

# 19

## Sedaka Sutta

The Discourse at Sedaka | S 47.19/5:168 f  
Theme: Truly guarding self and guarding others  
Translated by Piya Tan ©2004

### 1 Introduction

**1.1** The Sedaka Sutta reveals **the social and psychological aspects** of satipatthana practice not often mentioned, much less stressed, by modern meditation teachers. Here, the Buddha makes it clear that through satipatthana practice, one effectively guards oneself and guards others (*attānaṃ rakkhanto paraṃ rakkhati*). Conversely, “by patience (*khanti*), non-violence (*avihiṃsā*), lovingkindness (*mettā*) and caring [active compassion] (*anudayatā*)”<sup>1</sup> one guards others, and so guards oneself (*paraṃ rakkhanto attānaṃ rakkhati*)—in this way, there is mutual safety.<sup>2</sup>

“Guarding oneself, one protects others.”

“Guarding others, one protects oneself.”

These two sentences are interrelated and should not be taken separately as they would then lose their spiritual vitality. There is a general tendency amongst many people to think only in terms of the second statement, “protecting others, one protects oneself.” Various religious vie one another in social work to win converts or appear good in the eyes of others. Or perhaps, such works are done through a sense of guilt perceiving some past evil one has done. An over-zealous evangelist, trying to forcefully convert others, might actually be trying to convince himself that he *really* has faith in his beliefs, when actually deep down within he simply lacks it. In short, external good works may actually be repressing or hiding some dark shadow deep inside.

**1.2** One sunk in the mire would find it almost impossible to help another. One has not guarded oneself. Self-guarding is not selfish guarding. It is self-control through moral virtue and mental cultivation. Here are some inspiring excerpts from Nyanaponika, short reflection on “Protection Through Satipatthana”:

“**Protecting oneself, one protects others**”—the truth of this statement begins at a very simple and practical level. This first material level of the truth is so self-evident that we need say no more than a few words about it. It is obvious that the protection of our own health will go far in protecting the health of others in our environment, especially where contagious diseases are concerned. Caution and circumspection in all our doings and movements will protect others from the harm that may come to them through our carelessness and negligence. By careful driving, abstention from alcohol, self-restraint in situations that might lead to violence—in all these and many other ways we shall protect others by protecting ourselves.

We come now to the ethical level of that truth. Moral self-protection will safeguard others, individuals and society, against our own unrestrained passions and selfish impulses. If we permit the “three roots” of evil—greed, hate and delusion—to take a firm hold in our hearts, then their outgrowths will spread far and wide like a jungle creeper, suffocating much healthy and noble growth all around. But if we protect ourselves against these three roots, our fellow beings too will be safe. They will be safe from our reckless greed for possessions and power, from our unrestrained lust and sensuality, from our envy and jealousy; safe from the disruptive consequences of our hate and enmity which may be destructive or even murderous; safe from the outbursts of

<sup>1</sup> Comy: The last 3 are the first 3 divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*) of compassion (*karuṇā*), lovingkindness (*mettā*) and altruistic joy (*muditā*) (SA 3:227). See S:B 1925 n170.

<sup>2</sup> See “The Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas” = SD 13.1(6b).

our anger and from the resulting atmosphere of antagonism and conflict which may make life unbearable for them.

As to the third root of evil, delusion or ignorance we know very well how much harm may be done to others through the stupidity, thoughtlessness, prejudices, illusions and delusions of a single person.

Without wisdom and knowledge, attempts to protect oneself and others will usually fail. One will see the danger only when it is too late, one will not make provision for the future; one will not know the right and effective means of protection and help. Therefore, self-protection through wisdom and knowledge is of the greatest importance. By acquiring true wisdom and knowledge, we shall protect others from the harmful consequences of our own ignorance, prejudices, infectious fanaticism and delusions. History shows us that great and destructive mass delusions have often been kindled by a single individual or a small number of people. Self-protection through wisdom and knowledge will protect others from the pernicious effect of such influences.

... By meditation, the practical, emotional and intellectual motives of moral and spiritual self-protection will become our personal property which cannot easily be lost again. Therefore our sutta speaks here of *bhāvanā*, the meditative development of the mind in its widest sense. This is the highest form of protection which our world can bestow. He who has developed his mind by meditation lives in peace with himself and the world. From him no harm or violence will issue. The peace and purity which he radiates will have an inspiring, uplifting power and will be a blessing to the world. He will be a positive factor in society, even if he lives in seclusion and silence. When understanding for, and recognition of, the social value of a meditative life ceases in a nation, it will be one of the first symptoms of spiritual deterioration.

... **“Protecting others, one protects oneself.”** And how? By patience and forbearance, by a non-violent and harmless life, by loving-kindness and compassion (*khantiya avihimsaya mettataya anuddayataya*)."

