

## *Protection in all Directions*

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The Buddha once said that one of the teacher's duties is to provide protection for the student in all directions. Of course, that doesn't mean that the teacher runs around with a sword and a shield, trying to keep dangers away. The teacher provides the student with the knowledge of what should and shouldn't be done. If you follow that advice, you'll be protected.

Of course, you want the right advice. There's another place where the Buddha was critical of some other teachers at the time whose teachings basically denied that action had any power, that your actions had any real results, or that you had any control over your life at all—teaching that everything you were going to experience was already predetermined. As he said, that kind of teaching leaves no grounds for any idea of what should and shouldn't be done. There are no shoulds or should nots, and when there's no should or should not, there's no protection: You're left unprotected. Your actions are what protect you, based on your strong sense of what should and shouldn't be done.

Because your mind is constantly acting, it's always doing, and its actions really do have an impact on its life, on the pleasure and pain that it experiences, it needs all the help it can get.

There's another place where the Buddha said that the beginning of wisdom is when you go to a contemplative or brahman—and in this case, he's not talking about any old contemplative or any old brahman, he's talking about noble disciples—and you ask those people “What's skillful? What's unskillful? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm?”

So the teaching on skillfulness is basic, the wisdom that's basic to your protection. If you were to ask the Buddha about skillfulness, the first thing he would say would be one of his categorical teachings: that skillful qualities should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned. That's true across the board.

Then he would expand on that with what are called the ten *kammāpatha*: You start with skillful actions from the body, then skillful speech, and then skillful actions of the mind.

There's the body: No killing, no stealing, no illicit sex.

Then there's speech: No lying. No divisive speech. That's sometimes mistranslated in English as “slander.” Slander is when you're spreading lies.

Divisive speech is when you're actually saying something true but you're trying to make someone look really bad in the other person's eyes, particularly with the aim of breaking up a potential friendship or harming a friendship that already exists. You want to avoid that kind of speech.

You also avoid unnecessarily coarse speech, and you avoid idle chatter.

That last one, avoiding idle chatter, is a hard one because there's no clear line. On the one hand, there has to be a certain amount of what you could call "social-grease" chatter, just helping people get along, making sure that life in the group is friendly. But as we all know, too much grease can muck up the works. So we have to be very careful.

There's also a tendency when you're engaged in idle chatter that the filter that normally separates your mind from your speech gets pretty coarse, and lets all kinds of things through. Things you haven't really thought through carefully, things you're not really sure about what your intention is: Suddenly it all gets let out. You end up saying things that are untrue or divisive or whatever. Particularly in terms of your sense of humor, you have to be very careful. Just because something is funny doesn't mean it has to be said or should be said. You should put it to the test as well. Is it true, is it beneficial, is it timely? That's speech.

Then there are skillful actions of the mind. The first one is no undue greed. In other words, you see something you'd like and you realize that there are fair ways and unfair ways of gaining that or something like it. There are right and wrong ways, and you never go for the wrong ways. You always go for the right ways.

You also look at the things around you: Exactly how much out there do we really need? The Buddha has that reflection on the requisites to remind us that we need only so much food, only so much clothing, shelter, medicine. Beyond that, it becomes wasteful.

So whenever you find the mind wanting something, ask yourself, "What's the genuine gain is there? And what's the loss?" So many things in life are a trade.

I know someone who built a really beautiful new Dhamma hall in Thailand. He put years and years of work into it. More recently, he's been complaining that it requires a lot of upkeep. You've got the hall, but now you've got all the upkeep that goes along with it. Is it worth the trade? That's something we each have to decide for ourselves.

The second skillful mental action is lack of ill-will. You develop goodwill for all beings: yourself and everybody around you. What this means is that you don't want to see anybody suffer, and you don't want to cause anybody suffering.

There's an interesting passage where the Buddha shows ways in which you can express goodwill. It's not just, "May all beings be happy," but also, "May no one

deceive or despise anyone, anywhere.” In other words, not only may people be happy but more importantly, may they act on the causes of happiness. This is what makes goodwill not just a kind of airy-fairy pink-cotton-candy kind of idea. You really do want everyone in the world to behave skillfully. If there’s any way you can help people, the most genuine way you can benefit other people is by getting *them* to behave skillfully, too. If you see that opportunity, then follow through.

Finally there are views made straight, i.e., right view. Right view is basically the view that your actions really do matter, your actions do have results that go beyond this life. And this is not just a matter of hearsay: There are people who have practiced and have seen that there’s this life and the next life, and there’s a continuity or a continuum of the results of our actions. Sometimes the results appear now; sometimes they appear after we’ve died.

Thinking in this way is the beginning of right view. It’s the basis for the four noble truths. Some people say there’s no connection between the teachings on karma and the four noble truths, but how can that be? The four noble truths are about actions and their results. There are certain actions in the mind that lead to suffering; there are certain actions in the mind that lead away from suffering.

As you start out with these basic principles of what’s skillful, you find that in order to really strengthen your actions—especially skillful mental acts, but also your skillful bodily acts and your skillful verbal acts—you need to have a good meditation practice. Otherwise, your goodwill is weak, your right views get weakened, and when there’s no real sense of well-being coming from your meditation, it’s very easy to think that material things and social relationships are the really important things in life.

This is why, when the Buddha would teach, he would give a step-by-step discourse. He would start out with generosity and virtue. The virtue here would cover all these ten skillful actions. Then he would move on, talking about the rewards of these skillful actions, but then he’d point out that those rewards have their drawbacks, if you don’t have something more solid. That something more solid is when you learn how to give up your interest in all your sensual thinking—thinking about how you’d like the world to be this way or you’d like the world to be that way—and you turn your attention to your inner world instead. This is why we meditate. The meditation is embedded in this larger teaching of what’s skillful and what’s not.

You’re training the mind so that its sense of skillfulness becomes more interior. You’re not totally dependent on rules outside. This doesn’t mean that you break the rules, just that your sense of what’s skillful gets more subtle. Meditation is a kind of sensitivity training: It trains you in being more sensitive to

your actions, more sensitive to the results you're getting from your actions. It helps you raise your standards for what counts as genuinely skillful.

When you've internalized these lessons in this way, when you've internalized the practice, that's when you can become your own protection. As the Buddha said, "The self is its own mainstay"—*Attahi attano natho*. You can't be your own mainstay until you've developed good qualities inside.

So a firm sense of what's skillful and what's not: That's your protection. Your willingness to do whatever it takes to develop what's skillful: That's your protection as well. When that's based on a mind with a good foundation in concentration, then your protection is really solid wherever you go. Because it comes from inside, you never have to be afraid that you'll leave it anywhere. Wherever you go, it's there.