

Ten Protectors (9 of 10) Mindfulness

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Welcome to the ninth talk on the Ten Protectors. The idea that these are practices we can do that protect us and others implies that there's something valuable to protect. Through things like meditation, spiritual practices of different kinds, and other ways of being in the world, we discover that there is a place within of well-being, happiness, peace, and wisdom. This is a place where there can be a phenomenally wonderful caring for the world, which is filled with ease.

We discover that even amidst great tragedy, we don't have to sacrifice this valuable place within. We don't sacrifice it for the strong human tendencies of anger, hostility, hatred, greed, jealousy and envy, self-righteousness, being caught up in anxiety and fear, or being caught in ignorance. These are common human tendencies we tend to cover over and which tend to restrict us. They are obstacles for this deep place where wisdom and compassion can operate in a nourishing, healthy way.

There is a story, kind of a fable, that's told by the Buddha (SN 19). He talks about two acrobats in the ancient world, the master acrobat and the apprentice. It turns out the literal meaning of the name of the apprentice, at least as it appears to us who know a little bit of Pali, is "a frying pan." Maybe it's irrelevant to the story, but the association with the image of jumping out of the frying pan comes to mind.

So the master acrobat is going to hold up with one hand the apprentice, who will do various acrobatic feats on the hand of the master acrobat. The master acrobat says, "Watch over me and I will watch over you, and then we will both be safe." The apprentice says, "No, that's not how it works. I'll watch over myself, and you watch over yourself, and then we'll both be safe."

When telling the story, the Buddha said yes, that's the way it is. Then he says the way that we protect others by first protecting ourselves is by cultivating the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. (?This does not appear to be an exact quote. (SN 19) ; <https://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/bl034.html>; <https://suttacentral.net/sn47.19/en/bodhi?lang=en&reference=none&highlight=false>)

We cultivate our capacity to be aware in an embodied way – aware of our body; our capacity to be aware of our feelings – the feeling tones we have; to be aware of our mind states – to recognize them and know them well; and our capacity to be aware of the mental activity of the mind that either creates the tension of attachment or releases that tension and reveals the beautiful qualities of the mind: the Seven Factors of Awakening and the deep insight that leads to liberation.

Cultivating the Four Foundations of Mindfulness is the way we protect others. When we protect others in this way, I suppose we're protecting them from ourselves. Remember that in the analogy of the acrobat, there are two people who are doing these amazing interactive feats. In the ancient world of the Buddha, the primary way people influenced each other was through direct contact. There was no social media at the time of the Buddha. Communication lines were all through people's oral contact with each other.

Communication has become more complicated in our modern world. But in the ancient world, the reference point was how people related through direct contact. In the world of direct contact, we protect others when we protect ourselves. When we cultivate the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, we won't give in to greed, hate, and

delusion. We won't give in to the ways in which we get caught up, tense, and reactive to what's going on. Then people are protected from our reactivity.

First, the Buddha agrees that it's true. Then he goes on to say something a little bit more inclusive. He says we protect others by protecting ourselves – by cultivating the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. We protect ourselves by protecting others when we practice patience, harmlessness, loving-kindness, and sympathy. (Not an exact quote.)

Having the attitudes of kindness, patience, and sympathy towards others is the way to protect ourselves. The protection goes in both directions. There are certain things we do for ourselves that protect us from the kind of unhealthy reactivity we might have, and thereby we protect others. And there are certain things we can do for others, having to do with healthy, supportive attitudes of goodwill towards others, that in return, protect us.

We don't protect ourselves when we meet people with hate. We don't protect others when we meet with people with coldness and indifference, not really understanding where they are. We don't understand others if we are intolerant or impatient with them. The Pali word "*khanti*," which is usually translated as "patience," can also mean tolerance toward others. In English, being intolerant is usually not considered a very good way to be. So that's also how we protect ourselves – by being tolerant and patient.

The ninth protector of the Ten Protectors is *sati*, or awareness. It's significant to me that it's the ninth. Leading up to *sati* are practicing harmlessness, learning the Dharma well, being devoted to the Dharma, and loving it. All these things that we've been talking about lead up to, support, and protect one of the greatest protections we have, which is mindfulness.

We practice mindfulness not just for the sake of mindfulness, but because hopefully at some point as we practice, we become aware there's something valuable within us. We know we have access to a source, a profound place, an activity, of wisdom, compassion, love, kindness, generosity, non-harming, and insight, where we are grounded in a place of non-attachment.

This is worth protecting. And we protect it by being mindful. If we are mindful, the greater the mindfulness, the more acutely we'll see the movements towards reactivity. We will see the ways in which attachment operates, where we get involved, lean into, and get caught up in things. We might even justify reactivity. But instead, we can come back to that deeper place and protect it. By doing that we protect others and we protect ourselves. When we do that, we have the opportunity to offer others the goodwill and kindness that tends to protect us externally from others. The opposite of goodwill – intolerance, impatience, harming others, ill-will, being unsympathetic to the situation of others does not contribute to others wanting to care for us. It contributes to the opposite.

So mindfulness is a protector. The more we practice mindfulness, the more we stay aware, the more opportunity we have to protect something that's really precious within. From that place, we begin protecting others and have the possibility of living a life where hopefully we're all protecting each other.

We all have a capacity deep inside for beautiful qualities of being. If we want to find that in the world and spread that in the world, let us become transmitters of it. Let us be people who demonstrate that this is possible. If no one demonstrates this is possible, then how are people going to learn it?

Thank you. We have one more protector for tomorrow, and I very much appreciate this chance to talk about these things. May you protect yourself. Today, if you can practice mindfulness throughout the day, whenever you remember to be mindful, check in and reflect on how you are, what just happened for you, and what has been going on for you in the last few minutes. Ask if you lost your mindfulness. In losing the mindfulness, did you get involved in a reactive way? Did you get involved in something that ideally you would have been protected from – some way of being caught or tense? When you see that, you might see, "Oh yes, mindfulness is a protector. And it would have been worth being mindful so I didn't get so caught up." If you didn't have any caught-up-ness during the day, then at the end of the day you can celebrate. Thank you.