He whose relation to his fellow-beings is governed by these principles will protect himself better than he could with physical strength or with any mighty weapon. He who is patient and forbearing will avoid conflicts and quarrels, and will make friends of those for whom he has shown a patient understanding. He who does not resort to force or coercion will, under normal conditions, rarely become an object of violence himself as he provokes no violence from others. And if he should encounter violence, he will bring it to an early end as he will not perpetuate hostility through vengeance. He who has love and compassion for all beings, and is free of enmity, will conquer the ill-will of others and disarm the violent and brutal. A compassionate heart is the refuge of the whole world.

Self-protection and protection of others correspond to the great twin virtues of Buddhism, **wisdom and compassion**. Right self-protection is the expression of wisdom, right protection of others the expression of compassion. Wisdom and compassion, being the primary elements of Bodhi or Enlightenment, have found their highest perfection in the Fully Enlightened One, the Buddha. The insistence on their harmonious development is a characteristic feature of the entire Dhamma. We meet them in **the four sublime states** (*brahma, vihāra*), where equanimity corresponds to wisdom and self-protection, while loving-kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy correspond to compassion and the protection of others.

(Nyanaponika, “Protection Through Satipaṭṭhana,” 1990)

In short, “I shall guard myself” by cultivating mindfulness and wisdom for the sake of our own liberation. “I shall guard others” by cultivating mindfulness and wisdom, and regulating our conduct by patience, harmlessness, loving-kindness and active compassion, for the welfare and happiness of many.

## 2 Related teachings

### 2.1 King Pasenadi

**2.1.1 In the *Atta,rakkhita Sutta* (S 3.5)**, king Pasenadi shares with the Buddha a reflection he has during his solitary retreats. He uses a military imagery of the four-limbed army—elephants, horses, chariots and infantry—to reflect on the nature of self-protection, here seen on an “external” (*bahira*) or worldly level and on an “internal” (*ajjhattika*) or spiritual level, that is, true personal security. Political and personal security by the use of external or physical *force* may work on a worldly level, but spiritual security, that is, an internal or mental *restraint*

The Buddha endorses Pasenadi’s reflection and adds that internal practice is the keeping to the 10 courses of wholesome actions (*kusala kamma,patha*),<sup>3</sup> which brings true liberation.

### 2.2 Uggasena the acrobat

**2.2.1** There is another well known story of an acrobat found in the Dhammapada Commentary.<sup>4</sup> A verse in the Dhammapada makes an interesting use of “intentional language”<sup>5</sup> in a very dramatic situation. It was spoken by the Buddha in connection with Uggasena, an acrobat, while he was precariously poised on the top of a high bamboo pole:

<i>Muñca pure muñca pacchato</i>	Let go of the front. Let go of the back.
<i>majjhe muñca bhavassa pāragu</i>	Let go of the middle. One who has crossed over to the far shore (of existence),
<i>sabbattha vimutta,manāso</i>	with mind released from everything,
<i>na puna jāti,jaram upehisi.</i>	shall not again meet birth and decay. (Dh 348)

**2.2.2** On a simple level, we see here the essence of satipatthana practice, where at the start of meditation practice, one keeps one’s mind in the present moment (for example, watching the breath), letting go of the past and the future. Whatever phenomena arise at the present, too, one simply “let come, let go” of them, keeping the mind focussed on the meditation object.

**2.2.3** On a higher level, this verse means that the arhat has overcome past karma (the back), and faces no more rebirths (future). The arhat is not attached even to this life itself, not even present moment, but simply watching it arise, peaking and ending, over and again. The arhat’s mind may go with the flow, but it is never dragged along by it.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Atta,rakkhita S* (S 3.5, 4 + 5.4-6), SD 38.9; also *Sāleyyaka S* (M 41,7-14/1:286-288), SD 5.7.

<sup>4</sup> DhA 24.6/4:59-65, 26.14/4:158 f.

<sup>5</sup> See Piya Tan, “The Teaching Methods of the Buddha” 2002 §18 & also *Dhammapada 97* = SD 10.6 Intro (5).

## The Discourse at Sedaka

(S 47.19/5:168 f)

1 At one time the Blessed One was dwelling amongst the Sumbhas. There was a town of the Sumbhas named Sedaka.<sup>6</sup>

2 There the Blessed One addressed the monks thus:

“Bhikshus, once in the past an acrobat<sup>7</sup> set up his bamboo pole and addressed his apprentice Meda,-kathālikā<sup>8</sup> thus:

‘Come, dear Meda,kathālikā, climb up the bamboo pole and stand on my shoulders.’

Having replied, ‘Yes, teacher,’ the apprentice Meda,kathālikā climbed up the bamboo pole and stood on the teacher’s shoulders.

