Temple of Poi

Fire Safety Information

Temple of Poi hereby informs you of your individual responsibility to seek adequate knowledge and safety information to qualify you to spin fire. You are advised to seek appropriate educational knowledge on fire tools and safety techniques, including but not limited to safety precautions; legality of fire permits in your local jurisdiction; appropriate fuel storage, containment, and transport; safety personnel and fire equipment extinguishment; fire tool disposal; and all other aspects of fire safety as related to fire dancing.

Safety Warning

What people are saying...

"I just wanted to thank you for introducing me to Poi. I spun fire for the first time last night and it was unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before: the radiance, the soft heat, the sound. I felt safe and relaxed, yet totally exhilarated."

~F. Bautista;
Introduction to Fire Spinning:
A few thoughts...

Fire Dancing is a beautiful and safe art when you take responsibility for the dangers associated with it seriously. These guidelines are geared towards beginning fire dancers who are not necessarily fully comfortable with themselves as dancers and fire spinners. This is not intended to limit your choices; rather to provide a framework that is cautious within which you can explore your art safely even if you've only burned a few times.

Being safe means being aware of the choices being made in the fire circle you're working within. We offer these as guidelines; not everyone has them available to them, nor do they necessarily consider these items before burning fire. Be aware when you walk into a fire circle that different fire spinning cultures have different degrees of training, concern and methods for approaching their experience. Because there are as many ways to practice (or not) fire safety as there are fire dancers, protecting your self may require you to walk away from a fire circle where people are not practicing safe procedures by your own standard. Certainly it is fine for someone to practice more or less rigorous fire safety practices than you prefer. That said, you are responsible for your own safety, so know what your standards are and know what makes you comfortable so you can ensure you are taken care of as you need to be.

As a fire safety person, you might also walk away from taking on the responsibility of fire safety person where you are unclear of the dancer's ability to be clear, capable and/or competent. If you choose to light someone who is too tired, out of it, emotional, altered and/or otherwise a danger to themselves and others and something happens, you have to live with your choices as the fire safety person as well as the fire dancer living with their actions too.

We believe every fire dancer is safest when they are aware of how best to protect themselves, the space and those with whom they are sharing the space.

Remember that how you show up in your community impacts the other artists around you. It only takes one serious incident to create a bad reputation for our art form so please remember to protect our artform by playing as safely as possible.
The Three C’s:

- Are you clear?
- Are you capable?
- Are you competent?

Protecting Your Flesh

Ideally, you’ll be fire dancing in natural fibers. Cotton, denim leather and suede work really well as well as heavy weight silk. If you’re uncertain of the safety of a fabric, hold a lighter to a small and inconspicuous space on the clothing. If the clothing melts, as many synthetics will do, it is not a safe fabric to burn in because if you touch the flames of your tool against it, the fabric may burn and melt to your skin. This is more dangerous than the flame hitting naked skin!

Think about running your hand through a candle flame. You can do this without getting any burns because the flame is only touching you for a brief moment. In contrast, when synthetic fabric melts, it can bubble and attach itself to you which causes far worse burns than the actual flame itself.

The most dangerous part of the fire rig is likely to be the metal that is closest to the flame as it hold the most heat and, even after you’ve put the fire out, will still be hot even though it doesn’t look as dangerous as the flame itself.

In addition to wearing natural fibers on your body, when you light up the first few times we recommend a
Things to Check on your Fire Tool Before Burning – Every Time!

- Is your wick in good condition?
- Are the nuts/bolts/cable holding the wick in place firmly? (check both sides of the wick)
- Are the swivels rusted?
- Is the chain rusted?
- Do the swivels turn?
- Are the handles dry and free of fuel?
- Are all quicklinks and nuts secured tightly?
- Are the handles fully functioning and strong?
- If you’re using split rings, are they strong enough to work properly?
- Is the tool in proper working order including the parts of the tool that do not get set on fire?
- Are the connection joints strong?

