The Subjective View of the Student: Aṅgulimāla and Myōhōbō

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> Even the one who committed evil all their life
> If they encounter the wide-vow
> Their arrival to the world of peace and nurturing
> Is a testament to the result [of that encounter]
>
> 一生造悪 Isshō zō aku
> 値弘誓 chi gu zei
> 至安養界 shi an nyō kai
> 証妙果 shō myō ka
> —*Shōshinge* (my translation)

What was Shinran Shōnin like? When we read his own words, people easily get the idea that he was some depressed person with low self-esteem, describing his utter incorrigibility, such as the confession in *Kyōgyōshinshō*:

> How wretched I am! [Shin]ran, the stupid bald-headed one, deeply submerged in the wide ocean of desires and cravings, confusingly lost among the huge mountains of worldly fame and interests, has no aspirations for being counted among the elite of the definitely assured group and feels no pleasure in approaching the really true experience. How deplorable! How heart-rending![1]

In the visual depictions of Shinran (including the *kagami no goei* said to be drawn directly from observation), he seems to be scowling and in a bad mood. In a way, I feel that's how Shinran wanted to be seen by the public—as an unattractive sourpuss, rather than as a stately, charismatic hero to be admired.

1. D.T. Suzuki, trans., *Shinran's Kyōgyōshinshō* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter on "True Faith," 160.

So when I'm asked "What kind of person was Shinran?" I point to the story of Myōhōbō 妙法房. In that account we get a glimpse of how Shinran was seen by someone who became his student. This subjective view of the student is not something unique to Shinran, but it is mirrored in the story of Aṅgulimāla, the serial killer who encounters the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. These two stories show us how great teachers of the past were seen by those who initially approached them not with a worshipful attitude but full of murderous intent. And we see how the encounter with those teachers changed the murderers into dedicated students of the dharma.

Both the story of Myōhōbō in the *Godenshō* (Life of Shinran) and the account of Aṅgulimāla in the *Majjhima-nikāya* (Middle Length Discourses) are told in the third person, but the subjective details point to the actual tellers of the tales, who were Myōhōbō and Aṅgulimāla themselves.

SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTION OF TIME

One characteristic of the subjective view is the perception of time. In Aṅgulimāla's account, he is chasing after the Buddha but unable to catch him.

> Then 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. Then the thought occurred to Angulimala: "Isn't it amazing! Isn't it astounding! In the past I've chased & seized even a swift-running elephant, a swift-running horse, a swift-running chariot, a swift-running deer. But now, even though I'm running with all my might, I can't catch up with this contemplative walking at normal pace."[2]

Although the account attributes Aṅgulimāla's inability to catch up to the Buddha as the Buddha's "feat of psychic power," if we hear Aṅgulimāla as the teller of the tale, he is recalling the feeling of moving in slow motion. Something profound is affecting him, overriding his habitual impulsiveness for instant gratification.

2. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans., "Angulimala Sutta: About Angulimala," November 2013 revision, www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.086.than.html.

Likewise, in the *Godenshō*[3] if we hear Myōhōbō recounting his story, he says he knew Shinran Shōnin frequently (*yori-yori* 時々) travelled the Itajiki Pass, but as many times (*do-do* 度々) as he waited there to jump Shinran and kill him, the occasion never occurred (*sono setsu* 節 *o togezu*). It's not so much that Shinran had a radar warning system detecting dangers on the pass, but that something was holding Myōhōbō back from being at the pass for as long and as often as he thought he needed to be in order to attack Shinran.

THE STOPPING PLACE

In Aṅgulimāla's account, unable to catch up with the Buddha, he stops in his tracks and yells out, "Stop, contemplative, stop!" The Buddha responds, "I have stopped, Aṅgulimāla. You stop," and goes on to say:

> I have stopped, Angulimala, once and 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.[4]

In hearing this, Aṅgulimāla can come to rest after realizing how driven his life had been. He was named Aṅgulimāla, "finger-necklace," because he sliced off a finger from each of his victims and collected them on a necklace. Although there are commentaries speculating on why he was driven to commit murder after murder, attacking large groups on the road or laying towns to waste, his basic motivation is the same as all human beings. We are deludedly attached to our ego-self and feel we must destroy any being who gets in the way of our survival and flourishing. The Buddha calls out to all of us to just stop—stop being blindly pushed into destroying everything around us for the sake of enhancing what we deludedly think is a permanent, separate self. "You stop" is the Buddha calling us to examine that delusion and deconstruct the fears and anxieties it has built up.

