

Putting Out the Fires

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After his awakening, the Buddha surveyed the world. The first thing that struck him was that people's minds are on fire—on fire with greed, aversion, delusion, lust, fear. These things are constantly smoldering away in the mind and then they flare up.

This is why one of the images of the goal that he teaches, nibbana, actually means is the extinguishing of fires. Back in those days, there was the belief that there was a fire element, a potential for fire, present in everything. If you provoked it—in those days they didn't have matches, but they would use fire sticks, and would provoke the fire element: When the fire element was provoked, it would latch on to fuel. As long as it was latched on the fuel, it would keep burning. And as long as it latched on, it was trapped.

An interesting thing about it was that it was trapped by its own latching on. The fuel didn't trap the fire. The fire was trapped by its own clinging. When the fire let go, it was released. The fire element would then return to a state of calm, peace, coolness.

That's the Buddha's basic image for what we're doing here as we train the mind: trying to put the fires out, to free the mind from its attachment to the various kinds of fuel it latches on to. Even though we may think that things outside provoke lust, greed, or anger, the potential for lust, greed, and anger is there, just waiting in the mind, ready to pounce on things and latch onto them.

What we have to do is learn how to let go. The letting go is what frees us. Like that chant we had on the body just now: Really, there's nothing wrong with the body, just the fact that we latch on to it in so many different unskillful ways. We latch on to our own bodies and then like them or dislike them because they do or don't fit in with our image of how they should look or how they should act. Then we latch onto the bodies other people through lust.

So we have to learn how to find ways of thinking that help pry our fingers off of these things so that we can let them go and free ourselves. This is why, with the contemplation, we focus on the unattractive side of the body. The Buddha's not saying the body is a bad thing. After all, if we didn't have bodies, we wouldn't have anything with which to function in human life. But usually we focus on the wrong things, and that provokes the lust in the mind.

So first the Buddha has you focus on the unattractive side of the body, to the point where you begin to wonder why you would ever want to feel lust for this

kind of stuff in the first place. But that doesn't mean the lust goes away. Its potential is still waiting there in the mind, just that when you pull back from it like this, you can focus next on the lust in and of itself. What is this potential in the mind? Why does it want to go out and latch on to these things in this way? Basically, because it's hungry.

So the Buddha has you develop better food for the mind. Focus on the breath and allow the breath be comfortable—comfortable coming in, comfortable going out. Try not to put too much pressure on it. Just stay right next to it. Ajaan Fuang's word for this, *prakhawng*, is a Thai word meaning that you hover around something and hold it very gently. The classic image in the texts is of holding a baby quail in your hand. If you squeeze it too tightly, it's going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it's going to fly away. In the same way, you have to find just the right amount of pressure, so that you can stay with the breath and not put undue pressure on any part of the body, and yet not slip off.

When you get the sense of just right in staying with the breath, a sense not only of ease but also of fullness, this is where you begin to get food for the mind. It feels as if every little cell in your body is full of itself. Every potential for sensation has a nice fullness. It's not being bothered or pushed around by the process of breathing.

Think of that sense of fullness spreading out to fill as much of the body as you can. Then learn to stay with it.

Ajaan Fuang used to say that there are three steps in concentration practice. One is learning how to *do* it, how to get the mind settle down. The second is learning how to *maintain* it. These are two separate skills. They're connected but they're different, in the sense that once you're there, you've done what needs to be done to get the mind to settle down. Then the next question is how to maintain that, how to maintain that sense of balance in the midst of all the other distractions that may be either coming in from outside or welling up from within. You find all kinds of thoughts will come in. There's boredom, impatience: "What's next? Why can't I think of something else?" "No, don't think of anything else. Just stay right there with the breath. And allow it to do its work. If you're going to feed the mind, it takes a while for this nourishment to soak in."

When you give it that opportunity, then after a while you're ready to go on to the third stage, which is to *use* the concentration. In other words, once you've developed a sense of fullness, that in and of itself doesn't solve the problem, because the mind could in any point drop its concentration and go back to its old ways. So you have to learn how to take the sense of ease and well-being the mind develops while it's here with the breath and compare it with the pleasure it gets

out of giving in to lust or aversion or greed or whatever. You've changed the playing field because you've learned to find more pleasure in the state of mind that's not involved with those things. That way, it has more strength in learning how to resist their pull. At same time, you begin to understand why these things have this pull over us. Why does the mind want to get angry? Why does it want to get lustful? We're actually more attached to our desires than we are to the object of our desires.