Be sure to also check your costume for dangers like:

- Loose strings that can get caught in your toy
- Jewelry that can hurt (necklaces while hooping, for example) or get caught on your tool or clothing. We’ve experienced spiral earrings with an end sticking out getting caught on poi chain as well as clothing.
- Drapping fabric and scarves that might wrap around your toy in any way.
- Unfinished cotton edges are also prone to lighting on fire, so do a burn test first to see if there is danger

- A weave that is made of the right fibers but is a loose enough weave to hold fuel in it in a manner such that it acts like a wick. In general, tight weaves are safer than loose weaves.

In addition to protecting your flesh, you want to make sure to protect your spirit and soul. Spinning fire is not just about the tools; it is also about the mindset we bring into the spinning practice. Before spinning check your mindset and be sure you’re ready for this activity. We break down your “mindset self check” into three questions that we call the “3 C’s”:

Are you Clear? That is, do you feel mentally alert enough to be burning fire? Things that might impact this answer are your mood, how hard a day you had, how much you’ve been working, your ability to focus, a fight you had with someone, an emotional event in your life, and your use of altering substances including (and perhaps especially) alcohol.

Are you Capable? That is, do you feel physically capable of doing the dancing you’re attempting to do? Things that impact this answer include how much exercise you have done, how many times you have already burned recently, your use of altering substances, and how tired you are. BEWARE of the adrenaline rush! It can deceive you both on a mental and physical level. GlitterGir shares a story of...
her early days of spinning where her friend Rob stopped her from doing a third burn one night. Later, she realized she was more tired than she thought because she was hyper pumped from the rush of adrenaline. This can happen to any of us, so be sure to check in with yourself before each burn especially when you are starting out.

**Are you Competent?** That is, are you doing moves that you are trained and practiced in? At some point in time, each move will have its “first” time with fire and no matter how much you practice without fire, it isn’t necessarily the same feeling with the fire there. I prefer, if I am trying moves that are still wild and not fully practiced, to be extra careful with my hair and ensure my head is covered (even though I usually spin without); hair really is the quickest to burn away.

**Check Your Rig**

I am guilty of forgetting to do this from time to time and I’m grateful for each time I am reminded by my fire safety person who asks me, “Did you check your rig?” It’s really obvious when you think about it, but sometimes we get swept away in the moment and excitement involved in burning so we forget that faulty gear can be problematic - for the performer, the audience, the fire safety person and the environment.

The reality is, even if you check your rig at the beginning of a practice session, you may still end up with things coming lose or parts failing after a few burns. The reality is, a part can fail at any time, so not only should you check your rig at the beginning of a set of burns, you should also continue to monitor your rig before each and ever burn regardless of the type of equipment you spin.

The list on page 4 of this document is a great list to start with when checking your fire tools.

**3 Safe Spaces**

When you’re practicing and performing fire dancing, you’ll work within three designated spaces. This assumes you have a place outside of the performance area where you keep your personal effects. If you do not have a “green room” or other such designated area (which is likely when performing renegade style) be sure to designate an additional area to store your valuable that is away from the fuel and performance area and is also easily monitored to prevent theft or accidental damage to your belongings.
Part of your safety check before you burn includes familiarizing yourself with the three performance spaces.

**The dipping/soaking area is the first.** That space is where you have your fuel, dipping bucket, and other supplies not in use. This is where you will soak your wicks with fuel. This space should be well away from any open flames and should be guarded against potential dangers including cigarette smoking and butt disposal. **Never use a lighter as a light source in the dipping area!**

**The spin out area is the second.** In this space you will spin your tool to rid it of any excess fuel. This avoids spraying fuel and flames onto the crowd and yourself during a performance. This space should be as industrial as possible. For example, if you are performing at a pool party, it is ideal to move away from the pool and plants on the side of the pool to the street to spin out lest any excess fuel spoil the ecology and environment as a whole.

