BEARING WITH IT:
Angulimala's Transformative Journey

In the usual mythic meetings between hero and villain, the former slays or captures the latter. Each conquest strengthens the view of a hard-wired confrontation between opposing kinds of human beings and inner states—those that are fundamentally decent and those that are incorrigibly destructive. This vision serves a polarizing belief, yielding the reductionism that fuels much of our experience as a species. Between family members, tribes, ethnic groups and nations, the adversarial model thrives. In thriving, it seems to confirm itself as true. If we look deeply into our own minds, we can find how one part of the psyche stalks and threatens another, a kind of inner hologram that we project upon our social relations and upon the environment which sustains us. Nothing escapes the ferocity of this model. In clinging to it, we are all fundamentalists at heart.

Though the story of the Buddha's meeting on a dusty road in India with the murderer, Angulimala, has the feel of fable, it runs counter to the conventional narrative of inevitable struggle. It challenges the logos of duality. It offers a model of transformation so radical that we contain its potency with a diminished and diminishing reading. Although the story is a powerful metaphor, it might be useful to consider, too, the possibility of its literal premise: that a mass murderder can be stopped in his tracks and utterly changed by a teacher of non-violence he had meant to kill, but instead decides to follow as his spiritual guide for the rest of his life.

Akin to an archetypal Hollywood stand-off, Angulimala—'necklace of fingers'-- waits in ambush for his next victim, the Buddha. Although forewarned by friends of the killer's intention, the Buddha maintains his composure and continues on his route: " the Blessed One kept going in silence," the sutta says. He proceeds without discernible fear into Angulimala's apparent trap. What seems like the conventional encounter between evil and good becomes, instead, a repudiation of our polarized thinking and a challenge to all the ways we go to war against ourselves and others. Within the turn of a brief tale, the false duality transmutes into the alchemical possibilities of the heart's capacity to embrace and transform what is most frightening, rather than turning it into an enemy.

If we look deeply into the Angulimala sutta, we find a subtlty belied by the story's parable-like form. The Buddha was called 'the great physician,' not because of his cookie-cutter remedies, but because of his intuitive grasp of the particular ways in which each of us manifests the afflictions born of our ignorance. Again and again, we witness how he attunes to those he meets and teaches. Zen names that capacity 'an appropriate response,' and the creative nature of the Buddha's actions are as much a medicine as the content he addresses with those who come into his presence. The meeting with Angulimala reveals a four-fold 'protocol:' 1) courage, 2) engagement, 3) trust and 4) pragmatism. These elements are all pervaded by a homeopathic infusion of compassion for self and other, and it is this potion, in its appropriate combination, which undoes a murderous intention and re-directs that energy toward the good.

Courage

The warning is a dire one and it come three times: "Cowherds, shepherds, & farmers saw him going along the road to where Angulimala was staying, and on seeing him said to him, 'Don't go along that road, contemplative, for on that road is Angulimala: brutal, bloody-handed, devoted to killing & slaying, showing no mercy to living beings. He has turned villages into non-villages, towns into non-towns, settled countryside into unsettled countryside. Having repeatedly killed human beings, he wears a garland made of fingers. Groups of ten, twenty, thirty, & forty men have gone along that road, and even they have fallen into Angulimala's hands.'" And the Buddha's response epitomizes a courage that requires neither audience nor explanation: he "…kept going on in silence." On the path, literally and metaphorically, he remains steadfast in his intention, and self-contained. We know he has heard the warning, and likely he knows about Angulimala. Before their actual meeting, the Buddha models a bravery which life asks of each of us each day: without denial or drama, to continue toward whatever might await us, with a confidence only a practiced courage can offer. The Buddha's awakening, and our own, requires an ongoing meeting with Mara, that undermining shape-shifting force of fear and delusion, and Angulimala is one more manifestation of Mara's threatening power.

The danger that waits for us does not have to be physical or external. Within the mind, harsh thoughts toward self and others ambush our well-being a countless times a day. Spiritual practice asks that we cultivate the courage to continue on our path with equanimity rather than reactivity—the inner collapse or the flare of meanness. Can we walk forth as the Buddha does, in the face of our gravest dangers, with steps neither hurried nor reluctant, embodying faith in our own sanity?

Engagement

"All real living is meeting," Martin Buber knew, and he didn't mean only safe and pleasant ones. Life asks for our engagement each moment. Stepping forward on his chosen path, the Buddha knows he will meet the man who has sworn to kill him. He welcomes this engagement, it would seem. He does not try to elude or capture or annihilate Angulimala—instead, he chooses to encounter him. To be able to turn *toward* an adversary, inner or outer, real or imagined, invites an intimacy that is supported by the quiet courage of our presence. The Buddha does not go to war with the killer, and he does not ignore the threat. Instead he meets Angulimala with a creative response that changes the dynamic between the two of them.

