**Half-Day Study Session on the Three Fires: Greed, Ill-Will, and Delusion**

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**The Day’s Schedule:**

**10 a.m.:**

1. Pass out handouts:
2. Introductions (names, in the sitting circle)

**10:05-11:00 a.m.:** using the study guide:

1. Why study the Three Fires or the Three Poisons?
2. Read the selected sutta excerpts

11:00-11:15 a.m.: Short Meditation on Feeling the Fire

[meditation instructions]

5-10 minute bio and snack break

10:50-12:15 Noon:

1. Define and describe and commentary
2. Discussion and Q&A

**12:15-12:45: Lunch and clean-up in Noble Silence**

[practice instructions]

**12:45-1 p.m. Sitting or Walking Meditation in Noble Silence**

**1:00-2:00 p.m.:**

1. Putting out the flames
2. Discussion and Q&A

**About the Study Session Materials**

Tipitaka – baskets, the earliest teachings (three baskets: sutta basket, poetry basket, basket of rules for monks/nuns). The sutta basket contains these groups of suttas, which number to nearly 2000):

* [Digha Nikaya](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/index.html) (DN) — the "long collection"
* [Majjhima Nikaya](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/index.html) (MN) — the "middle-length collection"
* [Samyutta Nikaya](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/index.html) (SN) — the "grouped collection"
* [Anguttara Nikaya](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/index.html) (AN)— the "further-factored collection" or the Numbered Collection (i.e. the Book of Ones, the Book of Twos, the Books of ….)
* [Khuddaka Nikaya](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/index.html) — the "collection of little texts":

Books and websites referenced for Commentary and exegesis:

* *Early Buddhism: A New Approach* by Sue Hamilton
* *What the Buddha Thought* by Richard Gombrich
* *The Buddha Before Buddhism,* Gil Fronsdal
* *Mindfulness*, by Joseph Goldstein
* SuttaCentral.net
* Accesstoinsight.org
* Sunyata Buddhist Centre
* *Visuddhimagga* by Buddhaghosa, 5th century C.E.
* *Abbihdharma*, various, 3rd century B.C.E. and after

# Introduction to the Three Fires / Three Poisons

According to the Buddha’s teachings, the roots of our suffering can be attributed to one or more of the three mental states that cloud the mind and manifest in unwholesome actions: greed, hatred, and delusion. [alternatively, desire, ill-will, and ignorance] The three roots of suffering are collectively referred in different suttas/sutras as “the three fires” or more frequently, “the three poisons” or “the three defilements” (in Pali: *Kilesas*; in Sanskrit, *Kleshas*).

In this session, we’ll examine these mind states or afflictive emotions through meditation, readings, commentary, and discussion. We’ll also discuss ways to put the fires out.

## Revisiting the Three Insights and the Four Noble Truths

To get us started, we’ll do a very brief refresher on Buddhist basics including the Buddha’s three insights during his enlightenment experience. These are recounted at length in MN 36: *Maha-Saccaka Sutta: The Longer Discourse to Saccaka*, which is the Buddha’s story of how he became a wandering religious medicant. It is an interesting, inspiring story about the Buddha renouncing householder life, taking up robes and a begging bowl, and his years of practicing with different teachers and experimenting with different practices. In May, after 7 years, the Buddha’s striving came to fruition as sat under a Bodhi tree all night and had the three insights that led to his awakening:

[Note: the three insights are different from the three characteristics (impermanence, not-self, suffering)]

* Self-knowledge/knowledge of his own past lives
* Knowledge of others’ past lives (karma)
* The 4 Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths:

1. There is suffering (*dukka*),
2. there is a cause of suffering (craving/clinging),
3. there is a way out of suffering,
4. which is by following and developing the Eightfold Path of ethical behavior, meditation, and concentration.

