

# Three Fires

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When I began Buddhist training, my life seemed to have that normal mixture of happiness and suffering. My view of life slowly changed as I practiced meditation and as the Dharma slowly entered my heart. I began to see the ephemeral nature of life and how all my seeming happiness and unhappiness were both insubstantial. The vital insight that pointed me towards real transformation was recognizing how all my suffering and unhappiness were not coming from the difficult circumstances and problems in my life, but coming from my defilements. The defilements in Buddhism are called the Three Fires; we are suffering due to our desires, we are suffering due to our anger and ill will, and we are suffering due to our ignorance and delusion. I could see that I was suffering because I often allowed my defilements to determine my choices in life. All of Buddhist training can be seen as the process of converting our defilements of desire, ill will, and delusion into the enlightened states of compassion, love, and wisdom.

When I first began my spiritual training, I looked at the Buddhist path in terms of externals, and wondered whether I was meditating enough and following the forms of the practice correctly. I still was clueless about what to do with my many desires and fears. In a way, I was hoping that my Buddhist training would make all this uncomfortable and nasty stuff within me miraculously go away. My view of myself was deeply deluded, since I was viewing my inner life as a given. I viewed my own problems much as I viewed the external world: it is a mess, I did not ask for this mess, and I am not responsible for all this mess. It seemed obvious and inescapable that I must face considerable suffering in my life. Yet the core of the teaching of the Buddha is the Four Noble Truths. This is telling me that the Dharma path can lead me to freedom from all suffering.

When I first showed up at Shasta Abbey, I had arranged to be there for three months. I was very raw beginner. All this Buddhist practice in a monastery was new and exciting. There was a Jukai retreat a

month into my stay . During this week-long retreat, people can make a commitment to follow the Buddhist Precepts and become lay Buddhists. Without knowing very much about what this commitment meant, I decided to take the Precepts. One of the first ceremonies is the Sange, in which we takes responsibility for our past wrong actions and commit ourselves to cleansing our hearts and to trying our best to do good in the future.

During the Sange procession, I remember trying very hard to dredge up some wrong to take responsibility for. I wanted to have some significant wrong action or evil that I had done. Nothing significant seemed to come up. I did remember some seemingly minor wrong actions and behavior, such as times I had been thoughtless with friends and other seemingly minor ways in which I had done harm. But since I could not find something deeply wrong with me, the ceremony of asking for help and accepting responsibility did not really resonate in my heart.

I had a different experience a few years after I had become a Buddhist monk and I again walked in the Sange procession. Instead of needing to come up with something wrong, now everything in my life seemed wrong and impure. Before I had viewed all my passions, fears, selfish behavior, and wrong thought as normal, human stuff. Now I recognized that all these defilements were flowing out of my choices. I was allowing my heart and mind to make wrong choices much of the time. During the procession, I remember looking at the mess that seemed to be my life; I felt completely overwhelmed. I could see that I needed to turn my life around and face the Buddha. But I could also see that this pure desire was almost always drowned out by a lifetime of selfish and deluded habits. Fundamental change seemed impossible. I looked at myself; everything I could identify as me was this vast mess. But despite my despair, I could look around the monastery and see spiritual progress all around me. I could look at Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett. Her example made it clear and unmistakable to me that deep wisdom and compassion were possible. I could look at the fellow members of the Sangha and see that real transformation was possible, and that the Dharma worked. But when I looked at myself, it seemed hopeless.

When I was looking at myself, all I was seeing were endless defilements. I seemed to be filled with desires and many forms of ill will, such as despair, self loathing, jealousy, and anger. The nature of delusion is like a fog; we cannot see our delusions clearly. But looking back, I can now see how wrong I was. At that time, all I could see when I looked at myself was defilements. The sincerity and pure intention to cleanse my heart were there; it seems so obvious now. The whole point of Buddhist practice is to take refuge in the Buddha. Although, I seemed to sense and trust the heart of Buddha in the training of others, it seemed only a dream that I could ever trust myself to convert my own defilements. In other words, I did not really believe in the Dharma since I had convinced myself that I was an exception to its teachings.

As a priest, I see forms of my dilemma in almost everybody I teach. It is a great accomplishment when a person finally shows enough trust in the Dharma to follow the teachings of the Buddha, to have faith that no situation or problem is special, and to have faith that all obstacles will wash away when we take full refuge in the Three Treasures. Our difficulties and suffering are not getting in the way of our spiritual progress. It is how we approach our suffering and difficulties that is the core issue of our spiritual life. Real spiritual progress requires that we apply the Dharma to all of life's varied problems and difficulties.

I remember feeling that the Dharma was telling me to let go of a overwhelming desire and I could not conceive of how I could ever be free of burning desire. I remember taking the Precepts and having an overwhelming feeling arise that I could not fulfill this deep commitment because my patterns and habits were too strong. I was sure I could not change. That was my koan, my personal spiritual dilemma. Yet my heart deeply felt that the Dharma pointed me to the deepest Truth.