At the outset, the murderer is locked into his own narrow and destructive thinking. " '…Now this contemplative comes attacking, as it were, alone and without a companion. Why don't I kill him?' So Angulimala, taking up his sword & shield, buckling on his bow & quiver, follows right behind…" his supposedly-helpless prey. How does the Buddha engage with such a maniacal intent? Not by reasoning with Angulimala, but by something more potent: "And the Blessed One willed a feat of psychic power such that Angulimala, though running with all his might, could not catch up with the Blessed One walking at normal pace." This is the action of a person who understands the determination of his opponent. It is an action of the will, a declared clarity about personal boundaries and acceptable behavior. We do not have to believe in pyschic powers to understand the imbedded metaphor in such a demonstration of strength. We might read the Buddha's thwarting of Angulimala's murderous intent as an example of non-violent resistance that defeats armies. We might read it as the resolve we have to meet our own rage, hunting us down as it does with taunts and schemes. How might such resolve arise? Through a dedication to practices and principles

that cultivate such a capacity. In the most well-known exchange in the story, Angulimala demands, “Stop, Contemplative! Stop!” And the Buddha responds, “ I *have* stopped, Angulimala. *You* stop.” At that moment, the relationship between the two transforms. “Then the thought occurred to Angulimala, ‘These Sakyan contemplatives are speakers of the truth, asserters of the truths, and yet this contemplative, even while walking, says, *I have stopped, Angulimala.* You *stop.* Why don't I question him?’ “ An adversarial stand-off has turned into one of curiosity and possibility. “I ask you the meaning of this: How have you stopped? How haven't I?" When the murderer poses his questions, respectfully, the Buddha responds in kind. A life-and-death battle becomes an inquiry, a deadly confrontation becomes an example of mutuality, available in even the most apparently-intractable situation.

Trust

No change is possible without trust. Adversaries must trust themselves, each other and the desirability of peace. They must trust in the possibility of change. This is true for our outer comflicts and our internal ones: inside and out, the field we must call forth is one of trust. For the Buddha, this trust is the fruit of his years of meditation, inquiry and teaching. It is that trust which informs his repose, his steadfastness and his compassion toward a man intent on killing him. In the interchange itself, the two men demonstrate their trust in each other. Each believes he will be heard, and the teacher believes the student—for that is what Anguliamala has become—is ripe for a teaching. In a few words, he shares with Angulimala, in the man’s own terminology, the essence of his understanding: "I have stopped, Angulimala, once & for all, having cast off violence toward all living beings. You, though, are unrestrained toward beings. That's how I've stopped and you haven't."

In a pithy offering, the Buddha uses the language of his would-be murderer to suggest another plane of experience on which change is not only possible: it is the law of existence. And when he says “I have stopped,” the Buddha lets Angulimala know that they are alike, that the Buddha too was once unrestrained, violent in word and thought and deed, caught once as all humans are by the ‘three poisons’ of greed, hatred and ignorance. Mutuality grows from shared human fraility, and this confession inside the Buddha’s teaching touches Angulimala to his core. "At long last a greatly revered great seer for my sake has come to the great forest. Having heard your verse in line with the Dhamma, I will go about having abandoned evil." This immediate change of heart may be read as fable-like, or we might consider that Angulimala has long yearned for a way to free himself from his afflictions, and finally—rather than suddenly—the teacher appears who offers the necessary guidance. What looks like an instanteous conversion may be the completion of a heart’s wish to know itself, to claim its own goodness, to free itself from suffering. Angulimala becomes a monk, and the tale might end there, in what reads like a true happy ending: “Then the Blessed One set out wandering toward Savatthi with Ven. Angulimala as his attendant monk. After wandering by stages he reached Savatthi, and there he lived, near Savatthi, in Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's monastery.”

But we are only half-way through the sutta. What follows demonstrates the pragmatic, realistic and non-sentimental understanding of the Buddha’s insight into tne ending of violence, within ourselves and in our human relations.

Pragmatism

Sometime after Angulimala’s ordination, King Pasenadi, a devoted follower of the Buddha, sets off with a contingent of soldiers to capture or kill Angulimala. Not knowing of the murderer’s transformation, the king stops to visit with the Buddha at Jetavana Monastery.

He complains that he will never be able to apprehend the mythic terrorist, and the Buddha then sets forth a question (rather than announcing the fact of Angulimala's presence in the monestary): "But, great King, if you were to see Angulimala with shaven head and beard, clad in the yellow robe, gone forth from the home life into homelessness, and that he was abstaining from killing living beings, from taking that which is not given, and from false speech, and, eating only one time of day, he was living the life of purity in virtue and noble conduct — if you saw him thus, how would you treat him?"