Suffering is also sometimes translated as “unsatisfactoriness” or “stress,” and refers in particular to the mental and emotional suffering or stress by caused clinging and craving – the second arrow, as it were. Being physically sick, for example, is suffering; our suffering deepens when we fight against it – that’s the second arrow, where the clinging and craving come in. Clinging and craving may themselves be further defined as the ways in which we ruminate on (i.e. cling to) things we like and don’t like and crave what we desire. Further, clinging and craving are mental formations often infused with ignorance (i.e. delusion), which can create additional suffering. particularly the mental and emotional suffering or stress by caused clinging and craving.

Another important work for today’s study: *Samsara* is “a Sanskrit word that ‘means wandering’ or ‘world’, with the connotation of cyclic, circuitous change. It also refers to the concept of rebirth and ‘cyclicality of all life, matter, existence’, a fundamental assumption of most Indian religions. In short, it is the cycle of death and rebirth.”

If you aren’t comfortable with the notion of rebirth, you can think of samsara as the circular kind of thinking – obsessive thinking – typified by feelings and thoughts of greed, hatred, and delusion – that keeps us repeating unskillful, unwholesome or harmful behaviors.

## Defining Craving and Clinging

Clinging (*upadana*), from Wikipedia (I think this definition comes from the 1921 Pali-English dictionary created by early Pali-English scholar T.W. Rhys-Davies):

*“Upādāna* is a Vedic Sanskrit and Pali word that means "fuel, material cause… that is the source and means for keeping an active process energized". It is also an important Buddhist concept referring to "attachment, clinging, grasping". It is considered to be the result of *taṇhā* (*craving*), and is part of the *dukkha* (suffering, pain) doctrine in Buddhism.”

**AccesstoInsight: Three Cardinal Discourses of the Buddha**

**translated by Ñanamoli Thera**

**Clinging** (*upadana*) The word means literally "taking up" (*upa* plus *adana*). As such it, is the condition *sine qua non* for being. Clinging's ending is *nibbana*/*nirvana*.

**Craving** (*tanha*) draws creatures on through greed, and drives them on through hate, while ignorance prevents their seeing the truth of how things are or where they are going. Denial is as much an activity of craving as assertion is.

**Cessation:** (*nirodha)*, meaning the cessation of suffering through the cessation of craving, is regardable as the removal of a poison, the curing of a disease….

### From MN 11: The Shorter Discourse on the Lion's Roar (Cula-sihanada Sutta)

Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi

Thinking further about craving and clinging, let’s read this:

9. "Bhikkhus, there are these four kinds of clinging. What four? Clinging to sensual pleasures, clinging to views, clinging to rules and observances, and clinging to a doctrine of self.

16. "Now these four kinds of clinging have what as their source, what as their origin, from what are they born and produced? These four kinds of clinging have craving as their source, craving as their origin, they are born and produced from craving. Craving has what as its source...? Craving has feeling as its source... Feeling has contact as its source... Contact has the sixfold base as its source... The sixfold base has mentality-materiality [mental formations] as its source…”

# Reading the Suttas

We’ll read the following suttas in full or part then we’ll begin examining what they mean in greater detail:

* The Fire Sermon: Adittapariyaya Sutta
* The Nidana Sutta: On Causes
* Sammaditthi Sutta: Right View
* The Shorter Discourse on the Lion’s Roar
* An excerpt on Burning from The Connected Discourses on the Aggregates

## From SN 35.28, The Fire Sermon: *Adittapariyaya Sutta*

translated by Ñanamoli Thera

**Note**: The Fire Sermon is the 3rd sermon or teaching given by the newly enlightened Buddha. The first, on Suffering and the Four Noble Truths, was at Deer Park, given to five fellow ascetics (seekers); the second was on No-Self or Anatta, and the 3rd teaching was this one given to a thousand bhikkhus, on the three fires of Greed, Hatred, and Delusion. You can find Nanamoli’s translation and exposition of all three of them on the internet [search for The Three Cardinal Discourses translated by Nanamoli].

The Fire Sermon:

“Thus [have] I heard. On one occasion, the Blessed One was living at Gaya, at Gayasisa, together with a thousand bhikkhus. There he addressed the bhikkhus.

"Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what is the all that is burning?

"The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant [neutral] that arises with eye-contact …. that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust [greed], with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion. I say it is burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs.

