

The Cool Fire of Jhana

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When the Buddha told the monks to go meditate, he used the verb *jhayati*, which means to do jhana. But the same verb also means to burn. Pali has lots of verbs for burning, and this is a verb that means to burn with a steady flame. Ordinarily, our minds burn like bonfires. The flames lick here, flicker there, flame up, and then die down, flame up again. If you were trying to read by a bonfire, it would be really hard because the light's flickering too much, which is why you have to change the way it burns. You want the fire to still be burning, but steadily. *Jhayati* is the verb they use for a steady flame, the flame of an oil lamp.

When you think about meditating, think about what's involved in starting a fire: getting it going and putting it to use. Remember those three stages that Ajaan Fuang talked about in the meditation. First, you have to get the mind to settle down. Once it's there, you have to learn how to maintain it. And then you have to put it to use. These are three separate skills.

When you're getting it to settle down, you have to really protect it because the fire's weak. Think about a person trying to start a fire on a windy day. You have a tiny, little match. Of course, back in the time of the Buddha, they didn't even have matches. They had fire sticks, which required even more work. You had a block of wood with a little hole, and you had the drill. You put a little piece of kindling—say, a few bits of sawdust—inside the hole. And then you just kept drilling away, applying a lot of pressure. If you let up to look at how things were going, the warmth would die down. So you had to keep at it, keep at it, keep at it.

Once the little pieces of kindling caught, then you had to take them over to the fuel you were trying to get to burn. You had to protect the little flame, cupping your hands around it to protect it from the wind, and then very gradually add the fuel. If you added too much all at once, you'd snuff out the fire. But if you worked at it properly, eventually it would catch. Then, when it caught, you wouldn't have to put so much energy into it. But you'd still have to look after it, making sure that it didn't run out of fuel. If a sudden gust came, you'd have to protect it again. That's the maintaining.

Then there's the question of getting use out of it. Having a fire sometimes, it's nice simply having its warmth. But there are other things that need to be done with the fire. Food has to be cooked. Your house has to be heated. If you're working on a project that requires something be melted or heated up, you'd need the fire for that.

All of this applies to meditating.

When you're trying to get the mind to settle down, you have to be very, very intent on what you're doing. And you just keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. You can't let yourself get discouraged. If you get discouraged and say, "This is not working," you have to start over again. So any thoughts that come in at all, you have to protect your object from them. It's good to find a nice quiet place so that the only wind that you're dealing with is the wind of your own mind. That's plenty right there. You have to keep all the defilements away, keep all your hindrances away until finally the meditation catches.

There's a sense that it really does feel good to be with the breath. It really does feel good just to sit here breathing in, breathing out, and you're able to create a sense of fullness, making sure that you don't squeeze the breath out or force too much in. That way, the body feels balanced. There's no sense that you're trying to push the breath into a solid.

Try to think of the body as energy already. As the breath comes in, it's simply more energies pooling into the energy you've already got. There's no clear line between the breath energy that was already there and the new breath coming in. They mingle together. Think of it that way. And when the breath goes out, you don't have to squeeze it all out. Let the breath do the out-breath on its own, and learn how to read the point that tells you, "Now's the time to breathe in again." Keep at it, and a sense of fullness will develop because you're not squeezing things as you're breathing out.

All too often, when we have that cartoon idea of the breath going out that you have to squeeze everything to get it out, we start squeezing things that we don't need to squeeze at all. That prevents any sense of fullness from having a chance to develop. So you try to allow that sense of fullness to develop until the mind feels that its center of gravity has settled in. It's not constantly ready to run away.

Once it's settled in, then you don't have to be quite so attentive to it. You still have to tend to it. But you can actually allow other thoughts to come in—not that you're going to go with them, but you're beginning to see the process of how a thought forms. There's room for that.

At the same time, while you're maintaining it, you find that you can actually get into deeper states. Ajaan Fuang gives the analogy of setting something in concrete. First you make the forms; then you pour the concrete into the forms. As long as the concrete hasn't set, you can't take the forms away. But as soon as it's set, you can take them away. No problem. The concrete won't spill out because now it's solid.

The same way with the directed thought and the evaluation: In the beginning, your mind is tempted to think about and evaluate things outside, so you have to turn your thinking to the breath and keep it there. If you stop thinking about the breath, the mind will start going back to its old preoccupations. But once things have settled in, and there's a sense of really belonging here, you can drop the directed thought and evaluation, and instead of going back to your ordinary state, you go into a deeper state of concentration where you're just *there*. The breath is one with the body; the mind is one with the breath. You don't have to do a lot of thinking to protect it. The sense of well-being is enough to keep you glued here, and so on into the higher stages of concentration.

Now, as you protect them, you find that the big issue is going to be boredom. Nothing's happening. Everything's very still. It feels good, but there's this strange tendency of the mind: Once you've given it something that's really pleasant like this, it decides, "Okay, now I want something else." This is where you have to deal with the thoughts that would pull you away by saying, "Enough of this." You say, "No, it's not enough. I really want to master this skill. I want to see how deep it can go."

As for the thoughts that are bored, you have to question them: "Are you really bored, or is there something that's going to come up in the meditation that you're afraid to see?"—because that can happen, too, sometimes. The mind has its subterfuges. You have to watch out for them. It's here you really get to know your mind really well—the different arguments it'll bring for thinking about something else, saying, "Enough of this." And you say, "No, not enough. I'm going to stay here," because the longer you stay, the more you're going to see.

Now, in simply getting the mind to stay here, you're getting some benefit from the concentration already. That's one of the uses: the sense of well-being, and also an opportunity to observe your defilements—to see more deeply into the defilements. You see more and more clearly where their allure is: why there's that part of the mind that, even though you've got a state of concentration going, would like to do something else. Why? Sometimes, with things you've thought through many, many times, it's going to go back to them again. Why? What else is there? What else is it that you haven't seen yet?

This is when you put the concentration to use: getting the mind still enough so that it can see things clearly, and with enough of a sense of well-being so that if something comes up that it's ordinarily embarrassed to admit to itself, it's feeling a little bit more good-natured, a little bit less threatened, and it's willing to admit, "Oh yeah. I do go for that."

This is what Ajaan Lee would call the cool fire of jhana. As he says, unlike the hot fires of your greed, aversion, and delusion, or passion, aversion, and delusion, it doesn't wear out your nerves. It's actually good for the body, good for the mind, and it brings light into areas of the mind that have long been dark. You can read your mind because the flame is steady.

Of course, it's still burning. This is where the image of nibbana comes in. That's where there's no fire, no burning at all, even the cool fire of jhana. But it's through the cool fire that you get to the place where the fire goes out. So learn how to light this fire, tend to it, and put it to use.