

37. Gifts and Vulnerabilities

Our gifts and vulnerabilities are intertwined.

Angulimāla

Ahimsaka was the son of the royal chaplain of King Pasenadi's court. The King was a steadfast supporter of the Buddha. Astrologers noted that Ahimsaka was born under the "robber star" (Sirius) and believed he was vulnerable to becoming a robber or criminal.

So his parents named him "Ahimsaka" which means "harmless" in hopes this would inspire that ideal in him. They raised him with care and kindness. He grew up strong, intelligent, well-behaved, and diligent in his studies.

He was so diligent that his parents sent him to the famous university of Takkaskila. A renowned teacher accepted him, and he excelled in his studies. He served his teacher so faithfully and humbly that he became the teacher's favorite. The teacher's family gave him meals.

Other students grew envious and plotted to drive a wedge between Ahimsaka and the teacher. They quietly hinted that Ahimsaka was disloyal and plotting to push the teacher out.

At first the teacher dismissed the innuendos. But in time the poisonous suspicion took root in his heart, and he schemed to get rid of Ahimsaka.

Since Ahimsaka's studies were nearly completed, the teacher said that his final duty was to honor the teacher with a gift.

"Certainly, master!" he said. "What shall I give you?"

"You must give me a thousand fingers of the right hand." He figured Ahimsaka would be caught or killed in this task.

"O, how can I do that, master! My family never uses violence."

His teacher was firm: "You must give your education proper homage, or it will bear no fruit." Eventually Ahimsaka was persuaded of what he must do.

He gathered weapons and retreated into the wild Jālini forest in his home province of Kosala. He took up residence in a high cliff that offered a clear view of the road below. When he saw a traveler, he hurried down, killed him, and took a finger. He hung the fingers in a tree where birds ate the flesh away. To protect the bones from rotting, he threaded them into a necklace that he wore around his neck.

News of the gory crimes spread. No one knew his identity, so they called him "Angulimāla" which means "Finger Garland."

People stopped traveling through the Jālini forest, so Angulimāla ventured closer to the villages to find victims. Like modern refugees fleeing a war zone, the villagers abandoned their homes and sought the protection of cities.

Thus King Pasenadi learned of the one-man reign of terror and gathered a regiment of soldiers to hunt him down.

The Buddha learned as well and, intuitively sensing goodness in him, went to visit Angulimāla. By now he had killed 999 people.

(Picking up the story in the "Angulimāla Sutta" found in Majjhima Nikāya 86¹⁸.)

Angulimāla saw the Blessed One coming from afar and thought: "Isn't it amazing! Isn't it astounding! Groups of ten, twenty, thirty, and forty men have gone along this road, and have fallen into my hands. Yet now this contemplative comes attacking, as it were, alone and without a companion. I think I'll kill him."

Angulimāla took up his sword and shield, buckled on his bow and quiver, and ran with all his might to catch the Buddha, who walked at a normal pace. Yet he could not catch him.

Angulimāla thought: "Isn't it amazing! Isn't it astounding! I could catch a swift elephant, a swift horse, a swift chariot, a swift deer and seize them. But I can't catch this recluse walking at a normal pace."

So he stopped and called out, "Stop, recluse! Stop!"

The Buddha said, "I have stopped, Angulimāla. You stop too."

Angulimāla asked, "What do you mean? How have you stopped? How have I not stopped?"

The Buddha said, "Angulimāla, once and for all I have cast off violence toward all living beings. That's how I have stopped. You

¹⁸ This passage has been rendered from the translations of Bhikkhu Bodhi and Thanissaro Bhikkhu and shortened for readability.

are unrestrained toward beings. That's how you have not stopped."

Angulimāla reflected, "At long last a revered great seer has come to the forest for my sake. I will renounce evil forever."

He hurled his sword and weapons into a gaping chasm. He paid homage at the Sublime One's feet, and right then and there requested the going forth [so he could become a monk and disciple of the Buddha].

The Buddha said, "Come, monk."

With these simple words, Angulimāla became a monk.

I suspect this conversation between the Buddha and Angulimāla was more detailed than what has survived in the records. But we can see the flow of events.

Angulimāla walked back to Sāvathī with the Buddha and began training. This included meditation and daily alms rounds for his food. On his rounds, people were frightened and gave him little. Some threw clods and sticks at him. He often came back to the monastery cut and bleeding. But he continued the daily rounds because that was what was expected of a monk.

One day, on alms round, he saw a woman in difficult and painful labor. He was deeply moved by her suffering, and he shared his concern with the Buddha. The Buddha said, "You should help her."

Angulimāla sent word that he was coming. Her family set up a curtain and a chair so he could sit in the room with the woman without seeing her.

In his presence, her difficulties subsided, the birthing went smoothly and woman and infant were healthy.

Word of the miracle spread. Other women in labor sought his help. As more were helped, attitudes toward him changed. He received food on his rounds, though a few still hurled stones. He bore these injuries with a peaceful mind and heart.