Here we see the Buddha's psychological acumen, offering as hypothetical what is reality, allowing the King time to try on the possibility of a converted killer. The king is skeptical, but respectful: "…We should pay homage to him, invite him to accept the four requisites of a monk, and should arrange for his protection. But, how could such an unvirtuous person of evil character have such virtue and restraint?" When presented with Angulimala in person, in his monk's robes, the King is at first terrified, and then proceeds to interrogate the monk on questions about his birth and history. Beyond the verification of facts, the King is testing in the man the truth of his change. "It moved him deeply that the Buddha had been able to turn this cruel man into a gentle member of his Order." The King's doubt has been allowed room. In time, it gives way to a conviction which results in promises of protection for Angulimala, rather than his arrest or execution. How easy it might have been for King Pasenadi—for any of us—to allow pride to foreclose on a change of heart. Sometimes we doubt even our own capacity to grow, and we would benefit from the Buddha's example of giving the doubtful king time and space to inquire, interrogate, experience in himself his own shift from hatred to tenderness, from terror to protectiveness.

We see the Buddha's pragmatic approach again, when the monk who was the murderer comes for advice. A young woman in the town is suffering through a breech birth, and Angulimala wonders how he can support her. One can imagine that he still carries shame, senses himself unworthy of being of use. Each day on alms rounds, abuse is heaped upon him by those who do not accept that he has genuinely changed. Food is refused. Perhaps the suffering of the woman mirrors his own: two beings continuing forward even though circumstances are unusually difficult. "On seeing her, the thought occurred to him:' How tormented are living beings! How tormented are living beings!' "

When he asks the Buddha how to aid her, the Buddha offers a strange suggestion: that Angulimala let her know the he is someone who has not harmed others, and his harmlessness itself will protect her and her baby. Since the Buddha knows this is not the truth, why might he have given such advice? Consider it a test of the monk's capacity to face the truth of his past. Though the story of Angulimala demonstrates the possibility of transformation, it doesn't ask us to pretend that one's past deeds evaporate, have no consequence, do not need to be acknowledged. " Wouldn't that be a lie for me?, " the monk replies. "For I have intentionally killed many living beings."

The Buddha then reframes his response, and suggests that Angulimala say to her, "Since I was born in the noble birth, I do not recall intentionally killing a living being." In one clear-eyed "correction," the Buddha confirms his monk's integrity, and offers a pragmatic view of rebirth—a psychological/ethical one that implies the possibilities each of us might have for metamorphosis. Each time we surrender an afflictive emotion, a deluded state, we are 're-born,' ennobled, and able to buoy others with our very human—not mysterious or magical—hard-won goodness.

The teaching of karma arises again, at the end of the tale. Angulimala by now has become an arahant, which in Buddhist terminology refers to a highly advanced and purified practitioner. But one day on alms rounds he is violently attacked. "So Ven. Angulimala — his head broken open and dripping with blood, his bowl broken, and his outer robe ripped to shreds — went to the Blessed One." The Buddha offers chastening counsel: "The Blessed

One saw him coming from afar and on seeing him said to him: "Bear with it, brahman! Bear with it! “

Bear with it. In just three words, a philosphy for maturity, for taking responsibility for the results of one’s actions long after those actions have ceased. And this is offered as a benefit rather than a burden. We might read the next lines literally, or again we might wonder if the Buddha isn’t allowing for an understanding that doesn’t require an acceptance of the doctrine of literal rebirths. “The fruit of the kamma that would have burned you in hell for many years, many hundreds of years, many thousands of years, you are now experiencing in the here-&-now!" By not fighting against the long-reaching effects of the violence of his earlier years, Angulimala can complete rather than carry the suffering of his acts. No amount of wishing for it to be otherwise, no bargaining with fate, no appeal to others to see him as cleansed and changed can alter the fact that his prior actions still summon ill-will from others. *Bear with it,* and not just that: *Bear with it, Brahman,* the Buddha says. In this instruction, he also includes an honouring—*Brahman,* the term for a high-caste person radically transformed by the Buddha into a name for one who behaves nobly, rather than one born into entitled circumstances. The former prince forsakes his own royal birthright and finds instead a birthright of nobility available to any human being. Actions are fate, he taught for eighty devoted years , and continues to teach in the stories that remain so alive and valid for us today. Angulimala’s past violence continues to unfold in others even after his new-found gentleness and deep insight earn him the title of Brahman. Both are true, and both need to be be borne--the suffering and the freedom from that suffering--in each moment of every human life.

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