A more environmental sound choice is to spin off your tools into ziplock bags and recycle the fuel into the dipping bucket. This is easily portable and works well with all types of tools. It also reduces the fuel consumption.

**The performance space is your third area.** Be aware of your space! Are there potential hazards in the space? Before beginning your practice or performance be sure to look:

* **Below:** is the ground level? Are there obstacles on the ground? Are there potholes? Is there debris? Are there flyers? Slippery spots? Oil spills? Is there metal on the ground that might get slick with fuel if it flies off the rig? Are their nails sticking out of the platform? Is there dry brush that might light on fire?

* **Around:** Are there cars coming? Is the audience crowding you? Do you have enough space to safely perform? Is there enough space for you to do all the tricks you planned to do? Can your fire safety person get to you quickly? Can the crowd disperse easily if necessary?

* **Above:** Are there branches that might light up? Are there flags or other hanging items that might catch on fire or melt before your eyes? Are there wires above you that might catch on your tool?

### Fuel Choices

In 2000, Tim West, a wonderful man from New Zealand who had, at the time been working with fire for 12 years taught GlitterGirl fire safety. As he was educating her about fuels, he poured out some kerosene into

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Kerosine</th>
<th>Paraffin (lamp oil)</th>
<th>White Gas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brightness</strong></td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Least</td>
<td>Most</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Color</strong></td>
<td>Orange/white</td>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Whitest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Smokiness</strong></td>
<td>Most</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Least</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Odor</strong></td>
<td>Most</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Least</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residue (soot)</strong></td>
<td>Most</td>
<td>Most and dangerous</td>
<td>Least (evaporates best)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residue (fuel from spin out)</strong></td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>(slippery, especially on slick surfaces like painted wood, grass, granite that’s polished and marble)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Temperature</strong></td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Coolest</td>
<td>Hottest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cost</strong></td>
<td>Least</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Most</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flame Size</strong></td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Smallest</td>
<td>Largest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Burn Duration</strong></td>
<td>Long</td>
<td>Longest</td>
<td>Shortest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time to Light</strong></td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Slowest</td>
<td>Quickest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"...thank you for introducing me to the world of fire dancing. I had my first experience with fire last Wednesday night in Sparky's class and it was just magic! The first spin you do with lit poi... hearing that giant "Woosh!" as they go by... words are insufficient to describe the emotions I experienced at that moment. For once, everything else going on in the world melted away and the only thing left was an intense awareness of myself and the fire. At that moment, all seemed right in the world, like it was meant to be. As I sit here and fumble for words to express my gratitude and excitement and torrent of emotions, I feel rather helpless. I know you understand what I mean. Thank you for sharing this wonderful gift" ~A. Corley

Fire Safety Person

GlitterGirl on fire safety:

“I’ve been spinning fire since 2000. In all that time, I have never lit up without a clear, capable and competent fire safety person supporting my burn. Every time I’ve been tempted, I ask myself, ‘Is spinning fire in the moment so important that I should take the risk?’ and every time I answered, ‘No.’

“I will confess that a fire safety person may have looked like another person I was spinning with who was there watching me as I was watching them, while we were both spinning. “Ultimately though, they know the dangers, know what to do, and more than once have extinguished an item of clothing that accidentally caught and saved me some challenges."

Ideally, all a fire safety person does is light your wicks and smile a lot as they watch you dance.

That said, things can and do go wrong. If they do, you want your fire safety person to be educated about how to handle things while they stay calm in the crisis. All the while, they need to be able to communicate effectively with you and the crowd, if necessary.

Your fire safety person should be responsible for the following:

* Performance area:
Checking the performance area with you. They should be familiar with anything that may be problematic, especially metal covers while using lamp oil as they can be very slippery once fuel is dropped on them. For that matter, grass in the fog and early morning dew is just as problematic. If there are multiple performers, they should point out the potential danger zones to the artists as a reminder.