You see this all the time. You want something and then learn you can't get it. For a while, you feel frustrated. But then you decide you want something else instead, and you're perfectly content to do that. Some of the things you get; some of the things you don't. But the mind's tendency is always to keep wanting this, wanting that. If it can't get x , it's going to go for y . No problem. But if you told it that it can't have x and it can't have a desire for anything else, the mind would really rebel. Which shows it's not so much attached to x as it is to the process of desire.

Then when the desire is frustrated, that's when the anger comes out. These things are all connected.

What the Buddha does is to give you better things to desire: stillness of mind, and an understanding what's going on in the mind. You can desire this practice of concentration so that the path is not just a dry intellectual exercise, but it really does feel both mentally fulfilling and physically fulfilling. There's a sense of fullness in the body. It feels good just sitting here with the breath, with the different parts the body undisturbed. Simply allow them to be still right where they are.

And in that stillness, you can start seeing the process of how these different defilements arise.

We don't like the word "defilement." It's funny in the West: There are certain Buddhist teachings that's just haven't made their way across the Pacific Ocean yet. Every time they get sent over, they get sent back. Defilement is one of them. We don't like to think of our minds as defiled, but once the mind gets still and luminous, you begin to see greed, anger, and delusion are just that: clouds that come and obscure your mind. They make things murky inside so that you can't see anything clearly.

How does that process happen? How do we let those things take over? When the mind is still as you ask this question, you're in a much better position to see the answer. You see these defilements not by giving in to them, but by learning to say No to them.

This is when you begin to understand the currents in the mind. It's like learning about the currents in the river. One of the best ways to do that is to actually build a dam across the river. Try to stop the river and see which part of your dam gets washed away. Rivers may look very placid on the surface and yet can still have a very strong currents deeper down. If you just look at the surface, you'll never know. Or if you flow along with the river on an inner tube, you'll never know, either. But if you try an experiment and say, "We're going to put a dam across the river. We're not going to flow along with the current": That's when you learn about the currents and how strong they are.

It's the same with the mind. You decide you're not going to give in to its old tendencies for greed, anger, and delusion. You're going to try to stay right here with the breath. The more solid your concentration gets, the more clearly you see the force of these currents, where they spring up, why they spring up, why you decide to go along with them, and also how you have the choice *not* to go.

That's when you really start seeing interesting things in the mind: when you decide not to go along with the currents. You catch things very quickly at the point where the mind says, "Yeah, let's go." But this time it says, "No, let's not." You see the current going out, but you're not going out with it. And because you're not going with it, it doesn't go very far. It disappears.

This ability not to get pushed along or swayed by the currents puts you in a much better position. Even though you still haven't gotten rid of the potential for defilement, you're in a much better place, because you have more control over whether you're going to go with these things or not. Ultimately, you do see where they come from, and how you can stop them for good.

So this practice of concentration really changes the balance of power in the mind. It puts you in a stronger position and gives you a much wider sense of the alternatives available to you. All too often we think that if we don't give in to lust, don't give in to anger, it's going to get bottled up and then come out in weird ways in other directions. So we feel obliged, for our own mental and physical health, to give in to these things. That's because our understanding is that we only have two alternatives: We either give in to these things or repress them and get all screwed up. But the Buddha is offering other alternatives: Get the mind in a state of good solid concentration, where there's a sense of ease, a sense of fullness, and you don't need to feed on anything anymore. When you don't feed on things, you don't get pushed around by them. And whatever force they have, they just go right through you, without your feeling obliged either to latch on to them, or to fight it back. You just breathe right through any tension they leave in the body.

This is one of the reasons why one of the images of practicing is getting onto an island. In other words, you're in the middle of the river. The current flows past. You see the current flowing past, but you don't flow with it, because you're standing on solid ground. That puts you in a much better position, both through standing outside the force of the current and understanding where it's coming from, where it goes.

So we've switched images. First was the image of fire; now it's the image of water currents and standing on solid ground. Whichever set of images you use, whether it's learning how to put out the fires in the mind or how to get out of the currents to the safety of solid ground, in both cases the meaning is the same. They mean freedom—freedom from the way the mind has allowed itself to be enslaved, freedom from the way it's constantly kept in the dark, freedom from all agitation, freedom from its own clinging. When you taste the sense of well-being that comes from that freedom and you look at whatever pleasure happiness that came out of giving in to your defilements in the past, you don't see any reason why you would ever want to go back to your old ways.

So that's where this practice we're doing—staying with the breath, getting distracted but coming back to the breath again and again and again, and getting a sense of learning how to relate on good terms with then breath: This is where it all leads. It leads to freedom. So stick with it. Learn how to do it. Learn how to maintain it. And learn how to put it to use.