

# Ten Protectors (10 of 10) Wisdom

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## Summary Keywords

Virtue, ethical integrity, precepts, study, learn, good friends, practitioners, virtuous, sangha, community, generosity, non-harming, peaceful, beneficial, content, mindfulness, inconstancy, arising, passing, stream, bucket, non-harming, skillful, river, change, entering the stream

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Today we come to the end of these talks on the 10 protectors. The final talk is on wisdom.

There are many obvious ways in which wisdom protects us. When we go through the world with wisdom our eyes are open. This helps us understand how to behave and how to be. There are many ways that wisdom supports us and helps us protect others.

In this list of 10 protectors, the Buddha gives a particular meaning to wisdom. I want to appreciate that it is the last in the list of 10 protectors. Nine protectors came before. The assumption here is that we have something in ourselves to protect that is worthy of protection, care, and support.

One aspect of these 10 protectors is that these 10 things themselves are so wonderful that it is worth protecting them. We are protecting the very things that protect and help us to thrive. We protect the very things that help us protect others. They let us be someone who serves and cares for the world around us. They help us to be safe for other people. It is a wonderful list.

I think of these lists in Buddhism as being progressive. One builds on the other. The first protector is basic virtue, ethical integrity, and living by the five precepts. With ethics, we protect ourselves to some degree from ourselves. We avoid putting ourselves in situations that are very harmful to us. We also tend to protect ourselves from others. The world tends to treat people who are ethical better than those who are unethical.

Like many things in Buddhism, it begins with the foundation of ethics. When we have the foundation of ethics, then we are prepared for the next protector. This is to study and learn the Dharma, to take it in a deep way. If we live an unethical life, the Dharma can't penetrate us. The teachings can't come in because the teachings undermine the very motivations and ways of being that are unethical.

To be ethical begins with creating the ability in the mind and heart to receive and understand the teachings. Studying the teachings protects us. We understand what the teachings are about.

This leads to having good friends. We now understand the teachings enough to understand that there are good spiritual friends, beautiful friends, who might be more practiced than we are. They may be more rooted in the Dharma than we are. We learn to love and care for them. We have these good friends in our lives so that they can inspire and guide us. They can help us understand the Dharma more – not just to understand the Dharma as teachings, but to understand how they get integrated into how we live our lives.

The Protectors begin with ethics, then studying the Dharma, and having good, spiritual friends who live the Dharma. Next, we want to be easy to correct, and easy to speak to. If we have good Dharma friends, then we want to benefit from our teachers – the more experienced practitioners around us – and be easy to talk to. We are willing to hear what they have to say. We don't protest. This is particularly important when we have the benefits and the wonderful treasure of people who are willing to point out our faults. They will point out where we are off, or where we are causing harm in the world.

Since the time of the Buddha, it was considered a treasure to have people like that in our lives. It is a gift to have people who lovingly care for us while helping us understand where we need to focus, clarify, grow, and develop. It is important to be easy to speak to and not be defensive.

Be virtuous, so we can study the Dharma. Study the Dharma, so we can appreciate the people who live by the Dharma. Have good, spiritual friends, and then be easy to speak to so that they can help and support us.

Next, we care for the sangha. We care for our practice community, the community of people who are supporting us. It is a mutual relationship. We can practice generosity. We can take the ethical qualities we are learning and apply them in a community that values and supports them and is helping us develop.

When we care for our Dharma community and engage in the process of integrating all this into our lives, then it is easier at some point to love the Dharma, the sixth quality. The Dharma is not outside of us. The Dharma is us. The heart of the Dharma is non-harming. We love our capacity for non-harming, for living a peaceful life, a non-harming Dharma life. Then we are protected by that. We are protected by non-harming in important, deeper ways than if we just live by the precepts.

As we learn to live this life of loving the Dharma, we start to understand that if we love the Dharma, we don't want to do anything that harms us. We want to do the things that support us and from which we benefit. We learn to abandon what is unskillful, and unhelpful. We then pick up, support, and develop what is skillful. We cultivate what is beneficial, and helpful for us.

This is one of the key areas of practice. An important guideline for Buddhist practice is to abandon what is unhelpful and support what is helpful. Living that way is also a protector. We are protected from causing harm to ourselves.

