

Ten Protectors (8 of 10) Contentment

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Hello everyone, and welcome to this series on the Ten Protectors. Today's protection has to do with contentment.

This is a particular form of contentment, but before I talk about the particularity of it, I'll repeat what I said in the guided meditation. There are people who consider contentment to be a dangerous state because it undermines the motivation that people get from being discontented. When we're contented with the state of affairs as they are, then we won't fight or work to change them.

Certainly, there are things with which we should not be content, and there are things with which it might not be healthy to be discontented. There are people who have plenty of money who are discontented with what they have and want to be richer than that. There are people who have plenty of pleasures but always want more. There are people who have plenty of stuff but they always want more and better. Being driven by discontent is what supports many economies in the world. So there is a vested interest in keeping us discontented so we keep buying and working long hours to try to get ahead. Feeding or encouraging this discontent is partly what advertisements do. In certain ways, to be content is a radical act – a disruptive act.

From the Buddhist point of view, the benefit of contentment is that it makes it easier to focus on the practice, on what's happening here and now. If "there and then" is a two-dimensional reality, and if fantasy is a one-dimensional reality, then being really grounded here in ourselves is entering into a three-dimensional reality. It's richer and more multi-colored, like going from black and white to color.

Being in the three-dimensional reality of now does not mean that we don't think about the past and the future, or that we don't let the creative mind fantasize in some ways. But we do that while we are rooted here. We don't lose touch with this place here.

Contentment is one of the great states that helps us to be rooted and able to stay here. The Buddha gave the teachings on the ten protectors to monastics. He said that they should be content with the basic necessities of life. What is not often recognized is that the monastic lifestyle designed by the Buddha might look like a deprived lifestyle from the point of view of how many people in the modern West might be living. But in ancient India, the monastic life was meant to be the Middle Way, where just enough basic necessities to live well were provided, but not more than that.

This was not seen as a life of deprivation in ancient India. It wasn't considered to be an ascetic life because there were people who went to greater extremes in that direction. But for the Buddha, we were not supposed to harm ourselves, so there were no ascetic self-flagellations going on. Rather, the idea was to enter into meditation, which was understood to be a pleasant abiding and an enjoyable place to be provided that we had the basic necessities.

What monks and nuns are content with is the food that comes in their alms bowl, the clothes they have, the shelters that are given to them, and the basic medicine for their health. Those are the four basic necessities. The teaching is to be content with that.

How many of us are not so content with just having the basic necessities? We often have more clothes than we need, and we don't buy clothes just for the sake of staying warm and protection from insects and dirt. Instead, we often buy clothing for other reasons, often paying a lot of money. How many of us are not content with having a simple roof over our head, but want a bigger, nicer house? How many of us are not content with the basic necessities of food, but are buying food that's expensive? We don't really need it, but it's so nice, so pleasant, so enjoyable.

For a monastic, being content with the basic necessities makes it easier to live a radically simple lifestyle. That lifestyle allows them to stay connected to the Dharma that they love. They can engage in Dharma practice without having a lot of other things to take care of, which can make it harder for this love affair that monastics have with the Dharma. They want to stay close to their lover. It is important to stay close and attend to it and let that relationship grow, develop, and flower every moment of the day.

Being content with the basic necessities is the core idea here. For those of us living a lay life, what we consider to be the basic necessities might be a little bit different. The ancient Buddha didn't count emotional or interpersonal needs as much as people in modern cultures might need. We have a richer domain of basic necessities that we have to take care of.

But still, we can find out how much we need so we can be content. We can ask, what is the nature of our discontent? When we feel discontented, what is that? What's driving the discontent? Is there some feeling of lack? Is there a feeling of insecurity? Is there a strong sense of desire? What's that feeling of "not enough?" What's really happening here? Is there another way to address not having enough – another way of addressing the feeling that something has to happen, we have to do something, and we have to be busy?

Instead, we can really settle something here. We can relax the belly, relax the shoulders, relax the mind and the heart. We can really sit down and learn how to be content, even if that contentment is just for the period of the meditation practice.

There are things we should be discontented about. There is healthy contentment and unhealthy contentment. There's healthy discontent and there's unhealthy discontent. Both have their place, and both can be unhealthy. Being discontented with our suffering or with the suffering of the world is not necessarily a bad thing. That can be motivating, for sure. But we should act on that. One way to act on that is to sit and meditate and settle our discontent so that we don't add our suffering on top of suffering. We can be contented enough to sit and be present for what's happening with us. We find the way through our suffering from the inside out, rather than trying to change the world around us so we don't suffer.

If we need to change the world around us because it is suffering, then we need to distinguish between acting in the world and the activity of meditating. Meditating is not a time to act. This is a time for some other process to deepen and unfold. It is a time for us to learn how to be content with the moments that we're meditating so that we're not still spinning and driven by desires to change the world, get what we want, or avoid what we don't want. It is a time to be content with our lives at least for the period of meditation.

Maybe we have time. We know that our necessities are taken care of. We have enough food, for those of us who do. We have enough shelter, for those of us who do. We have enough clothing, for those of us who do. And we have enough medicine at least for this moment, for those of us who do. We can feel content that, at least for these minutes, it's okay.

This is special. It is unusual for human beings to have the time, the ability, the wherewithal, the understanding, and the dedication to sit down and meditate. Meditation is a phenomenally useful and important act. The inner transformation that can happen through meditation is a phenomenal gift to the world. It is a transformation where we don't continue living with business as usual – with greed, hate, and delusion. We settle all that's unresolved and unsettled in us so that, in that settled state, some of the most beautiful qualities of our being can come forth. These qualities are represented by things like generosity, love, and wisdom.

Then when we come out of meditation, we may have a better way of knowing how to act. If we are discontented with the state of affairs, then we know how to act and what to do. If we are discontented with all the dirty dishes in our kitchen, then we go and wash the dishes in a meditative, contemplative, respectful, present-moment,

engaged way that feels as if we're bringing meditation with us into our lives. This is an enjoyable thing. We're not rushing off and multitasking.

If what we feel is the suffering of the world elsewhere – anywhere, right now.

The suffering in Israel is huge. The whole nation is traumatized and in deep pain. Ukraine is in deep pain.

The list goes on. If this really troubles us when we come out of meditation and we're discontented, maybe we have the generosity and the wherewithal to do something about it – even the smallest act. We might offer a donation to charities or to someone who's helping the sick and the wounded.

Meditation is not about how to be calm and uninterested in the world. It is about being deeply contented with ourselves and with the moment so that what motivates us to act in the world and change the world comes from a place of tremendous well-being. This motivation can come from a place of generosity, a wellspring within of our goodness, rather than from the agitation of our fear, distress, and anger. This is the possibility that contentment can bring.

Today I would encourage you to explore your contentment and your discontentment. As you go through the day, check in with yourself once an hour. Ask if you would characterize how you are as more on the discontented side of the spectrum or more on the contented side. If you're discontented, what's happening? What is that about? Can you settle it? Can you be present for it? Can you investigate it?

If you're more on the contented side of the spectrum, feel that, enjoy that, take that in, and be nourished by it. If it's just a little bit on that spectrum, by recognizing the small amount of contentment you have, is there some appropriate way to settle into it more fully so it becomes a resource that supports and guides your day?

We have two more of these ten protectors. Thank you.