"The ear is burning, sounds are burning, ear-contact is burning, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant [neutral] that arises with ear-contact …. that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust [greed], with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion…

"The nose is burning, odors are burning, nose-contact is burning, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant [neutral] that arises with nose-contact …. that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of greed, the fire of…

"The tongue is burning, flavors are burning, tongue-contact is burning, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or …[neutral] that arises with tongue-contact …. that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of…

"The body is burning, tangibles are burning, touch-contact is burning, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or … [neutral] that arises with touch-contact …. that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of…

"The mind is burning, ideas are burning, mind-consciousness is burning, mind-contact is burning, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or [neutral] that arises with mind-contact [as] its indispensable condition, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, the fire of….

"Bhikkhus, when a noble follower who has heard (the truth) sees thus, he finds estrangement [disenchantment, dispassion] in the eye, finds estrangement in forms, finds estrangement in eye-consciousness, finds estrangement in eye-contact, and whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or [neutral] that arises with eye-contact for its indispensable condition, in that too he finds estrangement.

"He finds estrangement [disenchantment] in the ear... in sounds...

"He finds [disenchantment] in the nose... in odors...

"He finds [disenchantment] in the tongue... in flavors...

"He finds [disenchantment] in the body... in tangibles...

"He finds [disenchantment] in the mind…in ideas…

"When he finds [disenchantment], passion fades out. With the fading of passion, he is liberated. When liberated, there is knowledge that he is liberated…

That is what the Blessed One said. The bhikkhus were glad, and they approved his words.

Now during his utterance, the hearts of those thousand bhikkhus were liberated from taints through clinging no more.”

### Some Commentary

Gombrich, p. 111: “In Pali, [the Fire Sermon] is called the *Aditta-pariyaya*, “The Way pf Putting things as Being on Fire,” which indicates that fire is being used here as a metaphor. The sermon begins: ‘Everything O Monks is on fire.’ The Buddha then explains what he means by ‘everything.’ It is all our faculties – the five senses plus the mind – and their objects and operations and the feelings they give rise to. To paraphrase, ‘everything’ refers to the totality of experience. All components of our experience in this world, the Buddha declares, are on fire with the fires of passion, hatred, and delusion….”

In the Fire Sermon, when the Buddha refers to "all" (*sabba*), he means (includes):

* the six internal sense bases (*ayatana*): eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind
* the six external sense bases or sense objects: visible forms, sound, smells, tastes, touches and mental objects
* consciousness (*viññāṇa*) contingent on these sense bases
* the contact (*samphassa*) of a specific sense organ (such as the ear), its sense object (sound) and sense-specific consciousness.
* what is subsequently felt (*vedayita*): pleasure (sukha), pain (dukkha), or neither (adukkhamasukhaṃ).

## From SN 22, The Connected Discourses on the Aggregates

Translation by: Bhikku Sajato, on Sutta Central

Intro: The Buddha taught his disciples to look human beings not as a self but as Five groups of processes (“aggregates,” “heaps”): (*Khandas* in Pali; *Skhandas* in Sanskrit): Material form (ex: eye), consciousness (eye-consciousness), feeling (feeling tone; like, dislike), perceptions (labeling/identifying), and mental formations (stories/opinions about the object based on feeling tone and perceptions). Specifically, the Buddha encouraged his disciples to see themselves and others as “the five heaps of clinging.” In Pali:

*Upādāna-khandha*: burning masses of fuel.

So in sum: what we call “I” or a “self” is really the Five Aggregates hanging together.

Example from Goldstein, *Mindfulness*, pp. 181: a “storm” is an aggregate of wind, rain, lightening, thunder, etc.; separately, they are not a storm; together, they are.

61. Burning

At Sāvatthī, the Buddha taught:

“Mendicants, form, feeling, perception, choices [mental formations], and consciousness are burning.

“Seeing this, a learned noble disciple grows disillusioned with form, with feeling, with perception, with choices [mental formations], and with consciousness. Being disillusioned, desire fades away. When desire fades away, they are [the mendicants] freed.”