* Fire Extinguisher: Your safety person should know where the
*The Three C’s:* Checking you and themselves to ensure the 3 C’s. It is equally important for the artist to be able to safely perform as it is for the fire safety support staff to be able to safely address issues. For example, a safety person may have a huge adrenaline rush after handling an emergency situation and then, a short time later, may find themselves to be somewhat exhausted. As the adrenaline dissipates, they may hit and energy low and as a result be less aware of the needs of the performers. Another example is when a fire safety person is so new to seeing fire performance that they are completely focusing on the show – more so than they are on the performer’s safety. In a sense, they are not really “clear” enough to be the safety person because they are simply too mesmerized by the fire.

*Fire Blanket:* Your fire safety personnel should be holding a wet towel or fire retardant material for use in case of emergency. It is a good idea to keep extra duvetyn in your fire safety kit, especially if you use tools with more wicks like fans, hoops and double staves. If you spin in groups, you may want to label your duvetyn by putting a small piece of gaffer or masking tape on it with your name in permanent ink on the tape.

*Holding the space.* Holding space is different in different performance and practice areas. You may be spinning in an urban area, in which case cars may be heading towards you at any point in time, so it’s helpful for the fire safety person to stand further out in the street than the performer and call out, “Car!” as one approaches. Usually the safety person can direct the car around the performer and it is a non issue. It can be helpful, as a performer, to face in the direction of the car to assess the situation for yourself. If you are performing, the more challenging problem is the crowd. Mostly, people are just plain silly about fire performances and seem to think that because you’re in control of the fire, they can’t get hurt. More than once we’ve been in a situation where a drunk or high person stumbled through the crowd right across our dance space. In tight performance spaces, it is helpful for the safety person to enlist the help of others in the crowd to help keep the space safe. It really does help!

*Leadership.* Your lead safety person should be comfortable giving orders and telling people what to do because this is what they will need to do if an emergency arises. This means a comfort with telling people to get out of

“I had been wanting to learn how to spin with poi for years. I couldn’t believe it when I moved to San Francisco and found a school that actually gives classes and instructions on how to spin poi and eventually spin fire!!! Of course I had no idea how to spin fire or what to expect. Learning something new can be a so frustrating and uncomfortable. To my relief, the classes were small and judgment free - a perfect learning space. I have been going now for three months and the experience has been incredible. The instructors are not only great people and amazing artists, they are incredibly knowledgeable and have the ability to guide you into a move and conceptualize it. I learn at least 4 or 5 moves every class!! In no time at all, I was connecting them all together and spinning with fire. If you have ever wanted to learn or practice the art of poi, this is the place!”

~ J. Weiler
the way and the ability to project their voice in a way that is louder than the music, crowd and any other noise going on in the area where the performance is happening.

* **Liaison with the crowd/venue/security personnel.** When performing in any sort of semi-public situation, your safety person will need to have excellent interpersonal communication skills such that they can communicate with the crowd to make requests and coral them as needed. In addition, there may be security officers or police with whom they will need to interact. Be sure they know what to say so they can appropriately represent you in these conversations.

* **Fire Extinguishment:** While it is critical to have a fire safety person present to ensure your safety, it is useless to have someone there who doesn’t actually know how to handle the fire. We have all too often seen safety personnel who have no experience with actually extinguishing the fire. Be sure your safety person has extinguished fire at least a few times and knows what might happen when they pat the duvetyn rather than smoother as well as understanding how hot the metal on the tools are. Also explain the possibility of backdrafts of flame when lifting the duvetyn so they know that the tool can sometimes relight.

