

Your Game Leg

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You probably know the story of the man with the game leg, “game” in the sense of having pulled a muscle or a ligament. He found that it was a very good excuse for getting out of work. “Can’t do that. I’ve got a game leg,” he would say. Even as the leg was getting better, he continued to walk as if the leg were still game, so as to get out of work. In the end, he really did damage the leg by doing that.

So as you look at your practice, what is your game leg? In other words, what are the unskillful thoughts, attitudes, the excuses that you give to yourself for not putting more effort into the practice? A lot of the practice is simply learning how to drop the excuses and just do it. I think it was Ajaan Singthong who once said that there’s nothing mysterious about the practice; it’s simply a matter of just doing it. When the path finally comes together, there’s nothing mysterious about that. It’s all the factors you knew about. There’s no secret, esoteric teaching. It’s simply getting everything together right. It’s like your body walking. How can you get everything together so you walk without a limp and get to where you want to go?

There are four teachings, the Buddha said, that can’t be argued with and that form the basis of the practice. You know that if you’re following these teachings, you’re on course. They’re all very basic. I met a monk once in Thailand who said he’d found it difficult to live with any ajaans. He knew that this was a problem. As soon as he lived with somebody, he’d start getting into trouble. So he had to go off and live on his own. He asked Ajaan Maha Boowa what teachings he should hold to as he was living on his own, to make sure he didn’t go off course. This was the teaching Ajaan Maha Boowa gave: these four qualities that the Buddha had set out.

One is sticking to your precepts. Two is learning how to maintain restraint over your senses. Each time you look at something, each time you listen, smell, taste, touch, think about something, ask yourself: Why? Which member of the committee is doing the listening: the greed member, the anger member, or the simple observer? If you see there’s any greed involved in your motivation for looking, don’t look. Also, check to see what’s happening as a result of your looking.

What this means is that you’re looking at your engagement with the senses as part of a cause-and-effect process. What’s motivating your contact—motivating

your desire to go out and look and listen—and what happens to the mind as a result?

If you find that you're aggravating your greed or your lust or delusion, learn how to look in different ways. This is one of the reasons why we have the contemplation of the body. If you see something beautiful, look beneath the skin. You look at yourself. You think you're okay. You may not be especially good-looking, but you decide you're okay. But if you were to take off the skin, you wouldn't be able to look at yourself at all. The Buddha has you do this analysis with yourself first to be fair and also to deal with the fact that our attraction to the human body starts with our attraction to our own bodies.

So learn how to look at these things in a different way. Instead of looking for the signs of beauty, look for the signs of aging. Look for the signs of decay. Or as Ajaan Lee said, "Turn your eyes around." If all you can see is something that inspires lust, turn your eyes around so that you can see an aspect of the same thing that inspires a sense of loathing. If all you can see are things that inspire disgust, turn your eyes around to realize that the issue is with this process of perception—the labels we give to things—which, as Ajaan Suwat pointed out one time, are little agreements in the mind. "This means that; that means this. This is something you stamp with 'like'; this is something you stamp with 'dislike.'" The different parts of the mind agree on those labels. Well, learn how to question those agreements—these little pacts the mind has with itself—so that your looking and listening at the very least don't damage the state of the mind and can actually become part of the practice.

Moderation in eating is the third principle. How much do you need? When you fill up your bowl or your plate, are you taking just enough? Or are you taking a little bit extra just in case? Ajaan Chah's rule of thumb, which he picked up from Ven. Sariputta's verses, was that if he could feel that within five mouthfuls he was going to be full, he would stop and then fill himself up with water. That would be it. Which means that he had to become very sensitive to the body's messages. But most of us are not like that. We're full and then we top it off with another five mouthfuls—at least. So learn how to read your body's needs. And remember, the food you don't eat can be a gift. If you're a monk, it can be a gift to the monks down the line. If you're a lay person, we can give it to the other lay people. If all the lay people are full, we can give it to the coyotes.

The fourth principle is being wakeful—trying to get by with as little sleep as possible. Now, there are no hard and fast rules here. The standard in the Canon is four hours of sleep a day, but you have to look at yourself. How much sleep is enough, and at what point is it getting to be too much? As for the time you're

awake, try to spend it as much as you can with sitting and walking meditation. We've got our duties. We've got our chores around the monastery. But there's a lot of time left over that could be spent in sitting and walking and, as the Buddha said, washing away unskillful qualities in the mind. In other words, we're working primarily on *the* big sense door, which is the sense door of the mind.

There's that story of the novice who taught the scholarly monk. His meditation instructions were simple: There's a termite nest with six holes. In the Thai version, there's a chamot, a civet cat, inside the termites' nest, and you want to catch the chamot. So what do you do? You close off five of the holes, and you stay watching just the one. In other words, you don't focus on the eyes, ears, etc. Whatever comes up in the senses, you keep watch over the mind as you sit, as you walk, as you stand, as you go through all your activities in the day. If you see anything that comes up, especially the game-leg parts of the mind—the excuse, “Well, I can't do it all that much because I didn't sleep that much last night” or “I've got this problem today; I've got that problem today”—learn how to cleanse your mind of those things, because they're defilements.

“Defilement” is a concept we don't like to hear about much in the West. People either pretend that the defilements are not there or that the Buddha said these things don't really exist—they're empty, they don't matter. But compared to an awakened mind, your mind is dirty. Not in the sense of a dirty-old-man mind, but simply that it's filled with the dirt of greed, the dirt of aversion, and the dirt of delusion. This dirt is clouding things up, obscuring what you could see if you would take the time.

So these instructions are pretty basic. As is often the case, we tend to think we're too good for the basics and we want to move on to the higher levels. But it turns out that doing the basics really, really well is what makes the higher levels possible, because it's on the basic level where you catch yourself making excuses for your game leg. So focus on getting the basics right, and everything else will fall in line.