

## *Hitting a Wall*

*July 24, 2016*

The Buddha taught two things: suffering and the end of suffering. Now, there's a sense in which those two things are extremely personal and individual. The suffering you feel, the pain you feel, is something no one else can feel. It's the part of your experience that even scientists looking at your brain can't access. We're talking about experience as you feel it from the inside. And each of us has very particular sufferings, very particular ways of suffering, particular issues that weigh down the mind.

But there's also a sense in which it's something we all have in common. After all, we all do suffer. We recognize that. And as the Buddha pointed out, there's a common pattern to the suffering. The same issue applies to the path. When you're practicing the path, your concentration is something only you can experience. Your mindfulness, your effort, all the qualities that need to go into the path, are things that you experience from within, your consciousness. So in that sense, your path is a very particular one.

But in a more general sense, the path has the same structure for everybody. We all need to have all eight factors of the path. And they all need to come together.

What this means is that we're dealing with some basic principles, but we have to be very sensitive to how those principles apply to us right here, right now. And that's a large part of our discernment: learning what applies and how to apply it, how to recognize when things are working and how to recognize when they're not working and why.

So when the path gets difficult, it's good to reflect on the general structure to take yourself out of the particulars of why it's especially difficult for you right now. Remember what the Buddha said about right effort. Right effort involves your discernment in three ways. One is your motivation, two is the amount of effort, and three is the particular type of effort. So learn how to take that general structure and apply it when the going gets tough.

One way to motivate yourself is to remind yourself that this is work that nobody else can do for you—and if you don't do it now, it's not going to get easier as time goes on. So whatever difficulties you've got right now, they're what you've got to deal with. However, the type of effort you may be doing may be the wrong type.

I've noticed that when I'm working on the computer in the afternoon, I find that it's good to have at least two or three projects going at once so that if one

project goes dry, I've got other projects I can work on. And it's the same with the practice. Sometimes concentration practice gets dry. So you have to ask yourself, "What else in the path can I work on now? What other perfections can I work on now? Do I work on patience? Do I work on goodwill?" Or, in terms of the factors of the path, just go down the list: "Something wrong with my views? Something wrong with my resolve, with my speech, my actions, my livelihood, my effort, my mindfulness, my concentration?" If concentration is proving to be a problem, what about your resolve? What about your views? Maybe you can work on those for a while.

As Ajaan Lee pointed out, our mind is like a tree with lots of branches, as opposed to say a banana tree that has just one trunk and just a couple of branches and leaves. A banana grows really fast. A banana dies really fast. The longer-lasting trees are the ones with lots of branches. Sometimes working on one branch goes dry, so you work on another one.

You've got lots of things going on all at once. So take advantage of the fact. Don't make that something that gets you frazzled and distracted, but simply realize that when you run up against a brick wall in one area, try another one.

Ajaan Fuang tells a story of when Ajaan Lee had his plans for the celebration for 25 centuries of Buddhism. All the years that Ajaan Fuang had been with Ajaan Lee, Ajaan Lee had never pressured him to work on the construction or any of the physical repairs in the monastery. But when this time came, he said to him at one point, "If you don't help with this, I'm going to die." Now, Ajaan Fuang really did not like construction work. He resisted for a while. But he found that his meditation suddenly wasn't any good, so he figured, "Okay, if I'm going to die with a hammer and saw in my hands, at least I'm dying doing something good." So he helped put up the sheds they needed for the people who were going to come and stay. And he said he learned something from it.

So if you find yourself pushing against a brick wall in some area of your practice, ask yourself, "Well, maybe I'm pushing against the wrong place right now. Maybe there's an open door someplace that all I have to do is go through." So look at whatever aspect of your practice needs a little bit more work that you're not working on now, that will give you a change of pace. Then, when you get back to the concentration, you come back with fresh eyes and a sense of accomplishment. So, that's the issue of the type of effort.

And then there's the amount. If you're pushing yourself too hard, learn to notice what the telltale signs are. If your energy is running out, your mind is distracted, it's hard to focus, okay, you're pushing yourself too hard. If you're not pushing yourself hard enough, there are also telltale signs. You're going to sleep

without any sense of having expanded your range in the course of the day. That's a telltale sign right there. There should be some expansion in your practice in one area or another. Otherwise, you get lazy and careless. You get sloppy about the little details. This is one of the reasons why, in the forest tradition, they're so meticulous about keeping things clean and neat and organized. You have to put a little bit of extra oomph into what you're doing so that it develops that quality of intentness. Then you bring that intentness back into your concentration.

So that's the general framework for dealing with the problem of effort, especially when things are difficult. You look at your motivation and you look at the amount of effort you're putting in.

And you look at the type of effort you're engaged in. Sometimes when you're trying to develop concentration, things will run dry. Well, maybe there's something you should be abandoning, or something you should be just watching—or maybe you should be developing something else. Learn how to take the general framework and apply it to the particulars of your path as you experience it from within.

This is learning how to take the principles and make them your own. That's where a lot of the discernment in the practice applies and how it's developed.

If things were easy, you would just say, "Just do this and then you'll hit stream entry and then you do that and you'll hit once returning," it wouldn't take much discernment. And a lot more people would have gained awakening. But it's learning how to take the principles and realize, "Okay, I've got to adjust these." And you've got to adjust them in a way where you're not just giving in to your defilements. That's one way you develop your discernment, is to notice what that would be.

What is a valid way of applying the principles right now so that they really advance your practice? That's the question. And try to figure out an answer to that question. That's how you get wise.

This is why I said the other day, when we read the factors of the path, it starts out with right view and goes through the discernment factors and then the virtue factors and then the concentration factors, which is different from the normal list you hear: things starting out with virtue and then concentration and then discernment. But the point of putting the factors of the path in the order they are helps you understand that your discernment develops as you develop all the eight factors.

It's not that you do discernment and then you drop it and then you do resolve or do your virtue. You bring the discernment to the virtue, and the virtue teaches your discernment to be wiser. The concentration teaches your discernment to be

wiser as you figure out the problems of getting the mind concentrated. This is how the path all comes together.

And when it comes together, it does the same thing for everybody. As the Buddha said, for those who have seen the truth—and here he's talking about the truth of nibbāna—there's no difference in their opinions. There's no difference in the experience at all. And they recognize that fact. This is where the subjective and the objective side of the problem and the solution to the problem all come together. And how that happens, you'll have to find out for yourself.