Twice a year at Shasta Abbey Rev. Master would stand on the main altar during the Jodo ceremony. Each monk, in turn, would go up and ask her a spiritual question. Her deep faith and wisdom, and her ability to see into her disciples' hearts gave me great faith in her and

in the Dharma. Twice a year I would go in front of her and ask a variation of the same question, "Can I really do this Buddhist training when I am such a mess?" I desperately wanted reassurance that I was alright, and that I could deal with these defilements. Using different words and a variety of approaches, Rev. Master always said the same thing to me. "Just keep going. Keep your heart focused on what is real and all these defilements will eventually wash away." Over many years my faith has deepened, as has my faith in her words, faith in my training, faith in the reality of the boundless Buddha Heart and in the insubstantial nature of all my problems and difficulties.

Dogen had a wonderful teaching: our koan arises naturally in daily life. The koan is a spiritual problem that does not seem to have an answer or a solution. The real question that lies beneath all of our problems is: how do we deal with our defilements? Everyone's problems and difficulties seem to be real and often overwhelming. One person may face a difficult situation and say, "I cannot put up with this." Another loves someone who is suffering and they will be overwhelmed with lack of acceptance; why does this beloved person have to face such suffering and why is it happening? Someone else may be overwhelmed by fear and feel certain that they cannot face what they need to face or do what they need to do. A person can look at themselves, see a lifetime pattern of weakness and laziness, and not be able to believe they can change. The real spiritual problem is the feeling that we are special, that our problems are special, our weaknesses are special. It is very human to cling to our virtues and failings, to cling to our triumphs and failures, to cling to our traumatic memories and suffering, and to cling to this personal drama of our life that fills and fascinates us. Yet when people bring me their problems, all their specialness, the details of their life and their story are not what is most important. The way I can provide real help is to listen so I can hear what they are clinging to. What Rev. Master Jiyu had been telling me was that there are no obstacles, and that I just need to let go and take refuge.

Whatever problem or difficulty someone brings me, I see someone with the heart of Buddha who is looking the wrong way instead of

seeing what is real. Due to the habits of a lifetime, people are convinced that there is something fundamentally wrong. The lack of peace and acceptance we experience is just a delusion we have inherited, and this mistaken view has been nurtured and reinforced by the deluded world around us. We believe should be upset, that we should have a certain desire, that we should fear old age, disease and death. We repeat this deluded tale to ourselves, telling ourselves how a situation is so wrong, that we are such a mess, or that something is so evil. The Dharma tells us that instead of seeing something or someone as impossible, unacceptable, hopeless, or bad, we can just see it all as the unfolding of normal karma. Wherever we look, we can see some aspect of ourselves, of others, and of the world around us that needs help. For example, no one is fundamentally angry. Anger is nothing more than frustrated desire; we are not getting what we want. This frustrated, deluded desire does not call for our harsh judgments. It calls for our compassion and help.

The defilements fool us because we do not see the simple nature of how they work. The source of our defilements is our many desires. "I want this object, this job, this person, this situation. I want to be liked and admired. I want to be comfortable and feel good. I want my pleasure and I do not want pain." All of this is very simple and on one level, very obvious. Yet all ill will is nothing more than a sign that we are not getting what we want. Ill will includes anger, jealousy, envy, despair, and fear. They are the varied responses of the self when it does not get what it wants. Anger and hate are responses to circumstances we don't want to tolerate. Despair is a response to not getting what we want out of life right now. The darkness of despair can overwhelm us because we feel that nothing fundamental is ever going to change, and that we will never have what we are seeking in life. Fear often controls us and is the source of many misguided choices in life, Fear is nothing more than our attempt to protect ourselves or to protect whatever we care about from being harmed. Fear flows out of our mistaken desires. We think there is something we have that we can lose. Fear is converted by faith, the faith that there is nothing that can hurt the Buddha Heart. Om to the One who leaps beyond all fear. All the comings and goings of our life and all the comings and goings of the world cannot change the

deeper reality of our Unborn Buddha Nature.

Delusion seems complicated, but its source is simple; it is the result of our minds trying to create a way to justify all of our desires and ill will. It is easy for me to see this truth, for example, when I get angry. Instead of trying to see the anger in terms of what I am demanding, I blame someone or something else. And I often feel justified; the result is then, righteous anger.

The defilements are converted by not allowing them to control us. We allow them to arise. This requires us to work hard on patient acceptance. If we do not put more energy into the defilements, they will start to diminish. It is like a fire. If we do not give it more fuel, the fire will eventually burn itself out.

I remember someone telling me that they repeat the words "no problem" to themselves as they go through the day. The defilements tell us that what is unfolding in our lives right now is a problem. The Dharma tells us that whatever is unfolding in our lives right now, no matter how unwanted it may be, is the real life of Buddha. I now view my training as a way of helping my defilements, help my despair find faith, my anger find patient acceptance, my greed find the wholeness it is desperately seeking, and my fear find the indestructible Buddha nature. And when I do not let my defilements blind me, the whole world becomes pure and undefiled.