* **Help with extinguishing during out of control situations.** The dangers with staff, double staff, fan and hoop are somewhat less problematic in that with these tools, you can just drop it if you have a little freak out while spinning. Other tools, like rope dart, double meteor and poi are a bit more challenging as these tools can actually wrap around your body in a dangerous manner. If you do have a moment where

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**What to have in your fire kit:**

* A dipping bucket – for a regular kit, ideally this will be large enough to hold multiple wicks at a time, especially if you practice in groups. If you’re using fans, be sure to have a container where the fan wick can reach the fuel.
* Your tools – poi, fans, staff, hoop
* Wick covers (socks work); if you make them pretty and/or blacklight reactive, you can also use them more easily as performance tools for non fire. This also helps with traveling in airports.
* Plastic bags to tie over the wicks (to avoid contamination).
* A “safety blanket” – a towel you get wet or duvetyn; extra safety blankets are always useful
* A dry rag (to wipe excess carbon off the rig after a burn or fuel off your hands)
* Fuel in a travel safe container (note: if you are transporting it to the playa, leave space for the fuel to expand in its container)
* A bucket to carry it all in
* A lighter
* A funnel (to replace unused fuel from the dipping bucket into the fuel container)
* Lava rags and/or other grease cleaner for hands
* Paper towels & wet wipes
* Gloves for the safety person
* 2nd Skin for burns
* Flashlight
* Gauntlets for your arms
* Gloves for your hands
* Tools and replacement parts
your rig wraps around you in an unusual way and you can’t get it off you (such as “butterfly handcuffs”), your cloths do “catch” on fire or the ground around you catches on fire, your fire safety person would extinguish these flames. I quote the term "catch" because it isn’t necessarily obvious that what is burning is usually just excess fuel on top of your cloths or if it is a transfer. What is important is to extinguish the flame fully and to not leave any smoldering fabric. This may reignite and cause more problems after a few minutes of unattended smoldering.

* **Extinguishing your rig at your request.** At any point in time you can choose to end your practice or performance. If you want to extinguish your rig before it burns out, communicate this to your safety person. They can then lay down the fire safety towel for you to place your rig on top of. They will then cover the rig with the other side of the towel and you can smother the flames and if need be, you can step on the towel to assist in the smothering process. Be sure the safety person compresses and holds the safety blanket on top of the tool rather than patting it. Patting the blanket sometimes acts more like a bellows and stokes the fire rather than extinguishing it.

* **Support your performance.** It is especially pleasant when your safety person hoots and hollers on your behalf during the performance. More importantly though is letting you know you’re not on fire when the poi do brush against you by yelling, "You’re okay!” or something to that effect, especially for newer artists who are not as confident with the flames.

* **Communicating danger to the performer.** The fire safety person should calling out information about oncoming cars or observers getting in their performance path, and more important information such as, "pant leg on fire!" if your cloths should catch on fire. It is much less common for your cloths to transfer flames when using kerosene than when using something like white gas.

### What Can Go Wrong

You are playing with fire. And, as a result, you can have something go wrong. This list outlines some of the possibilities and how to handle various scenarios.

- **You’re on fire.** Mostly this shows up as excess fuel wiping on your cloths as you’re dancing which will burn off within a few seconds. This is called a transfer and is more likely to happen with white gas than any of the other fuels. We have never actually seen a person "on fire" -- just having their skin burn, though we’ve heard reports of fuel on the skin causing this visual effect. Remember that you, the artist, are closest to the flames and as such, you are likely to be able to extinguish the fire quickest. This does not always work (which is why we have fire safety people) and, staying calming and smothering the flame is your first line of defense. If your pant
If your leg is on fire, you can try to rub your leg on the other leg to extinguish the flames. If your shirt is on fire in the front, you can bend into yourself like you’re doing a sit up to try to smother the flame. If the fire is on your backside, communicate with your fire safety person to have them smother the flame.

- **Excess fuel on the tool.** This can cause problems other than the aforementioned clothing catching on fire. We have seen performances where excess fuel leapt off the poi and landed on the wooden deck. The deck then “caught” on fire. Much the same as the pant leg example, it was mostly just fuel burning off the surface. However, situations like this call for the safety person to communicate to the performer where the fire is and have them move away from it so they can stamp it out.