Then we learn to be content with what we have. It doesn't mean we are 100% content with living in poverty or living in areas of abuse. It means that when the necessities of our life are available to us, don't be greedy for more. Don't be discontented wanting more and more. Abandon looking for happiness outside of ourselves. Be content to some degree with the necessities, however it works for you in your life, so that you have more time to practice. Rather than looking externally for more validation and pleasure, cultivate the wherewithal to be present for your experience as you live it.

We are then protected by the ninth factor. This is the protection of mindfulness. It is the ability to be present, right here with our experience. This builds on all the other protectors.

Finally, we come to wisdom. This is a path of practice or a process that supports our maturation, so at some point, we become ready for wisdom. The reason it is important to think of wisdom as a result of all these steps is that this particular wisdom that the Buddha emphasizes may be hard to appreciate.

It is easy to protest and think this wisdom is not good enough, this wisdom is dismissive, it seems indifferent to the world and doesn't understand how the world is for me. Understanding this wisdom takes a deep capacity for attention and finding refuge inside oneself. We do not look externally for refuge.

This wisdom that the Buddha says will protect us and is one of the protectors is to see the river of change – the river in which things arise and pass away or come and go. It is cleansing and freeing to rest in that stream. The stream of change protects us from how we cling and hold on. It protects us from how we resist painfully and unnecessarily. It protects us from how our attachments spill out of us and affect how we relate to others.

This Buddhist idea of entering the stream is partly about entering the stream of change – this constant change, movement, or coming and going. I think this is playing off the idea or metaphor from ancient India that we can go into a river like the river Ganges and be purified. The Buddha wasn't so interested in the idea that a physical river can purify us of our inner challenges, faults, or ways in which we are stuck.

For him, we are the river that can purify. We become our own protectors and purifiers. We become our own liberators. We begin to allow that river of change inside of us to wash through us and wash away our attachments. It dissolves the way we are stuck and helps to evaporate the ways we are afraid, anxious, tight, and restricted. There is something about beginning to appreciate and feel the way that all things are constantly flowing through.

The challenge with this is that we have all kinds of things that we recognize will never change. We have a loss. How can these Buddhists say that everything is changing when this loss is permanent? Or we might compare ourselves to someone else – I am always going to be X whereas other people have the advantage, they are Y.

These have some truth in the world outside of us, which we don't want to deny. We want to be wise about that. But in meditation, we see that sitting quietly at home in ourselves, where we are allowed to be ourselves fully and completely and we are perfect just the way we are, we see that in this moment, loss is a memory. The loss is real, but in the moment-to-moment experience of change, it comes to us as a memory.

In the moment-to-moment experience of comparing ourselves to someone else, I am X and they are Y, that is an idea. It is a thought in the mind that makes a comparison. Those memories, thoughts, and ideas come and go. They are part of the stream of change. If we understand that and allow ourselves to see it, then they will not weigh us down. They will not grate on us. They will not add salt to our wounds.

We will see them just flowing and moving through. It can be hard to be willing to do that because it can seem like a betrayal of our ideas and memories. This is a deeply cleansing process that is good to do from time to time. It is like taking a shower or bathing, so we are clean as we go back into the world.

Just as it is good to bathe physically, it is good to do this inner bathing, this inner cleansing that comes when mindfulness is stable and strong enough so we can be here in the present moment. We allow ourselves to rest in the moment-to-moment changing, streaming flow of experience. We can see that this too will pass. This too will go. This too comes and goes, flows and streams.

This is the experience that liberates us from our attachments. It liberates us from holding on, from freezing and holding what is here. It liberates us from having to dip the pail into the stream of our life and then carry the bucket around, maybe for the rest of our lives. Some of us have carried or are carrying many, many buckets. The buckets are not the stream of life.

We protect ourselves through wisdom – the wisdom of change, impermanence, and inconstancy. If we can cleanse ourselves from that, then we can go into the world and be a better protector of the world.

Maybe we can be like these 10 protections in how we care for this world that desperately needs more protectors. It desperately needs people coming from this deep experience of love, kindness, support, and wisdom.

May it be that as we protect ourselves, we protect the world. Thank you.