Fire Prevention

August 23, 2023

Right effort is included in the concentration section of the path. The standard formula says you give rise to a desire, exert your persistence, uphold your intent, to prevent unskillful qualities that haven’t yet arisen from arising, to abandon those that have arisen, to give rise to skillful qualities that are not there yet. And when they are there, to develop them to the full extent of their culmination. Notice the first three qualities. Desire, persistence, intent. Those are also factors that give rise to concentration. And as you work on developing these qualities in the mind, right effort gets included in ardency in your right mindfulness. And then right mindfulness becomes the theme for right concentration. And then it’s in the fourth jhana that mindfulness becomes purified. So they all help one another along. And because mindfulness tends to focus so much on the present moment, we tend to forget that right effort also includes preventing things that are not there yet. This covers two things, prevention and then snuffing out things that arise. It’s like preventing a forest fire, a wildfire. Well before a fire starts you want to do some preparatory actions. There’s a lot of brush, a lot of things that could potentially burn. You do your best to cut them away so that if a fire does start it’s not going to spread easily. And then you have to be vigilant. So if a fire does start, you want to catch it right away before it spreads. This is one of the reasons why we have the contemplation of the body. It’s one of those preparatory exercises. Even when lust hasn’t arisen yet or pride in your body hasn’t arisen, it’s going to go through the parts of the body to remind yourself of what you’ve got here. Because the mind likes to close those things off so much. It’s so quick at doing it. So you want to get skilled at visualizing the body and all the different parts. Then we cut away a lot of the brush, a lot of the flammable material. But that doesn’t mean the fire potential isn’t there. The slightest spark can get you started. The little tiny things, and they can flare up very quickly. This is why you have to be quick. This is why alertness is such an important part of right effort and right mindfulness. To know what’s going on. Because there are parts of the mind that operate behind the scenes, in the shadows. And they’re ready to start a fire at any time. And if you’re alert you can see them and get them right away. Because when lust arises, when anger arises, there’s part of the mind that decides whether it’s on the side of the Dhamma or it’s going to be on the side of the defilement. And you want to influence the conversation as quickly as you can so it’s on the side of the Dhamma. So when the fire does arise, you’ll be able to remember and the mind will be able to be willing to go along with the contemplations to cut things off. Otherwise it’ll go through the motions for a little bit and then give up and say, “See, see, see, this method doesn’t work.” It’s because it primed it not to work. It’s like that survey they did back in the time of Rama V. They wanted the monks to help with the education mission in Thailand. They set up a system of public schools. And they didn’t have any teachers. So they wanted to recruit the monks. And there were some complaints, “Monks should be doing other things besides teaching school. They should be meditating.” So the government did a survey. And they arranged it in the survey so that they could not find any meditation monks. Now there were meditation monks at the time. And Chan Mon had already started meditating and Chan Sao. But they conveniently did not see them. So they came away saying that the survey proved that there were no meditating monks that were really serious, that were meditating properly. So you might as well put them all into the schools to teach the kids. In other words, the survey was biased from the very beginning. Usually when lust or anger arises, the mind is biased. And it’s going to tell you, “All these methods just don’t work.” Because it’s made up its mind that they are not going to work. So when things are triggered, you have to be very quick to make sure your allegiance is on the right side. This is why we have not only the contemplations of the body, or the contemplations of the impacts of anger, but also an appreciation for the mind that is quiet and the mind that is concentrated. Because you realize that if you give in to the defilement, it’s going to get harder and harder to get the mind into concentration. You’re going to lose what concentration you have. So work on your allegiance. Work on your appreciation. And what concentration can be, and what a quiet mind can be. Think of that chant that we have when the Buddha talks about every respect for the training. Then he says also respect for concentration. Now concentration is included in the training. So the question is why does he emphasize it again? And the reason seems to be that because it is so easily overlooked. People say you don’t really need strong concentration. A little bit of lucid calm is all you need. And calm is nice. But calm is one thing. Concentration is something else. Concentration in the mind is firmly established. And there really is a strong sense of well-being that goes with that. So learn to appreciate that. Be loyal to your concentration. So when defilements are triggered, you’re already inclined to say I’ve got something better. I don’t need to go with this. And this way all the various techniques that you learn in fire prevention can work. So look to your allegiance. And foster an appreciation for the good things of the path, day by day by day. So when fire breaks out, you’re prepared. And you can put it out. And as quickly as you can.

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