

# Ten Protectors (1 of 10) Virtuous Conduct

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**Gil Fronsdal**

Hello, and welcome to this Monday, where we begin a new theme for the 7 a.m. teachings. I'm inspired to use as the basis for the next ten days' teachings what are called "the ten protectors," or "the ten supports." The word *nathi* can mean someone who is a protector, someone who safeguards others, and also someone who helps and supports.

The idea is that there are ten protectors we have for how we live, how we act in the world, and our attitudes and motivations. These ten protectors are something we can call upon as a protection. This assumes that there is something worth protecting.

This doesn't mean protecting ourselves in the usual way we might be concerned about ourselves, because we have all kinds of complicated relationships with ourselves, and all kinds of complicated, maybe not-so-helpful attitudes about me, myself and mine, where selfishness can come along. So we are not trying to protect our selfishness, but to protect a deep source within. When I use the word "source," maybe that concept should be held a little bit lightly.

For example, we can have anxiety that's the source of fretting and worrying about our lives and the future. That anxiety can be felt physically somewhere in our body. It might be activated and intense. We can have a different kind of tension inside, maybe hurt or anger, which can be the source of ill will and even hostility.

We also have sources within, a place or a location or conditions that need to be in place for us to come into the world with generosity, benevolence, kindness, friendliness, and a sense of care for the world and ourselves. That source inside tends to be overridden, covered over, or obscured by an overly active mind that's driven by anxiety, hostility, conceit, or desires for what we want – lust and greed.

When those kinds of things settle and quiet down, then the deeper motivations and deeper ways of being can show themselves. They can appear as we get calmer and more settled. It can be quite wonderful to feel a deep sense of inner intimacy in the here and now, in the present moment, with our lived experience. That lived experience is below the discursive level of thought where we might often be caught up. Discursive thinking is driven by those more unhealthy or obscuring attitudes and motivations.

So we calm and settle the mind and come into the present moment through our body. At some point, there might be a feeling that "I'm home." There's an intimacy. There's a place where there is more wisdom and more sensitivity. The sense or feeling for that place inside – I call it a source – is not meant to be locatable, as in: "Okay, right there is where it is." Sometimes it's more like a suffusive place within. It might be somewhere in the torso, or in the belly. Some people might associate it with the heart, some people with the belly. Some people experience a sense of goodness or wellness in a kind of suffusive way that spreads through the body.

*This* is worth protecting. This needs a protector, because of the way life is – the way that we are sometimes caught up in the world, which can not only obscure this suffusive source within but can also limit it or even damage it in some ways. So it is good to know how to call upon those things that will protect it.

The first protector in this list of ten is virtuous conduct: the actions that we do in the world. This means that we do actions that are ethical, wholesome, and beneficial in the world – actions that do not cause harm: non-harming

actions. When thinking about this, it's useful to consider that sometimes we learn about ourselves more through our actions than through our thinking.

I think some people in the modern world have become excessively preoccupied with their thoughts – trying to think their way out of everything, figure out everything, or understand everything. This is as if thinking is a vehicle for making sense of the world and of oneself by protecting oneself, planning better for the future, and remembering the past to make it better. Certainly, thoughts have a very important role in our lives. But they are not necessarily how we come to the best understanding of ourselves. In many ways, we can understand ourselves better through our actions, by what we do and say in our lives.

Once we see and understand that, our actions can become a window to understanding something deeper about ourselves. The role of thinking is to be a bridge between our actions, our speech, and the source within. When the source within is anxiety, anger, hostility, greed, and lust, then the actions have a particular shape and form. But if the source is this place of benevolence, non-assertiveness, non-conceit, non-hostility, non-greed, and non-lust, then thinking is the medium, the bridge for that place to come into the world in our actions.

This goes in both directions. Our actions protect this inner place of goodness, and it's really worth protecting. There are other ways than meditation for tapping into this, the more we understand that *this* is health. This is a kind of inner health, inner beauty, and inner freedom that's worth protecting. It's a place where we recognize the value of being truthful. We recognize truth in ourselves and in others. It is a place that resonates with kindness. It's a place that acknowledges and confirms the value of friendliness and generosity. From this place within we can see these positive inner qualities in others and in the world and respond to them. We can offer them to the world.

One of the ways to protect this place is to live a life of virtuous conduct – a life that abstains from doing the things that we know or suspect are going to harm other people. The tradition lists five things that are definitely harmful. It is harmful to kill or physically harm others with violence. It's harmful to others to steal from them, to take what is not given. It's harmful to others to be involved in sexual misconduct – using sexuality to take advantage of or assert ourselves over people, where there is aggression, deceit, lying, and a lack of respect for the other person in the sexuality, or a lack of respect for other partners that we have.

Lastly, we harm ourselves and others directly or indirectly with the consumption of alcohol and recreational drugs. A lot of harm gets done in our society through these. There might be other ways in which we harm. If you want to protect your inner goodness, help discover it, and let it flourish, then these things are really important.

So in the list of these ten protectors, our actions can protect. There is a bridge, a channel between the actions of living a life of ethical integrity and this inner life. That bridge, that channel is our thinking. If we know that we're living ethically and not causing other people harm intentionally in overt ways, that's to be celebrated. That is to be appreciated.

So we can have thoughts with an inner confidence that we're not causing harm. We can have thoughts that recognize and appreciate that. We can let those thoughts point us back to the source within that resonates with and recognizes the inner wholesomeness of living without any motivation to harm anyone at all – without any hostility or greed that can cause harm. There is a kind of sensitivity that exists within us that tells us this is what feels best: the intuition of our goodness, our ethical integrity, and a deeper wellspring of benevolence that we can live our lives by.

So the first protector we have is our actions, specifically being careful to live a wholesome life based on the Five Precepts – not to kill or physically harm people, not to steal, not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to lie, and not to abuse intoxicants.

I hope that on this day, as we go through these ten protectors that we can have, maybe you can take a look at your actions and your speech, which are the most obvious, because they can be seen. Consider where your actions and speech come from. Is there a way of speaking and acting that you feel safeguards something precious within?

Thank you very much, and I look forward to tomorrow.

