

A Flammable Mind

September 5, 2003

Here we are only a few days into September and already the fire season has begun. Of course for the human mind, our minds, it's always fire season. Our minds are always ready to catch fire. They seem awfully dry.

A traditional simile for the Dhamma is that it's water to put out fires of the mind. And what are the fires of the mind? Passion, aversion, delusion. They're like the fire element in dry grass just ready to light up as soon as there's the slightest bit of spark to get it going. So this is what we have to watch out for: those sparks.

That's why restraint of the senses is so important. Before you can get your mind thoroughly watered so that it's not ready to catch flame, you have to be very careful about where you go, what you do, what you think about, what you look at, what you listen to, so that you don't set your mind on fire.

The traditional definition of restraint of the senses is that you don't focus on the details that would set you on fire, the details that—if you left your senses unguarded—would give rise to greed, aversion, and delusion. Again, it's not the case that greed, aversion, and delusion are coming in from outside. The potential is always there in the mind.

So you have to be very careful that sparks don't come in and set it off. If you find there's some topic where, as soon as you look at it, greed arises, lust arises, then don't look there at those particular details. This doesn't mean that you have to go around with blinders on your eyes all the time. Simply that you don't focus on the details that set you off.

Or you learn to think about the other side of the object. If it's something that would give rise to lust, focus on its unattractive side. If it's something that gives rise to anger, displeasure, irritation, look at its other side, see what good there is to it.

As Ajaan Lee used to say, don't be a person with only one eye or one ear. Be a person with two eyes, two ears. There's got to be something good to those people who have you angry. If there's nothing good at all, you have to feel compassion for that person because they're just really making life worse and worse and worse for themselves.

So there's no need to focus on the details that would give rise to anger. Those little details: Those are the sparks that set your desiccated mind on fire, your flammable mind on fire.

The same goes with things that you might think about. If you see that something suddenly sweeps through your mind and takes up all your attention, takes up all your active time, you've got to do your best to put out the fire and then watch out for the topic from then on in. It's a spark.

But still we can't go around simply watching out for sparks all the time. We have to learn how to water our minds as well. That's what concentration is for. It's a cool state of mind. Even

the word jhana, which comes from a word for burning: As Ajaan Lee said, it's a cool fire, a fire that doesn't cause any damage to your mind at all.

Again, it starts out as a little spark. But it burns in a different way. It's a cool steady burn. You focus on the breath; focus on what details of the breath, what aspects of the breath are really comfortable, really appealing, really gratifying as you breathe in, breathe out. Which parts of the body feel starved for breath energy? Well, give them something. You find that if you can locate those starved parts of the body, then the sense of refreshment that comes as you breathe right in there can be very intense. It gives you something really good to focus on.

Again, focusing on the details is like a spark for cool fire. With this kind of fire, though, you have to look after it to make sure that it *does* catch hold and that it does spread. Once you've got that comfortable sensation, then think of it going into different parts of the body or else connecting up with other comfortable sensations that may already be there in the body. Let them connect; let them nourish one another, from the top of the head down to the tips of the fingers, the tips of the toes. And as you do this, you realize that this is the water of the Dhamma that comes in to help make your mind less and less and less flammable. All the parts of the mind that were ready to flare up because they were so dry are now coated in something wet, something cool.

When the mind really is solid in this state, then even though there may be sparks outside in terms of what you see or hear or think about, the mind just doesn't catch. It doesn't have a lot of flammable material—because you've soaked it instead with the cool fire of jhana.

So this is your protection. If you don't have this protection, you have to be very careful about where you go, what you look at, what things you engage in, because the mind is ready to set on fire: the wrong kind of fire, the hot fire that burns and creates smoke and causes all kinds of ignorance, that blocks things out.

Whereas when you have this alternative kind of fire to consume the mind, then as long as you maintain it, then there's no room for outside fires to come in and catch.

Of course, even the fire of jhana is not 100% safe, 100% guaranteed. Sometimes people can develop strong powers of concentration but if there's no real discernment to go along with it, then even that cool fire can go out. The mind is then back to what it was, the same old flammable state. This is why the concentration has to be coupled with discernment—the discernment that sees how the mind creates these issues, how it makes itself flammable.

Sometimes it's not enough for a spark to come by. We go out and pull them in, open ourselves up hoping to suck in a few sparks. That's the real problem. The sparks themselves are not all that much. It's our desire to catch on fire: That's the problem. We like our passion, we like our aversion, we like our delusion. So we have to look at the drawbacks of these things until your insight into their drawbacks goes really deep into the heart.

See where their allure is, why you might like your passion, aversion, and delusion. Don't deny that. In fact, the better you understand that allure, the more directly you can deal with it.

Exactly what kind of gratification do you get out of giving into passion or lust or greed? What kind of gratification do you get out of thinking about all the injustices that have been done to you that make you angry? If it weren't for that kind of gratification, these things wouldn't have any appeal.

So, see where the gratification is. But then also look for the drawbacks. And when you've tabulated both sides to the point of gaining dispassion for the gratification, you know that you're looking at them with real objectivity.

And then go for the escape. Once the drawbacks really go to your heart, that's when the mind is ready to look for the escape so it can put out those fires. On one level, the practice of jhana is an escape, but ultimately you have to get beyond that as well. The real escape is total dispassion.

In the meantime, develop the mind in jhana. Don't analyze it too much. One of the problems of having all these Dhamma talks is that people start analyzing stuff way before they're ready. Focus on your breath; focus on getting a sense of nourishment out of the breath. You know that this is not the ultimate goal that you're working on, but it is the path that leads you there. If you focus full attention on the path, you get to the goal. You don't always keep second-guessing the goal or try to jump ahead of the steps.

Work on getting the mind saturated with the cool fire of jhana so that it's not constantly flammable, ready to flame up over any topic at all. Once it's fully occupied with the state of absorption, then there are fewer and fewer openings for the sparks of your sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas to come in and set the mind on fire.

This is your protection. Without this protection you really have to be careful. You have to hold yourself in very strict restraint. Like those gas tanks they have in trucks they have the big "flammable" signs on them because they're ready to blow up at the slightest spark, so that everything has to be very, very, very well-protected all the time.

So keep your protection up, don't let it down.

And in the meantime, work on this cool fire. When this cool fire bathes the mind, you're a lot safer. You can trust yourself more; other people can trust you more, too, because you're not going to flame up in an instant.