In time he became fully enlightened. Eventually he retired into the forest and lived serenely. We don't know much about his later years except for a few verses he spoke, such as:

*Who once did live in negligence
and then is negligent no more,
he illuminates this world
like the moon freed from a cloud.*

*Who checks the evil deeds he did
by doing wholesome deeds instead,
he illuminates this world
like the moon freed from a cloud*

*The youthful monk who devotes
his efforts to the Buddha's teaching,
he illuminates this world
like the moon freed from a cloud.*

— *Majjhima Nikāya* 86.18

Today in Buddhist lands, most children know Angulimāla's dramatic story. Pregnant women look upon him as a patron saint whose blessing ensures a successful delivery and brings children joyfully into the world.

Discouragement and Hope

As Angulimāla trained under the Buddha, he probably had moments of joy, peace, spaciousness, and deep relief. But I doubt it was all sweetness and light. He had given up violence, but the momentum of his crimes probably carried forward for some time. His bodily injuries were small compared to the horrific images arising in his mind-heart. He must have had moments of great discouragement.

When we sit down to meditate, we may have moments of joy, equanimity, and spaciousness. Insights into old habits give relief. We get a genuine taste of freedom

Then the meditation falls apart. The mind flies around the room like a party balloon that slipped out of our hands before we could tie off the valve. It goes "*phewwww*" as it circles insanely around the room, smashes into a wall, and drops to the floor like a total failure.

While I was training in Thailand, I wrote in my journal, "My mind has checked out every other book from the Library of Congress and is reading them all at once."

This practice can be discouraging. We may think, “I don’t have it.” “It’s beyond me.” “I can get a little glimpse, but I’m no yogi.” “I don’t have the talent for this.”

In this context, I share the story of Angulimāla for several reasons.

First, in the span of a few years, he went from killing 999 people to becoming an arahant, a fully enlightened being. Unless we have killed more than 999 people in the last few years, there is plenty of hope for us.

There is nothing essential keeping us from going as far as we might ever want to go. This sutta says, “Look how far we can go astray and still find full peaceful awakening.”

This story reassures us that distractions are normal and not fatal.

There are many stresses in our lives. We have all done bad things intentionally and unintentionally. We stumble over and over. It’s not surprising that disturbing states arise within us. This practice is about seeing the truth, not shielding us from it.

The story suggests that we can manage our difficulties. Probably none of us have gone over to the dark side as fully as Angulimāla. He awoke nonetheless. We can too.

The problem is not who we are. The problem may be who we *think* we are. It may be what we *fear* we are or *hope* we aren’t. But it’s not about the essence of *who* we are.

We don’t take refuge in who we *think* we are. We take refuge in our *potential to awaken* whether we understand it or not. We don’t take refuge in how we think life works. We take refuge in *the natural laws of how the mind works* whether we understand or not.

Gifts and Vulnerabilities

The main reason I share the story is that it suggests a relationship between our greatest gifts and our greatest vulnerabilities. Ahimsaka’s greatest gift was healing: his

serenity was so catching that women in difficult labor calmed down. Children who might otherwise have died were brought more easily into the world.

Angulimāla's greatest vulnerability was being gullible enough to be talked into killing innocent people: he violently took life out of the world. Ahimsaka/Angulimāla was a healer and a killer.

This suggests that our greatest gifts and our greatest vulnerabilities may be fraternal twins. Any religion, spirituality, or philosophy of life with any depth recognizes that the human heart has a tremendous capacity for kindness, compassion, generosity, and courage. We also have the potential to do great damage to ourselves and others.

Within each of us is an Ahimsaka and an Angulimāla, an Anakan Skywalker and a Darth Vader, angels and demons, Buddha nature and Mara (deluded) nature. We can help and we can harm. We all both help and harm.

We could call our greatest strengths and weaknesses Dhamma gifts and Dhamma vulnerabilities. These go beyond ordinary talents and frailties. Ordinary gifts might be music, writing, cooking, fixing machines, programming computers, or painting. Ordinary vulnerabilities might be having a short temper, being impulsive, being easily discouraged, or avoiding conflict. These are the stuff of personality and ordinary psychology.

Dhamma Gifts

But Dhamma gifts are deeper. They are the ways we connect with the core of life. They are the ways we touch a source of well-being that is undisturbed by the surface of life. They are the ways in which we are already enlightened.

All of us have one or two divine gifts. They may be so close to us that we don't recognize them. They may have been so ignored in our childhood that they don't seem real. They may be so denied that we have become cynical about them. But they are there.

For example, some of you have the gift of *Oneness*. You sense how everything is a part of everything else. Maybe the only place this surfaces is in your love of nature. When you're in the wilderness or a field, something deep inside you relaxes. Your armor — the ways you contain yourself — begins to melt. You feel more a part of everything.

Like Ahimsaka's concern for women in labor, some of you have the gift of *Compassion*. You're drawn to serve the suffering and oppressed. You aren't trying to relieve guilt or to be a do-gooder. You just feel more alive and whole when your heart flows into helping.

Some of you have Ahimsaka's gift of *Serenity*. You see the perfection in everything as it already is or as it is unfolding. Your capacity to look at suffering and remain serene is a gift of peace to yourself and comfort to those around you. They feel calmed and healed by your presence.

