

Ten Protectors (7 of 10) Letting Go and Picking Up

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Gil Fronsdal

Warm greetings from IMC and welcome to this series on the ten protectors.

Yesterday the protector was a love of the Dharma. Of course, that can have different meanings depending on what we mean by “Dharma.” People have different reference points for this wonderful word. Yesterday I suggested that the core aspect of the Dharma is non-harming. That's pretty powerful by itself, but the companion to non-harming is doing what's beneficial – doing that which is the opposite of harm. This protects us and the world around us.

We do what is beneficial with the operating idea of love, which I think is fantastic. We do this with love. We have love for non-harming so that the way we approach and meet the world is healthy and nourishing for us and for others.

When I first was introduced to the next protector, right effort, many years ago, it seemed a little too technique-focused, and perhaps a little judgmental and more difficult. To me, it felt very different than having open mindfulness and presence for whatever is here. But I've come to really appreciate that this protector is very fundamental to the Dharma.

The traditional way of translating it into English is “to abandon what is unwholesome and arouse or awaken what is wholesome.” Sometimes it's said to mean “abandoning what's unskillful and arousing what is skillful.” I like to think of it as letting go of what is unhelpful and picking up what is helpful – doing what is helpful. Sometimes I see it as putting down whatever is unhealthy that our mind, speech, and body might be doing and picking up what is healthy wherever we can pick it up.

This distinction makes a huge difference. If we don't see the choice between what is unhelpful and what is helpful in any situation in our life, why would we stop doing what's unhelpful? If you have a thorn in your foot and

you don't see that it's helpful or serves you to take the thorn out and you just keep walking on the thorn, then eventually it can cause infection and might cause lasting damage.

We are constantly making this distinction in our lives. When we're sitting in a chair, we feel which way of sitting is comfortable and helps us to relax, and which does not. Maybe there's some painful pressure against part of our body in a certain way of sitting in the chair. So we make an adjustment. This constant adjustment we make is pretty much human nature.

But when we apply it in Dharma practice, we are learning how we relate to our experience. Dharma practice has a very central value of taking responsibility for what comes out of us, as opposed to looking at the world and changing the world. If what comes out of us is not helpful for the world and for us, then we practice the art of letting go of it. If it is helpful or if we awaken what is helpful, then please continue doing that with enthusiasm. We make this choice.

For mindfulness practitioners, it is always helpful and always wholesome to be mindful – if the mindfulness is clean, if it doesn't come along with unhelpful attitudes, judgment, criticism, greed, or expectation. Tracking simple mindfulness for ourselves is a way of being our own protector, because the deepest harm we can

experience as adults is the harm that we do to ourselves. Even if there are horrendous things happening to us outside, in our deepest heart it's how we relate to what is inside that really counts in the end and has a lasting effect on us.

If we react with resistance and aversion deep in the heart, or if we react with hostility and hate, or greed and desire in some deep way, the reactivity has a kind of tension that is suffering in and of itself. Then we can create lasting harm. But if we can meet the deepest places within with love, care, generosity, non-conceit, and non-shutting down, there can be lasting benefit to us.

Of course, this is very difficult to appreciate when horrible things happen to us. But when we really get into Dharma practice and really understand it well, we understand that we are becoming the custodians of our own hearts. Whatever happens around us, we begin developing the strength to really stay close to that heart of ours and keep it free, clean, and non-reactive, so that we are not actually compounding the challenges by adding second arrows to ourselves. The ability to see where not to add the second arrow and the choice to stay close to that is a way of protecting ourselves.

What I love and find fascinating and delightful is the image of standing there and choosing what goes into

the compost – what we don't want and don't need, what is not helpful. By calling it “compost,” we don't have to think of ourselves as abandoning it, or see it as just another form of aversion. Everything has a use. Some things are just useful for composting.

When I have anger or greed, whatever I don't think is useful, if I let go of it, drop into my body and feel it in my body, the body has a way of composting it. I don't have to reject it exactly or have the attitude that it's bad or wrong. It has a use if I can let go of it into the body in such a way that it can get transmuted or settled, and support something beautiful to happen.

After that comes awakening what's beautiful and what's helpful. The way to do this – to abandon, to let go of, then to awaken and maintain – is to do that last part skillfully, in a helpful way – a way that's nourishing and supportive and feels wholesome.

Rather than navigating this distinction between healthy and not healthy as one more difficult exhausting thing to do, our attitude, the way we relate to it is supported by the love of the Dharma. We just love doing this practice. We love doing something that avoids further harm and creates more benefit. How lucky we are that we can do this. If we don't have a healthy attitude toward how we navigate this natural distinction between what's healthy and not healthy, then it's hard to sustain the practice. It

can be exhausting. It can be debilitating. It can feel like a burden.

But if we can find a healthy way to make this distinction and navigate this, it can be a delight, a joy. It can be kind of like the joy of paddling down the current of a river and enjoying just staying in the current as we go. Just that little choice we make to stay in that healthy current – stay here, be here – is delightful.

I love that the idea of abandoning the unwholesome and awakening the wholesome follows love of the Dharma in this list. Maybe that's a guide for how to do this very fundamental practice of what's usually called “right effort” in Buddhism. It is one of the steps of the Eightfold Path, so it's pretty central. By doing this, we become our own protector. I think one of the really significant stepping stones in Dharma practice is learning how we can be our own protectors. We protect ourselves from ourselves.

As we do this, we also become a protector for others, and we're protecting them from us. We become a safe person. Maybe this seems a trifling thing in a world that's full of horrendous suffering and challenges. Many of us are very sensitive to what's happening right now in the world. But someone has to be this kind of person. Someone has to be able to enter into the world in such a way that they're safe for others. Who is better for this

than us? If it doesn't start with us, does it make sense to continue to expect that other people will make the world a better place? But if we can do it, if we can be a safe person for the world, then maybe we have a place upon which to stand and a way to begin encouraging other people to do it and speak up about it. Let's meet each other peacefully, and kindly. Let's try to actively stand not in opposition exactly, but take a stand to convince people that violence doesn't work, hate doesn't work, and greed doesn't work. Let's speak up about that, but only if we know how to be safe for all people, including the people we disagree with.

We'll continue on these ten protectors tomorrow. Thank you.