

# Ten Protectors (5 of 10) Caring for Sangha

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## **Summary Keywords**

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Good morning. We will continue with this 10-part series on the Ten Protectors (the ten supporters or ten helpers). Today, we will consider skillful and wise ways of caring for and supporting your Sangha or practice community.

I became involved in the IMC Sangha many years ago when it was just a small sitting group. We met on Monday nights. There were about 12-15 people who would come. I joined them as a teacher. The sangha had already been in place for maybe four years.

I was coming out of monastic training. In the monastery, I had seen how useful and powerful it was to care for

the place where we practiced. It is the place where we are supported – the location, friends, community, and teachings. There is something in the alchemy of practice that changes in a good way when we care for the place where we practice.

When there were just a few people coming to the Sangha, it was easy to take care of the logistics. There were very few things that needed to be done. There was a key that opened and closed the church library where we met. There were flyers from Spirit Rock Meditation Center that we put out to let people know what was happening there. There were very few insight meditation opportunities in the Bay Area back then. That was it. We only needed someone with a key, and someone to take care of the flyers.

I could easily have done that myself, but it felt important to provide people with an opportunity to care for the place where we practiced. We found someone who carried the key and opened the place every week. I told them that they were the president of our sitting group. I gave them some higher-level caretaking responsibility for it. Even though there was almost nothing to do, I thought it was useful for people to step into a bit of a leadership role.

I didn't know what was going to happen, but slowly we grew and developed. It was remarkable how many

people stepped forward to volunteer. One of the benefits of volunteering was forming a deeper sense of community and connectedness with other practitioners. Caring for the practice center so there is a greater sense of connection and community also supports and protects our practice. That is not so available when we practice alone all the time.

We can become a protector of the Sangha, which is a powerful thing to be. More importantly, being a little selfless and extending ourselves to support others protects us from our selfishness. It is a protection from doing the practice in a self-centered way. It protects us from being too preoccupied with me, myself, and mine. “This is my practice. I am going to get enlightened. I am going to become concentrated. All these people are getting in the way. They just make life more difficult and complicated.”

Rather, we see that we grow in connection to the community. The community mirrors who we are. It mirrors how we might be a little bit off or confused. The community can help us see how we might take things too personally or where our judgments of others come forward. Being in a community and working with people becomes a mirror for us.

This is one of the primary reasons that I decided to live at a Buddhist center. I had been practicing Zen in

college. I meditated zazen (zen meditation) twice a day on my own. I would visit the San Francisco Zen Center occasionally, maybe once a month. I noticed something peculiar there. I was young, about 22, and there were a lot of social games that I played. I wanted to present myself in a certain way so they would see me in a certain way, so I talked and engaged in ways to try to get that response from people. I played those social games to try to reinforce a specific identity that I wanted to have.

When I was with my friends, I didn't even know I was doing this. We were all doing it. It was one big social thing.

We were all good friends and got along well, but we were moving in and out of this unconscious game of self and self-presentation.

When I went to the San Francisco Zen Center and talked to some of the more senior practitioners, a remarkable thing happened. I would do the social game of presenting myself in a certain way and there would be no response. They weren't playing the game. They were like a mirror. I thought, "Wow." I saw what I was doing in a way I hadn't seen before.

This is when I realized how invaluable it was to have people mirror the ways that we are kind of off. I wanted to see this more clearly. That was my first reason for

wanting to go live at the San Francisco Zen Center. I wanted to be around these people who mirrored me. The mirroring showed me where I needed to let go, where I needed to grow, where I needed to take a good look at myself and see the things that were not necessarily so wonderful.

I felt so lucky to have found a place that would be a mirror for me so I could see this about myself. Even though some of it was rather embarrassing and I would cringe when I saw it in myself, I was so happy. I felt much safer as a human moving through the world when I was being mirrored and shown how I was off.

That was a protection for me, and I loved this protection. I felt safer being in such a community – for support, to know people more personally, and to witness people's goodness in a way that we might not see unless we were sharing in and caring for the community's life.

Here at IMC, I have felt it was important to make volunteering available for people but never to require it. It was extremely important to not have any sense of obligation around volunteering. There should never be any sense that you were less a member of the community if you weren't volunteering.

There is an art to making volunteering available to people, while also recognizing all the circumstances people have in their lives. People have busy lives. They have personal circumstances that might challenge them. They may not have the ability, the time, or the interest to volunteer at their local sangha or community.

The art is finding a balance between making volunteer opportunities available while ensuring that no one has any sense of obligation to volunteer. Over many years, as IMC has grown, this is the balancing act that we have tried to accomplish.

Consider offering some care to the Buddhist community (or whatever community) that you practice with. If you live someplace where there is no Buddhist community, or where this YouTube is your community, there might be some simple ways you can volunteer for IMC from a distance. People help with technology. They help with managing the Zoom meetings or the recordings. It is not always easy to find volunteer positions for people, but it is essential for who we are.

I am not fishing for people to volunteer. I am talking about the protection we get – when we protect the Sangha, we are protected as well. The primary protection that I celebrate is the protection from being excessively self-preoccupied, maybe even selfish.

It is hard to see how this works. One way to see your selfishness is to put yourself in situations where you must stretch yourself beyond your usual sense of self, or where you must drop it. There are all kinds of ways to do this besides supporting a Sangha. There are other ways and other communities.

I was struck by how much raising babies and toddlers allowed me to stretch and challenge myself. It was a mirror for me. It was a place where I could see how selfish, self-concerned, or self-preoccupied I was. Often I had no idea how self-concerned I was because I could do it so freely, in such a reasonable, healthy way that no one could see it. I couldn't even see it, but the demands of caring for young children were a good mirror.

I saw all kinds of things about myself that were challenging to see and challenging to let go of. It was a fantastic Sangha. It was a protection for me to see these things about myself that I had not even seen in a long monastic life.

Find some ways to be connected to and supportive of other people that take you out of the little world of self. Stretch yourself in such a way that you can let go of something that is not needed. You might find yourself freer in living this life. You won't have the wind drag of self-concern. You won't have the tension of conceit. You can be involved in the world in a more selfless,

impersonal, or non-personal way, where you are not the center of attention and the other person becomes more valuable.

It was so freeing when I allowed caring for Sangha into my life. The possibility of freedom from self-concern and self-preoccupation that arose from being supportive and working for others was sometimes more present than I had seen in meditation. Going back and forth between meditation and the challenge of how to live in the world is a wonderful balance.

For some people, this teaching about doing things more non-personally or without selfishness and self-preoccupation needs to be heard with care. It is not meant to be a denial or diminishing of the value of the person that we are. It is not meant to be a kind of sacrifice of ourselves for others. It is meant to support us in stepping forward more fully and becoming ourselves more fully, rather than less. When we step forward more fully, this is sometimes where the shell or the ties of self-concern can fall off.

May you consider ways in which your support and your care for others may be a mirror to see yourself better. May it help you break out of the ways where self-concern limits you. Thank you very much.