Myōhōbō, feeling foiled in his attempts to ambush Shinran on the road, decides to go where Shinran is staying. The place is Shinran's contemplation room, *zen-shitsu* 禅室. Having missed his chances to attack Shinran in transit, Myōhōbō comes to Shinran at a place of stillness. As in the case of Aṅgulimāla, Myōhōbō is forced to stop running,

3. By Kakunyo. See D.T. Suzuki, Collected Writings on Shin Buddhism (Kyoto: Shinshū Ōtaniha, 1973).
4. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans., "Angulimala Sutta."

being pushed around by his blind desires, and finds himself in a place where he can contemplate his own heart/mind.

CALLED FORTH IN WELCOME

For most of us, if we are faced with a person holding a weapon fully intending to kill us, our fear would overcome us. But what is fear but the expression of exclusively loving our ego-self, wanting it to survive and thrive and hating all other lives that seem to thwart our desire? The Buddha in his many teachings shows us the way to overcome the delusion of the separate, permanent self and to realize the interdependency of our life with all lives, that is, the teachings of no-self and oneness.

When Aṅgulimāla approaches the Buddha with the intent to kill him, he sees a person without a trace of fear, a person whose face is full of loving-kindness (such as the moonloving face the Buddha shows Ajātaśatru in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*). Instead of "Get away from me, you monster!" the Buddha says to Aṅgulimāla, "Come, bhikkhu." The Buddha totally accepts Aṅgulimāla as his fellow practitioner—they are brothers in seeking the dharma.

Upon entering the contemplation room, Myōhōbō is welcomed by Shinran. Shinran is calm and shows Myōhōbō an expression of respect (*son-gen* 禅室). Myōhōbō is overcome with regret over his murderous intent as he feels completely accepted by this man who sees everyone as a friend and no one as an enemy.

ABANDONING THE WEAPONS

In both stories, swords and arrows are broken and discarded and the men dedicate themselves to a new life of learning the dharma, no longer at odds with the world or wishing violence on anyone. It is unlikely that either the Buddha or Shinran recounted these stories to the other students—"All I did was smile at him and he threw away his sword. Boy, I can really turn on the charm, right?" Rather, in both these stories, we hear the protagonist giving their subjective view of what happened.

Probably in Shinran's case, he would see himself as having no role in anyone's complete change of life. We see that attitude in *Tannishō*, chapter six: "If I could make others say the nembutsu through my own devices, they would be my disciples. But how arrogant it is to claim as disciples those who live the nembutsu through the sole working of

Amida's compassion."[5] For Myōhōbō, his encounter with Shinran was the experience of the "working of Amida's compassion." In his subjective view, Shinran was exerting a tremendous power to turn him around—making time slow down, making him come to a stop, and then calling him to a deep level of identification with all beings. If there was a security camera video of Myōhōbō meeting Shinran, I imagine that we would see nothing happening with Shinran. We would only see Myōhōbō brandishing his weapons and then throwing them down. We would ask, "What happened?" Only by entering Myōhōbō's subjective view of Shinran can we get a glimpse of how the *nenbutsu* teachings manifested themselves in Shinran's effect on people.

Shinran calls himself wretched and deplorable because he has no bit of ego-self worth holding on to. So what if he's threatened with imminent death? He already feels settled in the wide-vow, the great aspiration of Being Itself that takes in all of life, excluding none. He sees the man pointing weapons at him as just another friend in the dharma, *ondōbō* 御同朋, *ondōgyō* 御同行. For Myōhōbō this encounter brought him to the world of peace and nurturing, and it is "a miracle, indeed" or, as voiced in Aṅgulimāla's story, "It's amazing, it's astounding."

5. Taitetsu Unno, trans., *Tannisho: A Shin Buddhist Classic* (Honolulu: Buddhist Study Center Press, 1995).