

# *The Perfect Wall*

## Mindfulness

We were poor monks who needed buildings. We couldn't afford to employ a builder – the materials were expensive enough. So I had to learn how to build: how to prepare the foundations, lay concrete and bricks, erect the roof, put in the plumbing – the whole lot. I had been a theoretical physicist and high-school teacher in lay life, not used to working with my hands. After a few years, I became quite skilled at building.

Being a monk, I had patience and as much time as I needed. I made sure every single brick was perfect, no matter how long it took. Eventually, I completed my first brick wall and stood back to admire it. It was only then that I noticed— oh no! – I'd missed two bricks. All the other bricks were nicely in line, but these two were inclined at an angle. They looked terrible. They spoiled the whole wall. They ruined it.

By then, the cement mortar was too hard for the bricks to be taken out, so I asked the abbot if I could knock the wall down and start over again – or, even better, perhaps blow it up. I'd made a mess of it and I was very embarrassed. The abbot said no, the wall had to stay.

When I showed our first visitors around our fledgling monastery, I always tried to avoid taking them past my brick wall. I hated anyone seeing it. Then one day, some three or four months after I finished it, I was walking with a visitor and he saw the wall.

"That's a nice wall," he casually remarked. "Sir," I joked in surprise, "have you left your glasses in your car? Are you visually impaired? Can't you see those two bad bricks which spoil the whole wall?" What he said next changed my whole view of that wall, of myself, and of many other aspects of life.

He said, "Yes. I can see those two bad bricks. But I can see the 998 good bricks as well."

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION: How do you know when it is time to move on to the bigger picture, as opposed to continuing to strive for perfection? Can you share a personal story of a time when you were reminded of the bigger picture? How do you develop detachment to the result of your work without compromising on your commitment to its quality?