Some of you have the gift of *Lawfulness* and you sense the universal simplicity behind the surface complexity. Some of you have the gift of *Joy*. Some have the gift of *Faith*. Some have the gift of *Generosity*. Some have the gift of *Innocence and Openness*.

There are probably ten to fifteen relatively distinct Dhamma gifts. Each is related to all the others, so all of us know all of them a little. We can relate to every one. But I'd suggest that each of us has one or two of these gifts in great abundance. Our gifts may not be the same as Ahimsaka's, but we have one or two that shine while others are dimmer in the background.

Dhamma Vulnerabilities

If that were all there was to our story, we'd be living in a heavenly realm: life would be sweet, wonderful, blissful, clear, and delightful. Like Ahimsaka's later years, life would be groovy.

But life is more interesting than that. There is a dark side to each gift. Like Ahimsaka, we are gifted and confused. We have flaws, weaknesses, and blind spots.

Consider: There are many obstacles in life — detours, barricades, washed out bridges, potholes, and fallen trees. Life impinges on us through insults, thoughtless people, stubbed toes, blocked opportunities, and disappointments.

Though we may run into the same obstacles, each of us has different responses. To recognize our Dhamma vulnerabilities, we have only to recognize which obstacles get to us most readily.

Social rejection, for example, rolls off one person like water off a duck's back while another gets soaked and drowns. Under pressure, one person is serene, another frantic, another lethargic, another worried about safety. When impeded, one person feels oppressed, another invigorated, another abandoned, and another resentful. Some people are more prone to melancholy, others to anxiety. Some jump the gun again and again while others can't get off the dime.

Have you ever been in difficulty and wondered, "How'd I get here? Why does this keep happening to me? I know this pothole so well. How'd I fall into it again?" You were probably caught in one of your deepest vulnerabilities. Dhamma vulnerabilities are ways we get thrown off balance over and over.

If you take only one thing away from this chapter, I hope it's the willingness to explore the possibility that our deepest gifts may be tied to our deepest vulnerabilities. Our greatest strengths may give rise to our greatest weaknesses.

For example, if you have the gift of *Oneness*, when thrown off balance you are more vulnerable than others to feeling isolated, alone, and separated from the goodness of life. Because your sensitivity to feeling interconnected is so strong, when the connection is cut off, you more easily feel cut off from all of life.

If you have the gift of *Serenity*, when thrown off balance, you may feel jumpy or moody. Your mind may race. Your sensitivity makes it easier to slide into peaceful states without even knowing what you are doing. The same sensitivity makes

you more receptive to agitation. And since tranquility comes so easily, normal states may seem so much coarser to you in comparison.

If you have the gift of *Compassion* and run into a roadblock, you may feel frustrated, angry, or irritable. Passion makes up 70 percent of the word “compassion.” Because of the strength of your compassion, when it is thwarted, it can flare outwardly into anger or inwardly into seething or grumbling.

To see your Dhamma gifts and vulnerabilities, contemplate a few questions:

What is the beauty in me? What are my Dhamma gifts? How do I most easily connect with the highest in life?

After a while, shift to these questions:

How do I hide my beauty? What are my Dhamma vulnerabilities? What quirks and weaknesses blind me?

Non-Dual Nature

It is all too easy to think of Ahimsaka and Angulimāla as two separate entities who serially inhabit one body. But the Buddha didn't see it that way. Ahimsaka and Angulimāla were in fact the same being. Under different conditions, different responses arose, but not different people.

Our gifts and vulnerabilities do not arise out of separate angels and demons within us. We are unified in truth even if our delusions say otherwise.

So if you feel assaulted by hindrances and just want to be free of them, the most effective way may be to see that they are *nīvaraṇa*: masks disguising a deeper truth. Don't get caught in the storylines of the hindrances. Release and Relax and see beneath the surface. If all you see is Angulimāla, then you aren't seeing the whole picture. Don't try to get rid of Angulimāla. Instead Recognize, Release, Soften, Smile, and send out *mettā*.

The Buddha never said that we have an Anakan Skywalker and a Darth Vader within. But he did counsel developing Wise View: seeing everything that arises with dispassionate interest.

We humans are sensitive creatures. We are animals who stood up to expose the softness of our bellies to the world. If we treat our sensitivities with fear and rejection, that does not change the present moment one bit. But it does condition the future to have more fear and rejection. Our sensitivities then feel like a curse.

However, if we greet our present experience with kindness, our sensitivities become a blessing. The natural luminosity beneath and within comes to the surface more and more easily.

To repeat the passage from Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan*:

Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't it is of no use. Both paths lead nowhere; but one has a heart, the other doesn't. One makes for a joyful journey; as long as you follow it, you are one with it. The other will make you curse your life. One makes you strong; the other weakens you.

Related Chapters

- 29. Crossed Intentions, p. 123
- 33. Hindrances Want to Retire, p. 151
- 42. Mistakes As Teachers, p. 199
- 36. Goodness and Meanness, p. 163