Disillusioned, disenchanted, detached from what is burning. When we detach, we dampen the flame.

“Formations have ignorance as their source, ignorance as their origin; they are born and produced from ignorance.” From The Shorter Discourse on the Lion’s Roar.

## From AN 3:34, Nidāna Sutta: Causes

Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

“Monks, these three are causes for the origination of actions. Which three? Greed is a cause for the origination of actions. Aversion is a cause for the origination of actions. Delusion is a cause for the origination of actions.

“Any action performed with greed—born of greed, caused by greed, originating from greed: Wherever one’s selfhood [*atta-bhāva*] turns up, there that action will ripen. Where that action ripens, there one will experience its fruit, either in this very life that has arisen or further along in the sequence.

“Any action performed with aversion—born of aversion, caused by aversion, originating from aversion: Wherever one’s selfhood turns up, there that action will ripen. Where that action ripens, there one will experience its fruit, either in this very life that has arisen or further along in the sequence.

“Any action performed with delusion—born of delusion, caused by delusion, originating from delusion: Wherever one’s selfhood turns up, there that action will ripen. Where that action ripens, there one will experience its fruit, either in this very life that has arisen or further along in the sequence….

“These are three causes for the origination of actions.

“Now, these three are (further) causes for the origination of actions. Which three? Non-greed is a cause for the origination of actions. Non-aversion is a cause for the origination of actions. Non-delusion is a cause for the origination of actions.

….

“In the same way, any action performed with non-greed… performed with non-aversion… performed with non-delusion— that action is thus abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, [it is] not destined for future arising.”

## From MN 9: Sammaditthi Sutta: Right View

translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

*[This sutta is almost identical to AN 3.69, Mula Sutta: Roots*

“I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Savatthi in Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's monastery. Then Ven. Sariputta addressed the monks, "Friends!"

….

Ven. Sariputta said, "When a disciple of the noble ones discerns what is unskillful, discerns the root of what is unskillful, discerns what is skillful, and discerns the root of what is skillful, it is to that extent that he is a person of right view…and who has arrived at this true Dhamma.

Now what is unskillful? Taking life is unskillful, taking what is not given is unskillful... sexual misconduct unskillful... lying... abusive speech... divisive tale-bearing... idle chatter is unskillful. Covetousness... ill will... wrong views are unskillful. These things are termed unskillful.

And what are the roots of what is unskillful? Greed is a root of what is unskillful, aversion is a root of what is unskillful, delusion is a root of what is unskillful. These are termed the roots of what is unskillful.

And what is skillful? Abstaining from taking life is skillful, abstaining from taking what is not given... from sexual misconduct... from lying... from abusive speech... from divisive tale-bearing... abstaining from idle chatter is skillful. Lack of covetousness... lack of ill will... right views are skillful. These things are termed skillful.

And what are the roots of what is skillful? Lack of greed is a root of what is skillful, lack of aversion is a root of what is skillful, lack of delusion is a root of what is skillful. These are termed the roots of what is skillful."

## From the Atthakavagga or “The Book of Eights”

From the Khuddaka Nikaya or “Minor Collection” in the Pali Canon

Translated by Gil Fronsdal

This is the beginning of the *Kalahavivada Sutta: The Discourse on Quarrels and Disputes*

“[Questioner]:

“From where come

Quarrels, disputes, despair, and sorrow,

as well as selfishness, pride,

conceit, and malicious speech?”

[Buddha]:

From what is cherished

come quarrels, disputes, despair, and sorrow,

as well as selfishness, pride,

conceit, and malicious speech.

Quarrels and disputes are tied to selfishness.

Maligning others arises with disputes.”

“[Questioner]:

“Where is the foundation for what is cherished in the world

and for the greed that operates in the world?

Where is the basis for the hopes and aims

people have for a future [state}?

[Buddha]:

“Desire is the foundation for what is cherished in the world

and for the greed that operates in the world.

It is the basis for the hopes and aims

people have for a future [state].”

