When You Hit a Plateau

May 26, 2025

If you practice meditation long enough, you’re going to run into plateaus. There are times, especially in the beginning, when it feels like you’re climbing a mountain. Sometimes it’s quite steep. You can see the progress you’re making, and it’s very encouraging. But then there come the times when you meditate, and meditate, and meditate, and it all seems to be the same. And you wonder, “When is the next mountain going to come?” But you don’t know. It’s as if you’re in a fog. You don’t know if there’s going to be a mountain, or if you’re on top of a butte. And you’ve reached the top already. What are you going to do? You don’t want to go down. You explore what you’ve got. You’ve got to be more sensitive to what’s going on. Look for the little things. On the way up, you were looking for the large markers, the obvious things. That’s what got you up. Then you get to the plateau. You’ve got to look very carefully at the soil. There’s a highway in Arizona that goes down to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. It’s a very pretty highway. They advertise it as one of the prettiest rides in America. You go through forests, you go through meadows. I’ve been over it many times. There was one time they were working on the road, and the person who flagged us down said we had to wait. So we’re going to have to wait for about 15-20 minutes before they’re going to let us through. So I decided to get out of the car and walk across the meadows. And that’s when I realized that there were tiny, tiny flowers all over the meadow. The ride had been passed in the car. You didn’t see that. It was just like grass. But if you’d stopped and paid attention, you could see more. There’s a lot to see. Because after all, what’s happening right now in your mind? There’s bodily fabrication, the way you breathe. Verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. And mental fabrication, the images you hold in mind, the perceptions, and then the feelings you focus on. And you’re doing this all the time. But how conscious are you of what you’re doing? And what are the details? What are the perceptions you hold in mind? Often you don’t know. Because these things can be buried under many layers. You’re not going to get down to them until you strip the layers away. And that’s not going to happen by looking around to see where the next slope is going to be. You focus on what you’ve got, what you’re doing. After all, where did the Buddha gain awakening? He gained awakening watching his own breath. What’s the difference between his breath and your breath? Nothing. It’s just that he looked a lot more carefully. He asked the right questions. How am I putting this together? What are my intentions right now? What views are they based on? We go through life being driven by different thoughts, different attitudes, that we don’t really comprehend. And although there are some things that you see more clearly the higher you get on the mountain. There are things you’re not going to see unless you look very carefully at what’s right underneath your feet. So when you hit a plateau, take that as an opportunity to say, “I’m going to look more carefully.” Go back over the territory you’ve been on. Back and forth, back and forth. And John Lee makes a lot of this image. This path we’re walking on, it’s like a walking meditation path. You go back and forth, back and forth. It’s the same path. But sometimes you’ll notice a little something that you didn’t notice before. It was there all along. But you didn’t notice it because you weren’t looking carefully enough. So everything you need to know for awakening is right here. The question often comes up, “Where is the best place to meditate?” And the answer, of course, is right here, where you are. Just look very carefully. The Buddha gives you those maps of what’s going on in the mind. When he described dependent co-arising, he wasn’t just showing off his knowledge. He meant for the different links to be useful. Now, what you see as you look at your mind is going to vary from person to person. It’s the most meaningful for you. But read through the different links and ask yourself, “Do I know what this is in my mind right now? Do I know what that is in my mind right now? Where are the blanks?” And you don’t want to just fill in the blanks. You want to look carefully. What is there in the blank? Because these thoughts going through the mind are quicker than the thoughts in the middle messages on TV. So you’ve got to slow things down inside in terms of what you’re going to be looking at. And you look at one thing continually. And try to be alert. I mentioned this before. The image that a lot of the Forrester Jones like to use as being a hunter. I’ve never been a hunter. But hunting is a skill. It requires that you be alert and still at the same time. If you move around, you chase away the game. If you stay still but fall asleep, they can be right under your nose and you’re not going to know. So ask yourself, “Are you still enough? Are you alert enough?” And ask different questions. For me, one of the most revelatory Dharma books I ever read was the one where Ajahn Mahaprabhu was giving talks to a woman who’s dying of cancer. He talks about his own practice, dealing with pain. He starts talking about the different questions that he asked, and the things he observed in his mind. And there were questions that I had never thought of asking. And I found that when I started asking them, it opened things up inside. Now his questions may not open things up for you, but you’ve got to ask yourself, “What are the assumptions I’m making right now, the things I’m sloughing over, that I’m running past, so I don’t see the little flowers? All I see is a field of grass. How can I question those assumptions?” That’s a lot of the work of discernment right there, is not so much finding the answers, but knowing the right questions to ask. It was a while after reading Ajahn Mahaprabhu that I came across the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation. I discovered that the Buddha gives, in a very cursory form, precisely the approach that Ajahn Mahaprabhu was recommending. You get in touch with what kind of feelings you have in the body. And then you ask yourself, “Well, what are the perceptions around this, the perceptions and feelings?” Those are the things that are mental fabrications. And to what extent are the perceptions the problem? How can I calm those perceptions? In other words, how can I find a perception that’s just as true, but has a more calming effect on the mind? Like the perception that the pain is coming at you. Like going away. In other words, it arises, but as soon as it arises, it’s running away from you. Because after all, time passes. Everything that arises runs away. They say that space-time moves at the speed of light. So think of that. And what does that do for the mind? Does it have an effect on the mind? What other perceptions can you change? As you dig around in this, you find that you’re going to run into some assumptions that you have that you didn’t expect. Which is why insights, the really good ones, are unexpected. You can’t guarantee an insight meditation technique. When they tell you you’re going to see this, this, this, well, of course you’re going to make yourself see this, this, this. But the really important insights are the unexpected ones. And you see those by slowing down and looking more carefully. Right there on the ground in the plateau. Maybe precisely what you’re needing. So look carefully. Slow down. Look for the details. Because those are the things that are going to open things up. When you catch yourself doing things that you didn’t notice before. Remember that the Buddha’s image right inside is a mirror. I think I mentioned when I was in France, the question came, “How does meditation help you see the nature of reality?” And I had to respond, “The Buddha’s not asking you to see the nature of reality. He’s asking you to see what you’re doing that’s causing suffering.” And to see that, you have to look carefully. It’s happening all the time. But we’re sloughing over the details. And so we don’t see.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2025/250526_When_You_Hit_a_Plateau.mp3>