

Ten Protectors (3 of 10) Good Spiritual Friends

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

nathi(?), *kalyāṇa mitta*, *samādhī*, Numerical Discourses, beautiful, virtue, ethical integrity, honest, truthful, Seven Factors of Awakening, Dharma, liberation, support, present-moment, awareness, mindfulness, investigation, effort, joy, tranquility, *samādhī*, equanimity, dawn, sun, awakening, profound, contemplation, guidance, teachers, goodness, compassion, care, simplicity, inspire

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We have come to the third talk on the ten protectors – the ten supports or ten helpers, depending on how we translate the Pali word “*nathi* (?)” This is a teaching from the Buddha that appears in the Numerical Discourses. It's discourse number 17 in chapter ten (AN 10.17) The discourse provides a list without any discussion about the items. But it's a wonderful list. These qualities are discussed differently in other places in the texts.

The first protector was our own virtue. The second was learning well – learning about goodness through studying the Dharma. Today the protector is having good spiritual friends – *kalyāṇa mitta*. The word “*kalyāṇa*” can mean “beautiful.” That's usually the first dictionary definition. But it also refers to the kind of inner beauty from which virtue and ethical integrity arise, and from which the disposition to be honest and truthful appears.

Someone who is a good spiritual friend – a *kalyāṇa mitta* – is someone who is honest and lives with virtuous behavior. It's also meant to refer to someone who is a spiritual teacher. The Buddha was considered to be the great *kalyāṇa mitta*. This is someone who opens the door for a spiritual life on the path of liberation, knows the path, and supports others in opening that door. The idea here is when they're *kalyāṇa*, they possess a certain kind of inner beauty – the ethical beauty that is part of what they're pointing to as a possibility for everyone else.

Having a few *kalyāṇa mittas*, a few good spiritual friends, these beautiful spiritual friendships, is a great support for us. It is also a protection. Having good spiritual friends to whom you're a little bit accountable means that when you're about to do something that you don't quite feel good about, you remember your good spiritual friends. Would you want to tell them about what you're doing? Would you like them to know about it? And if the answer is “no,” then you should probably be careful not to do it.

Not that these good spiritual friends are policing you, watching you, and judging you if you do something that is not quite coming from this beautiful ethical place within. But in the teachings of the Buddha, he assumes that people have a natural desire not to do something that would be disapproved of by these good spiritual friends. He assumes that there would be a certain degree of awkwardness, regret, or not feeling good about oneself if we're doing something that our good spiritual friends would disapprove of.

Some of this is about finding and having good spiritual friends, ones that can not only be people we trust and think are wise but also those who can encourage the practice and bring out the best qualities we have. In the Buddha's teachings, a good spiritual friend is someone who supports us to develop the Seven Factors of Awakening. These are some of the most beautiful qualities of heart that come out of deep Dharma practice.

They are the cultivation and development of present-moment awareness, mindfulness, investigation, a delightful and wholesome effort and engagement in the practice, joy, tranquility, *samādhī*, and equanimity. The Buddha said – a beautiful teaching, I think – “Just as the dawn is the precursor to the rising sun, so externally, the precursor or heralding forth our own awakening is a good spiritual friend.”

Externally the protector is good spiritual friends, and internally it is our capacity to have a deep, profound form of contemplation and attention to our inner life. This profound contemplation speaks to the fact that we can have this inner beauty. This is one of the word plays around the word “*kalyāṇa mitta*.” Usually, it probably means good

spiritual friends we have externally. But it can also mean friendship with our own beauty and our own ethical integrity, so that our own inner beauty can be a protection for us.

Staying close to our own inner beauty and ethical sensibility supports us and protects us from doing things that we later regret. For example, it protects us from being mean or hostile to people. It prevents us from actions that harm other people, which we would later regret. There is a kind of guidance that we can receive internally when we're settled in ourselves, relaxed, and connected to this soft, quiet place inside that offers a clear kind of guidance in living well – living out of a sense of goodness, compassion, and care.

So we find a good spiritual friend externally that we stay in touch with enough. When I was a new student of Buddhism, I was fortunate to have good spiritual teachers whom I didn't talk to regularly but saw regularly. Just by being around them, going to their talks and other things, I was reminded, "Oh, this is a support for me. This reminds me to practice and really live from the best places from inside."

We can have good spiritual friends externally and also discover a friendship with what is beautiful within ourselves. Then we protect and support that because it will protect us. It will guide us, it will keep us close to what's really valuable and important. And it will probably make life a lot simpler.

Living unethically – for example, lying, stealing, doing things that are ethically questionable tends to create a more complicated life. There's a saying that it's better to be honest because there's less we have to remember. If we start lying, then it's important to remember the lies, to keep them going. But when we're being honest, we don't necessarily have to remember what we said because there's no need to keep the lie going. Life is simpler.

There's an inner simplicity of being, an inner joy of being, and an inner beauty of being. *Kalyāṇa mitta*, externally and internally, is one of the great supports. When we don't have it internally, it can be really useful to have it externally – to be around and spend time with sangha members, other practitioners, or other people who we feel are virtuous and have this inner beauty. We can be reminded by them that it is possible to be that way ourselves by being around them enough to be inspired by them. We can feel, "Yes – when I'm most myself, this is where I want to come from."

May you consider both the topic of your inner beauty and also, who are the people in your life who live in a way that inspires your own inner beauty, who are truthful, ethically virtuous, and have some quality of goodness that inspires you? They don't have to be a Buddhist, but stay close to them. Let your familiarity and your contact with them protect what is maybe most valuable in yourself.

The list so far is virtue, learning and applying what we learn, and good spiritual friends. Thank you very much, and we'll continue tomorrow.