If the fuel is on the hoop tube or staff length itself, this can be a bigger hazard than a bit of fuel on a poi chain as the hoop or staff may be rubbed against the body and therefore rub the fuel on the body. This can also lead to a transfer, or worse, the fuel soaking into the fabric of the clothing which then actually does catch on fire.

- **Your handles fall in the fuel.** This is a challenge for poi artists and it sometimes does happen. Even when you are careful, sometimes the poi handle can slip into the fuel bucket. Under no circumstance do you want to just spin the poi with the fuel soaked handles as that handle now becomes an additional wick, even if it is made of leather. To address this situation, take the poi handles and lay them on the ground away from the fuel soaked heads. Using a fire blanket in one hand and lighter in the other while the handles are on the ground, light the handles on fire for 3-5 seconds. Extinguish them with the safety blanket. Let them cool and repeat this process several times. You will want to make sure to remove the excess fuel slowly so you don’t ruin the handles, though, likely there will be some impact to the handles and you may need to replace them.

- **Tool breaks.** During one of GlitterGirl’s performances in a really confined space, her poi hit a metal ledge mounted behind us. It broke leaving her with her handle and a few links of chain in her hand. Fortunately, the flaming head landed on the ground in front of the fire safety person who then extinguished the broken rig. She kept performing with the one poi until the next performer came on. During her second burn with her first fire hoop, the hoop snapped open at the joint where the tubing was held together. Fortunately, this was during a practice session with lots of space so there was no impact. Another example happened after the fire inspection from the SFFD before the performance in Union...
Square at the 2009 Fire Dancing Expo where one of the artist’s poi heads flew off while he was warming up. Tools can break at any time. Be aware. Be present. Have a safety person on hand and have appropriate distance between you and your audience for maximum control.

- **Your fuel catches on fire.** Fire can’t burn without oxygen so your best bet is to cover the fuel can as quickly as possible. The can will likely implode, creating a vacuum as the fire burns within the can.

- **Fuel spills.** Sadly, fuel cans get knocked over and gear can get covered in excess fuel as a result. This may happen in your transport container or at the site where you’re spinning. If your gear is covered burn off and wipe up what you can, being sure to dispose of the fuel soaked rags in a well ventilated place. If fuel spills on the ground, you can try to burn it off the ground which works well on concrete and is unlikely to work on grass. We’ve had mixed results on dirt, depending on how much the fuel has soaked into the ground. Having a catch pan underneath your dipping area is a great way to help with this challenge.

- **The police approach.** If the police approach, be friendly and respectful. Often times they will stand around and watch what you’re doing. You being competent with your art form and being clear about being safe with fire is a great way to gain respect and help when working with the officers. If you do not have a permit and are spinning illegally, remember they have the authority and the nicer you are, the easier it is to get through the situation without any trouble.

### Transporting your Gear

When transporting gear locally, the fire kit information outlined on page 9 will give you a general sense of what to include that is utilized most.

If you are travelling with gear and will be on planes, check out the tips listed on the left side of this page.

### Permitting in San Francisco

The permitting process in San Francisco is currently undergoing some revisions. While things have been more lax in the past, the SFFD has gotten more strict in 2009. Check the Temple of Poi Blog at [http://templeofpoi.com/blog](http://templeofpoi.com/blog) for updates on this topic – As we get information we will post it for everyone to see.

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**Tips for travelling with tools:**

- Burn off all excess fuel
- Wrap the tools in plastic
- If the tools smell like they’ve been burned, burn them with white gas to try to eliminate the odor; wrap in turkey bags to cut down on odor
- Wipe off soot and residue from burning the gear (with alcohol)
- Cover all wicks (socks, fabric, bear cozy’s)
- Have a business card of a professional with gear
- When shipping hoops, put several hoops together and shrink wrap plastic them to each other to protect the tape on the hoops
- Breakdown staves are fabulous options and you can get an excellent one here (please use this link as we get a referral credit): [http://tinyurl.com/lwqagdr](http://tinyurl.com/lwqagdr)