

# *Fires of the Mind*

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It's said that several days after his gaining Awakening, the Buddha surveyed the world with the eye of a Buddha. In other words, he was able to see all beings, and he saw them as on fire: burning with the fires of greed, anger, and delusion; or the fires of passion, aversion, and delusion.

One of the reasons we're here is because we feel that our minds are on fire and we'd like to put them out—because passion is like a fire. Aversion is like a fire. Delusion is a little bit harder to compare with a fire, but it's still burning away in the mind, like a fire that smolders under ashes.

A large part of the teaching revolves around this imagery of burning. Like the five khandhas: One of the meanings of "khandha" is the trunk of a tree. And *upadanakkhando* that we chant every morning, that's a trunk of a tree serving as fuel, fuel for our clinging. The clinging in turn gives rise to the fires of greed, anger, and delusion. It gives rise to the fires of aging, illness, and death.

There are lots of fires that burn in our mind. Remorse is also a fire. In fact, the Thai word for remorse is *rawn cai*, which means "heat in the heart." One of the reasons why we practice the precepts is to help put out the fire of remorse. We make up our minds that we're not going to do anything unskillful, so that when the time comes to sit down and meditate, there's not this burning in the heart.

As for things done in the past, there's nothing you can do about them. But you develop equanimity. In fact, if you get yourself all tied up about remorse about the past, then it's hard to do skillful things in the present moment because your energy is being siphoned off. Just make up the mind, "Okay, what I did in the past is past; what we're going to focus on now is the present moment."

So on the one hand there is this negative meaning to fire in the mind. But there's also a positive kind of fire. It corresponds to the different words they have for burning in Pali. A lot of the words for burning mean the conflagration of a fire: the flames flare up, flare up, flare up. Constantly agitated, constantly flickering, changing.

But there's another kind of burning that we're all familiar with: It's like the burning of an oil lamp. It's the steady flame, the steady burn. And the verb for that is *jhayati*, which is related to the word, *jhana*. As the mind develops concentration, it's like a flame that begins to grow steady. Even though it's still burning, at least it becomes more useful. You can read by the light of an oil lamp.

It's much more difficult to read by the light of a fire. Because the fire is always flickering, it's not good for your eyes. But the oil lamp is steady. And in that steady light, you can see a lot

more clearly. Shadows don't do weird things on the wall. And there's no flickering of the flame to do weird things on the page you're trying to read.

So as we meditate we're trying to take this burning in the mind which is flickering all over the place and bringing it to a steady burn. Ultimately, you want all the fires to go out. That's what the name for nibbana is about. But before you can get there, you've got to bring the mind to this steady burn.

And part of the way you do that is to protect it. You know that if the flame is subject to a lot of wind, it's not going to stay steady. So you do your best to protect that little flame you've got going.

In other words, you protect the mind from all other thoughts aside from the one thought of the breath. That's what you're going to be burning into. Your focus usually starts off as a very tiny little flame. You've got one spot in the body where you're focused. It's like setting fire to something that you've got to protect. In the beginning as you light the flame, it's going to be very small. But then as you protect it, it begins to grow.

So whatever little sense of stillness you can find as you focus on the breath, learn how to protect that, learn how to have respect for it. Because after all, little fires can grow into big fires, and you want this particular fire to become a steady flame. So whatever little steady moments you have in the mind, learn how to protect them. Don't go throwing them away.

When I started meditating, I was always looking for the lights and the visions and all the other fancy stuff that you read about in the books. And, of course, as a result I was overlooking those little spells of stillness that were actually there in the mind. They just didn't have the lights, they didn't have the action, so I tended to disregard them. As a result, the meditation wasn't getting anywhere.

It's only when you realize that there are these little still moments in the mind that keep coming and going, coming and going, coming and going, that you can connect them into longer stretches of concentration. When they're there, learn to appreciate them. That's what right effort is all about. You learn to see them when they start. Cup your hands around them and let them grow. Learn how to protect them. And try to maintain that steadiness.

Once it catches—in other words, once you're able to stay with whatever still spots you can find in the body—the steady flame will grow. It'll spread out.

That's why all the images that the Buddha uses with reference to jhana deal with filling the body with rapture, filling the body with pleasure, filling it with equanimity. And finally there's a sense of light, a very still light that spreads throughout the body.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a flame that fills the mantle of a Coleman lantern. When the pressure on the lantern is set just right, the threads just glow all throughout the mantle. The flame doesn't flicker. It's just this steady, steady light.

That's the quality you want to develop as you meditate: this sense of being steadily with the body, steadily with the whole body. And either there'll be an sense of light in the body or just

kind of a feeling, a kind of a glowing feeling that feels steady throughout all the little parts of the body you can feel.

This is how you take the mind's tendency to burn and put it to good use. Because once you have that steadiness, then, as I said, you can see things a lot more clearly. There's a light and there's the stillness: the prerequisites for clear seeing.

If things still are flickering—now they're on, now they're off, now they're on, now they're off—well, you've seen what it's like when you go light a fire out in the forest. The flames flicker up and all of a sudden you can imagine all kinds of weird things coming in from the trees—which is the way the mind normally is when it's flickering with passion, aversion, and delusion. But once you have a steady light, you can see things for precisely what they are.

So as you're practicing concentration, this is the quality you're trying to develop: steadiness, no matter how large or small it is when it starts out. In the beginning, it tends to be awfully small. But as the Buddha said, a small fire is one of the things you cannot overlook just because it's small. After all, it can grow into a huge conflagration.

So the question is, what are you going to do with these little fires in the mind? Are you just going to let them burn and flicker away? Or are you going to adjust them to a steady burn that enables you to see what's going on inside, to light up what's going on inside? Because it's from this steady burn that the next step comes, the insight that frees the flame.

That's what they thought happened to a fire that went out back in the time of the Buddha: It didn't go out of existence. It was freed. It was freed from its attachment to its fuel, freed from its clinging, freed from its agitation.

Because a real surprise as you get the mind quiet like this is that there's still an element of stress, there's still an element of change. But it's a lot more subtle than it was before. There's still a burning going on in the mind, but because things are a lot more subtle and steady, you're able to see where they're coming from, precisely what's happening. And that's when you can let go. The flame is freed.

So try to sense those little still moments in the mind and protect them, the same way that you'd protect a little tiny fire that you're trying to start even though there's wind outside ready to blow it out. You try to keep that steady little flame going until it takes.

And if it goes out, well, just light it again, light it again. If you protect what you've got, then you'll find that it'll become the light that you need in order to see yourself, to see clearly what's going on. If you don't appreciate these little moments of stillness, if you don't protect them, then they won't be able to help very much, and you won't have anything from which to develop your concentration.

So that quality of appreciation, what the Buddha called "respect for concentration": This is one aspect of what he means. Respect these little moments of stillness, of light in the mind. Protect them so that they can grow.