Questions: What does “cherished” mean? Longed for, treasured, *attached-to*.

# Exploring the Different “Flavors” or Varieties of the Three Fires/Poisons

What are some other words for or “flavors of” greed, ill-will, and delusion? Examples

* **Greed:** Desire, wanting, longing, hunger, thirst, acquisitiveness, covetousness, avariciousness
* **Hatred:** Ill-will, aversion, a grudge, hostility, anger, irritability, fear, animosity, contempt, malice, prejudice, bitterness, antagonism, aggression
* **Delusion:** Confusion, ignorance, obfuscation, distortion, deception, self-deception, illusion, fantasy, misapprehension, misunderstanding – not seeing things as they are; not seeing clearly.

### A Little More Commentary

Hamilton, p 58: “Negative states of mind [such as greed and ill-will]….constitute the fuel that keeps one continuing in the cycle of lives [because] they [negative states of mind] give rise to consequence-producing intentions [and actions]. And collectively, they are the flame that needs to be blown out – it is to this that nirvana, which means ‘blowing out,’ refers.”

“The fact that ignorance is so closely linked with desire in the descriptions of the Buddha’s Enlightenment, and that both cognitive and affective aspects of one’s state of mind are included in the continuity tendencies that are uprooted on that occasion, in my view clearly suggests that in early Buddhism the terms of Enlightenment [Awakening] and nirvana refer to the same occasion. Though in some later forms of Buddhism they become separated….in early Buddhism, Enlightenment is the insight which affects the blowing out of the fuel.”

p. 204: “The metaphor [of fire] conveys not just the fueling of continuity but its power, volatility, [and] the need to keep it under control, and, because the fire is destructive of one’s best interests, that the aim is to put it out.”

**Short bio break**

## Meditation on Feeling the Fire

15-minute sitting on practicing awareness of the three fires/poisons as/if they arise: what do they feel like in the body? [we’ll work with this during the lunch and clean-up break as well, and during the post-lunch short sit or walking meditation]. As they arise, see if you can parse out what the three fires feel like in your body. To heighten awareness of these three unskillful roots as they arise. For example:

* Greed/desire: Anxious? Agitating? Strung out?
* Ill-will/hatred: Contracted? Tight?
* Delusion: Confused? Cloudy? Frustrated?

# Discussion and Q&A

# Lunch and clean up

in noble silence, followed by 15 minutes of sitting or walking meditation as you prefer

# The Antidotes: Putting out the Fires

### Some Notes on Nirvana/Nibbana:

From Gombrich, p. 112, on what the word Nirvana means: “The word comes from the Sanskrit verbal root *va*, ‘to blow’; with the prefix *nir*, the basic meaning is ‘cease to burn, go out’ (like a flame)….In the ‘Fire Sermon,’ the Buddha preaches that our experience is on fire with the three fires, the fires of passion, hatred and delusion; our aim must be for all of them to go out.” When we become disenchanted, dispassionate, let go, we are putting the fire out: we can feel at peace, at ease, with the agitation gone.

Gombrich again: “…the ultimate solution which the Buddha offered to the sufferings and dissatisfactions of life [is] the attainment of nirvana (P: *nibbana*).

As Hamilton points out, p. 117, the opposite of *dukkha* (suffering/unpleasantness/unsatisfactoriness) is *sukkah*: happiness or as some put it, “bliss.” Nirvana is sometimes translated as “bliss,” sometimes as “peace.” Hamilton points out though that the bliss of nirvana is “associated with the coolness of the cessation of the burning of the fuel of continuity [i.e. the end of samsara, the cycle of lives]. Cognitively one is no longer restricted by ignorance, and affectively [i.e. emotionally] one is no longer burning with desire.”

So if nirvana means to put out the fuel that fans the flames, how do we get there, reach Nirvana or moments of nirvana?

## How to Become More Skillful

***“Deconditioning our preferences***.” Phrase from a talk by Ayya Santachitta. Using the following, esp the four efforts, can help us decondition our preferences. Our preferences lead to like/dislike, strong attractions, strong aversions.