3 The acrobat then said to the apprentice Meda,kathālikā:

‘You guard me, dear Meda,kathālikā, and I’ll guard you. Thus [169] guarded by one another, protected by one another, we’ll display our skills, collect the fee, and get down safely from the bamboo pole.’<sup>9</sup>

4 When this was said, the apprentice Meda,kathālikā replied:

‘That’s not the way to do it, teacher. You guard yourself, teacher, and I’ll guard myself. Thus, each self-guarded and self-protected, we’ll display our skills, collect the fee, and get down safely from the bamboo pole.’ That’s the right way here,<sup>10</sup>

5 Said the Blessed One, “It’s just as the apprentice Meda,kathālikā said to the teacher: ‘I’ll guard myself,’ bhikshus: thus should the focusses of mindfulness be set up.

‘I’ll guard others,’ bhikshus: thus should the focusses of mindfulness [satipaṭṭhana] be set up.

Guarding oneself, bhikshus, one guards others; guarding others, one guards oneself.

6 And how, bhikshus, does one, by guarding oneself, guards others?

By attending to, cultivating, often developing it<sup>11</sup> [that is, the focusses of mindfulness]. It is in such a way that by guarding oneself one guards others.<sup>12</sup>

7 And how, bhikshus, does one, by guarding others, guards oneself?

By patience, non-violence, lovingkindness and caring.<sup>13</sup> It is in such a way that by guarding oneself one guards others.

<sup>6</sup> Cf a similar opening in the **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** (D 10; M 22), where Comy to **Mahā Nidāna S** (D 15) says: “It is said that the Blessed One was unable to find any dwelling-place at (ie near) the market-town. So leaving the market-town, the Blessed One went into the great forest, where he found a certain suitable and pleasant spot with water, and there he dwelt, making the market-town his alms-resort” (*Bhagavato kira tasmim nigame vasan’okāso koci vihāro nāma nāhosi. Nigamato pana apakkamma aññatarasmim udaka,sampanne ramaniye bhūmi,bhāge mahā,vana,soṇḍo ahoṣi tattha bhagavā vihāsi, tam nigamaṃ gocara,gāmaṃ katvā*) (DA 2:483).

<sup>7</sup> *Caṇḍāla,vamsika.*

<sup>8</sup> Meda,kathālikā is feminine, meaning “frying pan.” Comy says that a given name in the fem gender (*itthi,linga,-vasena laddha,nāman*) (SA 3:226), “probably of a boy” (S:B 1925 n167). The sutta contains no hint of Meda,-kathālikā’s gender. It is also possible to resolve the name as *medaka* (a precious stone) + *thālikā* (a small bowl, beaker) = *thālakā* (fem). *Go,medaka* is said to be a precious stone of light-red or golden colour (VvA 111). In this case, the name could be rendered as “Jewel Cup” or “Gem Bowl.”

<sup>9</sup> Comy: The teacher protects himself by holding up the pole firmly, moving with his apprentice, and always looking at the top of the pole. The apprentice protects himself by keeping his body straight, balancing himself against the wind, keeping steady mindfulness, and sitting down motionless (SA 3:226). “From [SA’s] description, it seems that the master places the lower end of the bamboo pole over the base of his throat or forehead (*galavāṭake vā naḷāte*), and the pupil then climbs via his shoulders to the top of the pole. Though in the sutta the master speaks as if they both descend from the pole, this may only be a figure of speech.” (S:B 1925 n168)

<sup>10</sup> “That’s the right way here,” *so tattha nāyo ti*, lit “that is the right way there.”

<sup>11</sup> “By attending...often practising it,” *asevanāya bhāvanāya bahuli,kammena.*

<sup>12</sup> Comy: The monk who gives up frivolous activity and attends to, cultivates, his basic meditation subject day and night attains arhathood. Then when others see him and gains faith in him, they become destined for heaven. This one protects others by protecting himself. (SA 3:227)

8 ‘I’ll guard myself,’ bhikshus: thus should the focusses of mindfulness be practised.  
 ‘I’ll guard others,’ bhikshus: thus should the focusses of mindfulness be practised.  
 Guarding oneself, bhikshus, one guards others; guarding others, one guards oneself.”

— evaṃ —

## Bibliography

Nyanaponika Thera

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<sup>13</sup> *Khantiyā avihimsāya mettatāya anudayatāya*. Comy takes the last three to be respectively compassion (*karuṇā*), lovingkindness (*mettā*) and altruistic joy (*muditā*). The monk attains dhyana based on the brahmavihara, then uses the dhyana as a basis for insight and attaina arhathood. This one protects himself by protecting others. (SA 3:227). For a broader and more profound explanation, see Nyanaponika, *Protection Through Satipaṭṭhāna*, 1967.