *samsāra*, through its merit production, instead a tool for attaining *nibbāna* through its *kamma* destruction. People's desire for sensual pleasures and continued existence distorts their vision of the path and of *nibbāna*. Our craving causes us to interpret *nibbāna*-orientated *suttas*, like the *Aṅgulimāla-sutta*, in a way that validates the objects of our desire – *samsāric* sensual pleasures and continued existence – rather than interpreting them in a way that negates these desires. Establishing past and present good actions and finding meaning in our life as an influences on future Path actions effectively validates our present *samsāric* actions by giving them *nibbānic* meaning. Buddhist lay-people commonly state that they are not ready in this life to fully practice the Path, but that they are nonetheless laying a foundation for committed practice in a future existence. In this scenario, our present weakness is not so bad after all.

Modern academic rationality and materiality seek to explain everything in terms of history, philosophy, psychology etc. and thus they miss the point of the *nibbānic* teachings of the *dhamma-vinaya* in searching for *samsāric* explanations. These explanations serve to interpret *suttas* in a way which validates the modern academics worldview rather than explain

the religious dynamics of a *sutta* such as the *Āṅgulimāla-sutta*.³

In diluting *Āṅgulimāla*'s evil, before he commences the Path, the commentaries change the whole dynamic of the Noble Eight-fold Path, for now one's success lies not in the immediate efficacy of the Path, but in the purified *kamma* of previous existences. The Noble Eight-fold Path becomes a necessary, but not sufficient, cause in attaining *nibbāna* in a single lifetime. Because without prior purification enlightenment becomes impossible.

Establishing that one must arrive at the Path as a basically good person with a store of past good *kamma*, means that no one actually attains *nibbāna* in this very life. No one can, for the very first time, hear the teachings of the Buddha, begin to practice them and attain *nibbāna*. One must have been lucky enough, or already 'good' enough, to have performed good *kamma* in previous lives, never mind that one may have been ignorant of any Buddhist teaching. Past *kamma* certainly plays a part; old *kamma* or old actions, have set up one's current physical body and determined much of one's mental dispositions. Yet, given the wide range of people who attain *nibbāna*, from a murderer to a courtesan, rich and poor, people from all classes, etc., old *kamma* operating in this life is obviously not determinate, unless of course we weaken the Noble Eight-fold Path, the fourth *kamma*, and follow the line that all these people have past good *kamma* that finally ripens and allows them to understand, practice and realize the Path.

Conclusion

Following the commentaries, the traditional interpretations of the *Bodhisatta* in the *Jātaka* stories, and the like, in accepting past-life purification as part of Path practice creates a significant problem. *Kamma* becomes too deterministic. By this thinking *Āṅgulimāla*'s past good *kamma* put the Buddha before him, provided him with the mental dispositions to understand the Buddha's teaching, and had him say 'yes' to that teaching. But, new *kamma*, new volitional action, is what we currently willfully do through body, speech and mind, what we choose to do now. *Āṅgulimāla* had to have been able to say 'no' to the Buddha had he wanted to or his

³ In this same line of thinking, I suggest that Mahayana validates *samsāra* by equating it with *nirvāna* using logical inference. Rather than put end to desire and exit *samsāra*, attaining nirvana in Mahayana allows one to experience the *samsāra* we all love and crave only without the suffering.

decision to follow the Buddha was not volitional, not *kamma*. It would have been an already determined response due to past good *kamma*, and he said ‘yes’ in a strict cause and effect determined by his current fruits of past good *kamma*. We must accept that one can say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the Buddha, no matter our prior dispositions, or new *kamma* does not exist and we end up with a previously determined response. No matter one’s past *kamma*, bad or good, one must be free to make the choice.

Due to human desire for sensual pleasures and continued existence, later Pali works – commentaries, interpretations of *Jātakas*, etc. – have reworked the dynamics of Path practice in a manner which validates these desires. Establishing goodness and good *kamma* as prerequisites for Path practice takes the pressure off the practitioner; it excuses our present weakness and allows us to take a very gradual path toward enlightenment. In practicing this gradual path, we can stop and smell the roses throughout eons of existence all with a clear conscience. However, the *Āṅgulimāla-sutta* tells a story that demonstrates the power of the Noble Eight-fold Path, of *kamma* which leads to the destruction of *kamma*. It also shows the ‘other-worldliness’ of Path practice, which when rigorously practiced, stands completely outside human, *saṃsāric*, norms. The lack of a context and a why for Āṅgulimāla’s killing allows the original *sutta* to show liberation from evil in a single lifetime without contingencies.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Two principle recommendations are put forth here: 1) Every religious text has had multiple meanings of its content put forth. In an attempt to extract meaning from a religious text we highly recommend not reading into the text. Setting personal, cultural, political and religious bias aside is standard in academic work; it should also be so when religious adherents search for meaning in religious texts. By this I mean the religious adherents themselves must not read their religious bias into their own texts. Buddhists who are shocked by the *Āṅgulimāla-sutta* must leave it as it stands. Creating a story that alleviates that shock in no way explains, or even comments on, what caused that shock. In fact we have seen the stories explain away rather than comment on the shock. Read the Tipiṭaka as it is. 2) Academic, socio-historical, philological, etc., studies do aid in the understanding of the human phenomena of religious belief and behavior (and we most heartily support this work), but it does not usually allow us

to know what this belief and behavior mean for the insider. And so in the in the tradition of Max Weber's *verstehen* and Clifford Geertz's thick description and interpretive theory⁴ – understanding the religious meaning of religious text is a necessary first step in any understanding of the text.

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⁴ See Pals (2006) chapter five and Geertz (1973, 2000) especially chapter one.

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