

# Ten Protectors (2 of 10) Study

October 3, 2023

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

safeguard, support, Dharma, harm, violence, hostility, virtuous, conduct, compassion, care, respect, well-learned, Eightfold Path, simplicity, *metta*, motivation, truth, opinion, faith

**Gil Fronsdal**

So hello and welcome to the second talk in the ten-part series on the protectors. The Pali word is translated into English as “the protectors,” meaning that which we can call upon and upon which we can rely for a certain kind of protection, safeguarding, and support. The protectors support and safeguard our inner life and our outer life. They give us ways to live in the world protected from outer harm and from inner harm that we cause ourselves.

The Buddha came up with an interesting list for this purpose. Yesterday's talk was about virtuous conduct. If we live in a way that doesn't harm others or harm ourselves, there is a kind of protection. We are protecting something in ourselves that is worth protecting: the sense of compassion, care, and respect we have for ourselves and others. We also tend to lessen the anger, hostility, and even violence – the harm that others might do to us.

The second protector on the list is to be well-learned. In the ancient language, the literal meaning is “to have heard a lot.” It is worded that way because, in the time of the Buddha, there were no books. People weren't reading. The only way to learn something and to get information was to hear it. So “to have heard a lot” means to be well-learned.

For people who are doing Buddhist practice, I think this implies learning about Buddhism, learning about the Dharma. Doing this can have benefits and also be a distraction. Too much learning and studying Buddhism is a distraction. It sometimes becomes an abstract exercise in philosophy and doctrine.

But there are many ways in which learning about the Dharma teaches us where to be oriented. It can teach us the values we want to have, the practices we want to do, and the ways of being in the world that protect us from ourselves and mitigate the possibility of harm from the world around us.

For example, it's one thing to learn mindfulness. It's another thing to learn how mindfulness is integral to the Eightfold Path – right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Learning these and learning how to practice them and bring them forth into our lives helps develop mindfulness more strongly. It gives feet to the mindfulness. It also shows us more completely what we ourselves bring into the Dharma so that mindfulness can be more effective. We can recognize more effectively what's going on inside and outside of ourselves. This way we can live a life that is more beneficial. Studying the Dharma and learning the Eightfold Path provides that kind of support.

Some people come to Buddhism with erroneous ideas, some of which can be harmful to them. I've known people who came to Buddhism from the religion they grew up with, where the understanding was that if you were part of a religion you had to believe everything the religion said. There was no questioning it. When they came to Buddhism they thought they had to believe all of it. Some parts of Buddhism are hard to believe for many people, so they struggled and thought maybe they couldn't be Buddhists.

But when you study Buddhism, you quickly realize that there's no need to believe all of Buddhism. In Buddhism, the emphasis is on its pragmatic, practical side: we study Buddhism in order to help us on the path to liberation, or freedom from attachments. Within Buddhism, we can pick and choose a little what we want to study – whatever helps and supports us. There is a vast supply of teachings and practices in Buddhism. We are responsible for our own practice and how we navigate the different choices of practice to find which teachings are most useful for us.

For example, learning well might mean learning not only mindfulness practice, but learning loving-kindness practice, compassion practice, or equanimity practice, and knowing when those are useful to practice, and when they support us.

It's also helpful to know that we don't have to believe all of Buddhism. Some people come to Buddhism believing that the precepts are hard and fast rules and that, when you commit yourself to the precepts, if you break them, you're kind of doomed, as if you create so much bad karma or sin. This is what can happen when people come with other religious ideas and use them to understand Buddhism. In Buddhism, the precepts are actually literally called "trainings." Understanding them as trainings, rather than commandments, can make a huge difference in how people approach Buddhist precepts.

Part of learning well is learning the importance of our motivation for practicing. Learning that motivation is very important. Then we do the inner work ourselves, asking, "What is my motivation? Is my motivation useful? What motivations does Buddhism encourage us to have? Why does it want us to have the motivation, for example, of liberation from suffering?" There are some people who feel that the end of suffering is not even really spiritual – the end of suffering is nice and therapeutic, but it doesn't connect them to what they think is a spiritual world of deities or cosmic ultimate meanings.

But why does early Buddhism put such a big emphasis on the end of suffering as really being the ultimate goal of the practice? Knowing that can help refine how someone is involved in Buddhism, or maybe help them decide that Buddhism is not for them. They have other purposes and goals. There are other completely worthwhile religious practices and orientations that the person could have. But by studying the teachings of Buddhism, the person can know, "This is actually not for me. I think I would rather have some other approach for how to live my life."

To study well means, in daily life also, not to take things on faith – not to read or learn something and have opinions about it without having studied it. I know in my life I've had opinions about things that I actually didn't know much about. Then I felt quite concerned that I would do this.

One of the purposes of reading and studying is so that we don't rely on unfounded opinions. Even if opinions seem logical, or it seems as if a lot of people believe them, there are all kinds of opinions traveling around in our society about politics, economics, racism, and all kinds of things. Some of these opinions and ideas don't even present themselves as opinions and ideas – they are presented as truth. If someone with authority says them, we think they must be true.

Instead, we can go behind and underneath the ideas and see where they come from and what their history is. This doesn't mean we have to do an extensive study of something. Even a small study or summary of the background of some of the opinions people have can be eye-opening. This can safeguard the truth, and safeguard us from holding onto opinions tightly without really knowing. Or if we keep the opinion, then we're better informed, so we're safeguarding the truth.

The Buddha emphasized something called safeguarding the truth, which means being really clear about the basis upon which we have an opinion or a belief. This is different than believing something because we read it in a book, heard a teacher say it, or because we reasoned it out.

This holds true for Buddhism itself. On what basis do you believe your beliefs? Are they something you know from experience, or something you know from a book? Then say that. As opposed to saying, "Buddhism says," or "the Buddha said," you can say that the Buddha said this in a particular *sutta*. This creates a little context for what you're doing.

I like to think that this teaching on learning well is not a way of becoming complicated and filling our heads with ideas. This is guidance with the idea that studying well actually allows the mind to become simpler and quieter – not simplistic, but wisely simple. We can wisely appreciate the depth and the great value of showing up in all the situations in our lives with a simplicity of being, mindfulness, and care.

So we safeguard our inner simplicity of being and our inner sense of being at home and at peace with ourselves. We study in order to learn about the beliefs we have that take us away from that. We begin to understand a little bit about how it's appropriate to find a simplicity of being to rest in and to be with. There's so much goodness that

flows from that. The simplicity of being protects some of the most beautiful qualities of who we are so they can be shared with the world.

I do recommend that people who want to do a regular Buddhist practice spend some time studying Buddhism and getting the basic ideas. One of the consequences of doing that is that even if we don't understand all the teachings now, as our practice matures we'll be able to identify and recognize what's happening to us. We will have the language, the context, and the concepts to realize what's happening and to see it's good.

One example of this concerns a time when I had learned a little bit about *metta*, or loving-kindness. At some point in my meditation practice on retreat, this unusual feeling rose up in me. At first, I didn't know what it was. But because I had learned about loving-kindness (which I had no idea about before I studied Buddhism), I saw, "Oh, *this* is what *metta* is." Having that simple recognition made *metta* come alive for me and really let it grow.

So part of the purpose of being well-studied in Buddhism is to learn the basic ideas so that when it's appropriate we can recognize them and see them grow in us. Another example would be to learn what the Seven Factors of Awakening are. Then as you practice, at some point each of these Seven Factors of Awakening might appear for you and you can know, "Oh, this is what it is. This is useful. This is something to safeguard." So the second of the ten protectors is now being well-studied, well-learned. I'll continue with this series tomorrow. Thank you.