Thag 16.8 — Angulimala Thera: The Moon Released

English translation by Andrew Olendzki.

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Source revision: sha256:7c411108530c04aafcca0ac43267ed12227cbb2653320e8ae0bb686e566bb783

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Changes: Presentation only: original HTML markup reflowed into plain text; wording, numbering and source repetitions retained. No repetitions expanded.

Completeness: PARTIAL. Complete source excerpt preserved, including introductions, notes and verse structure; source omits part of the canonical discourse.

Text

Translator's note

Of all the monks and nuns who awakened under the guidance of the Buddha, none was more notorious than the author of these verses, the robber and murderer Angulimala. Originally named Ahimsaka (the harmless one), he was the son of the brahman chaplain to the Kosala king and became a brilliant student in the medical school at Takkasila. On account of a number of intrigues perpetrated by his jealous classmates, he set upon a course of ambushing victims on the road and cutting off their thumbs in order to assemble a "garland of thumbs" which is the translation of his monastic name Angulimala.

The Buddha fearlessly confronted the robber and helped him to see the error of his ways. Then, in the face of tremendous opposition from the population, he allowed Angulimala to join the Sangha, and in due time he became an awakened Arahant. The karma of his previous deeds still followed him, however, and he was later stoned in the street by an angry mob. Coming into the teacher's presence "with blood running from his cut head, with his bowl broken, and with his outer robe torn," the Buddha simply said, "Bear it! brahman, Bear it! You are experiencing here and now the result of [your] deeds..."

It is within this context that the above verses were composed. The author is clearly referring to his own emergence from negligence and unwholesome deeds into a wiser and more wholesome understanding. I cannot help but feel this story is timely, whether referring to individuals who have committed terrible deeds yet being capable of radical transformation, or to a nation looking more closely at its impact in the world. The goodness that fills our world may well be poised to emerge, like the bright moon, from behind the clouds which far too often obscure it.

He who once lived in negligence And then is negligent no more, He's the one who brightens this world — Like the moon released from a cloud. Who follows up with wholesome deeds Unwholesome deeds he may have done, He's the one who brightens this world — Like the moon released from a cloud. Indeed that youthful bhikkhu who Pours himself into the Buddha's teaching, He's the one who brightens this world — Like the moon released from a cloud.