We use mindfulness and the other tools listed below to decondition our preferences and habitual reactions.

### Generating the Five Faculties

Practices and experiences/mind states to cultivate:

* energy
* mindfulness
* concentration
* understanding
* with faith (confidence) in the efficacy of the other four

### Practicing the Four Right Efforts

* **Guarding against**: Not to let an unwholesome/unskillful thought, which has not yet arisen, arise;
* **Abandoning**: Not to let an unwholesome/unskillful thought, which has already arisen, continue;
* **Developing/Cultivate**: To make a wholesome/skillful thought, which has not yet arisen, arise;
* **Sustaining/maintain**: To make a wholesome/skillful thought, which has already arisen, continue

Opposite reactions to the three fires:

* Greed (lobha) – *mindfulness* transforms this into dāna (generosity) and more other-focused rather than self-focused
* Aversion/hatred (dosa) – mindfulness transforms this into mettā (loving-kindness)
* Delusion (moha) – mindfulness transforms this into Equanimity or prajna (wisdom)

### Cultivating the Brahmaviharas (Heavenly Abodes) and the Paramitas (Perfections)

**The Brahmaviharas, the four heavenly abodes**: kindness, compassion, patience, and forgiveness.

**The 10 Perfections:**

* generosity
* morality, proper or skillful conduct
* renunciation
* wisdom, discernment
* energy
* patience, tolerance, forbearance
* truthfulness
* determination, resolution
* lovingkindness, good-will
* equanimity

From “The Antidotes” on the Sunyata Buddhist Centre (Buddhist Meditation and Retreat center in Ireland)

“***To …. overcome greed,***we learn to cultivate selflessness, generosity, detachment, and contentment. If we are experiencing greed, strong desire, or attachment and we want to let it go, we can contemplate the impermanence or the disadvantages of the objects of our desire. We can practice giving away those things we would most like to hold onto. We can also practice acts of selfless service and charity, offering care and assistance to others in any way we can, free of all desire for recognition or compensation. In truth, there is no objection to enjoying and sharing the beauty, pleasures, and objects of this material world. The problems associated with greed and attachment only arise when we mistakenly believe and act as if the source of our happiness is outside of ourselves.

“***To …overcome hatred***, we learn to cultivate loving-kindness, compassion, patience, and forgiveness. When we react to unpleasant feelings, circumstances, or people, with hatred, ill-will, anger, or aversion, we can use these sublime antidotes to counteract the poisons. Here we learn to openly embrace the entire spectrum of our experiences without hatred or aversion. Just as we practice meeting unpleasant experiences in the outer world with patience, kindness, forgiveness, and compassion, we must also practice meeting our own unpleasant feelings in the same way. Our feelings of loneliness, hurt, doubt, fear, insecurity, inadequacy, depression, and so forth, all require our openness and loving-kindness. Our challenge in spiritual practice is to soften our habitual defenses, open our heart, and let go of hatred, aversion, and denial. In this way, we can meet and embrace ourselves, others, and all inner and outer experiences with great compassion and wisdom.

**“*To … overcome delusion***, we cultivate wisdom, insight, and right understanding. Learning to experience reality exactly as it is, without the distortions of our self-centered desires, fears, and expectations, we free ourselves from delusion. Deeply sensing and acting in harmony with the interdependent, impermanent, and ever-changing nature of this world—realizing that all living beings are inseparably related and that lasting happiness does not come from anything external—we free ourselves from delusion. As we develop a clear understanding of karma, knowing the positive, wholesome actions that bring happiness and the negative, unwholesome actions that bring suffering, we cultivate the wisdom, insight, and right understanding that free us from delusion.”

“By studying the Dharma and applying the teachings properly in our lives, we will gradually wear away even the most stubborn habitual behaviors, fully liberating ourselves from stress, unhappiness, and suffering. The Buddha calls this the “taintless liberation of the mind.” The sublime peace, wisdom, limitless awareness, unity, and bliss of Nirvana shines forth as our essential nature when the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion have finally been extinguished.”