

Ten Protectors (4 of 10) Easy to Speak To

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Good day, everyone. We'll continue with the tenfold list of the ten protectors that the Buddha gave. It might be just as useful or more useful to call these "ten supports."

Life can be quite challenging, and the challenges can be unexpected. And our inner life can be challenging because of all the unexpected ways it shifts and changes, sometimes seemingly for no reason. So it's good to have supports to help us find our way and not be overwhelmed or excessively challenged. It is good to have supports that keep us balanced, centered, and attentive in a clear and wise way.

So far the supports have been virtuous conduct – behaving in such a way that our behavior doesn't challenge us and make things more difficult than they need to be. The second is to learn – learning the Dharma, learning good skills in life, studying and being prepared for what we're doing so we understand the larger context. The third support is having good spiritual friends – surrounding ourselves with or having a reference point of friends who bring out the best in us. These are people who wish us the best, who want to support us, and who care about our well-being. They do so from a place of freedom, not demanding, expecting, or judging us for who we are. These are good spiritual friends.

Today the support is being easy to speak to – being someone to whom it's easy for people to say things. In Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of this particular *sutta* (AN 10.17), he defines this as "easy to correct." In the Buddha's commentary about this point, he describes it as being "easy to receive instructions and respectful of the instructions we receive." Instruction sometimes can mean feedback – people telling us things that are difficult for us to hear that maybe we need to hear. Sometimes people have criticisms or critiques of us.

Being easy to speak to is an act of generosity towards others. If they want to come and speak to us about something, we're generous toward them by being willing to receive it. We take it in and are available for it. We are not automatically defensive. We're not offensive because we don't like what we're hearing. We don't immediately meet criticism with criticism, shutting down, or anger.

We have the ability to be open and to hear what's being said in an open, relaxed way so we can really know what's going on. We can track what's going on in ourselves, and we can track others and what they're saying in such a way that we're actually safer.

One way of protecting ourselves is by being angry, and then people just want to go away, or they shut up or stop what they're doing. However the relationship is damaged that way, and long-term safety is not attained. Long-term safety comes from really knowing what people are thinking and feeling, and processing and working with it. I think that being angry and getting someone to shut up so they never talk about difficult things again makes the situation much more difficult and challenging. Then we don't know what's underneath – what people are thinking and what's driving them to do what they do.

So to have the capacity, the wisdom, and the skill to listen first, and to be easy to speak to. It can be very challenging to do this. It can threaten our sense of self – the feeling that we're capable, that we know everything, and there's nothing anyone needs to tell us. We can imagine that the fact that someone needs to tell us anything is a sign that somehow they think we're wrong or bad, or they're challenging our self-image of being quite capable and knowledgeable – the one who should be talking rather than the one who should be receiving.

The idea that what they're saying is feedback about us can touch some very difficult sore places inside. We can interpret it in ways that make it a much bigger deal than what is actually being said. We can interpret it to mean that we're fundamentally flawed and this is proof of that. We can interpret it to mean that people are being mean and unfairly critical. Of course, sometimes they are. But even if they are, do we have to take it personally? Is there any need to reply?

There's a whole art of receiving criticism, where we don't believe it, we don't accept it, but we also don't fight it. We might listen carefully and then we might say, "I'll think about it, but I don't think I agree with you," and, "Well, what you're saying is interesting and I'll have to think about it because it doesn't seem quite right to me." That's a gentle way of saying you're not exactly behind it, but you are respectful of what's being said. Maybe some little piece of it is true, or in the fact that someone has critiques of you, maybe what's true is not the words, but behind the words. Why are they doing this? Maybe they feel challenged in the relationship. Maybe they're afraid. Maybe something that happened has created a rupture in the relationship and this is their way of trying to establish a connection.

So the idea is to be easy to speak to. Then people are comfortable speaking to us. People don't have to be afraid of us when they speak to us. This is a tremendous support and protection because if there is something we need to hear about ourselves, some way that we're off, people feel comfortable about coming and telling us. In the Buddhist tradition people like that are considered to be a treasure. It's a really phenomenal gift and tremendously valuable to have people come to us and say, "You know, you said something that didn't quite work," or, "That was challenging," or, "I think that what you did hurt the other person," or, "I think what you said there was difficult for me to listen to, and I feel hurt. I feel afraid. Can we talk about it?"

I've known people who are so reactive, so tense, and who immediately attack anybody who says anything to them about who they are personally, so that no one wants to talk to them. As a teacher, I've known people who are like that for years and years. It was very difficult as a teacher to get through the barrier, the wall that was there. Then at some point when it felt really important to say something to one person, I finally said I knew it would be difficult. In fact, the person became very angry and upset for about a minute. Then they quieted down and thought about it, and came back and said, "Oh, now I understand what's happening with me and other people. I didn't understand."

That was a turning point in that person's life. Within a few years, the person ended up dying. I think that conversation we had was such a big turning point that it contributed to that person's ability to die peacefully. All kinds of people came to sit with the person because it was so wonderful and pleasant to be with someone who no longer had that reactivity, defensiveness, and anger. I think she was quite lucky to have someone who was finally able to speak to her about it.

It is unfortunate if we have to wait until a crisis before we're ready to hear some feedback from people. There are some people who actually invite feedback. They say, "Please, if you see anything I say or do that is not right, please speak up. I welcome it. Maybe just do it at the right time. Don't do it when I feel grumpy or when I feel kind of under the weather. But I want to hear."

To be easy to speak to and available for the community to say anything to, and to have the inner resources and inner strength not to take it personally. Also, to be able to stand up for oneself as necessary. This doesn't mean being a pushover for whatever other people have to say. It means not being in conflict with what they're saying. This is a protection because then we don't end up in conflict. It's a protection because we can learn what we need to learn about ourselves. Even if it's not about ourselves, we learn something about the relationship we have with the other person. Maybe that is where work needs to be done. If we take it personally and attack back, the relationship stays ruptured.

But when we hear and acknowledge what we've heard, maybe even repeat back – "Is what I've heard accurate?" – that settles people. They know they've been understood. Then we can say, "Well, you know, I don't think that's right," and "Here's my understanding of it." Or, "I don't think that's right, but before talking about what you're saying, I just want to say that I care about you." Or, "We're friends, and I want to find a way to have this conversation that maintains our friendship."

Sometimes what's going on is that underneath a person's criticism, there is something different that needs to be addressed. There is some challenge in the relationship. It is sometimes invaluable to be able to listen and hear what's underneath. That supports everyone and also is a protection for oneself and others.

Being easy to speak to is not a lightweight thing to do. I believe it's a phenomenally significant and powerful thing to do. I like to think of it as a part of one of the fruits of mindfulness practice. It is a deep way of monitoring ourselves, knowing ourselves, and tracking what's happening as it is happening. Having this capacity and willingness to hear even difficult things supports us.

So if you want to be well-protected and well-supported, be easy to speak to. Become a good listener, listening both to people around you and to yourself. Listen not only to the words but also to where the words are coming from, and listen to where those words land inside of you. This will make you easy to speak to. You will find support and protection in being this way.

I would encourage you to look for opportunities, even the smallest opportunities – even when people give feedback or criticism that is relatively mild. Or when something is difficult to hear. Rather than just closing down, experiment with turning towards the person. You don't have to do this physically and literally. You can do it as if you're stepping forward and being available with open arms to hear – "Tell me more." Turn towards the person rather than away. This expression "Tell me more" is a powerful and effective way of disarming people when necessary, and it's a powerful way of learning more fully what we might need to hear.

Thank you, and may we all be good listeners today.