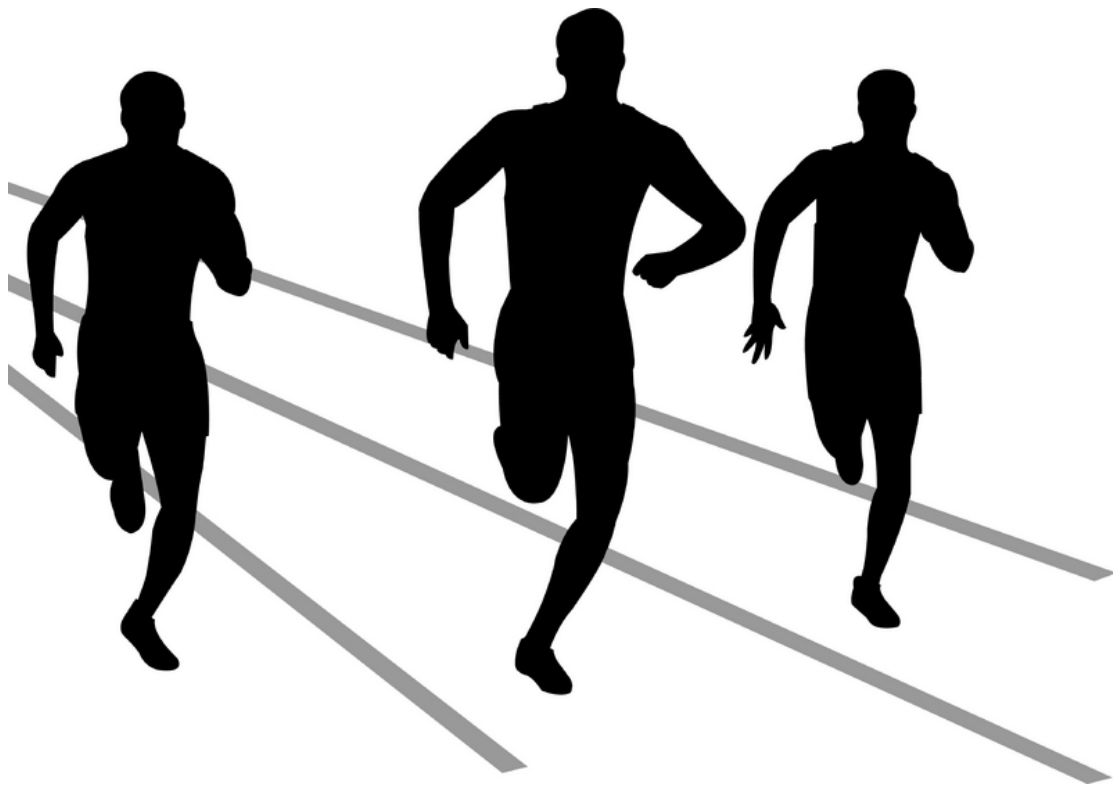


RUNNING BUDDHAS



©Connie Larsen / Dreamstime

Ultra-Endurance and the Spiritual Athlete

Hi. I'm Jayne Storey, Director of Training at **Chi-Power™ Sports**.

Welcome to the **FOCUS** report, which will help you to prepare your mind and body to access "the sporting zone" - a state of peak performance where actions are automatic and where bursts of 'spontaneous excellence' occur naturally and without effort.

As a performance enhancement specialist, I coach athletes and sports-teams in training essentials from Taoism and Zen - things like Chi Kung (energy training) Meditation and T'ai Chi which include lower abdominal breathing, balance, and postural exercises to help maximise training and performance and to reduce injuries.

So far in this report we've looked at Zazen (the tradition of seated meditation from Zen Buddhism) and Zhan Zhuang (the practise of standing meditation which forms an integral part of T'ai Chi and Kung-Fu training).

In this report, we'll be looking at the Japanese Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei, who perform an incredible 1000 days of marathons, as part of their training in Tendai Buddhism – exploring the training they undertake to perform such a feat of ultra-endurance and how you can apply some of their training to your own extreme and/or endurance sports.

The Marathon Monks

The marathon monks of Japan are a group of Buddhists who push the limits of human endurance in search of a higher plane of spirituality. The ritual followed by these monks is almost beyond belief.

Take a look at this:

FIRST YEAR: 100 consecutive days of 26.2-mile marathons, beginning at 1:30 a.m., each day after an hour of prayer.

SECOND YEAR: 100 consecutive days of 26.2 mile marathons.

THIRD YEAR: 100 consecutive days of 26.2 mile marathons.

FOURTH YEAR: 100 consecutive days of 26.2 mile marathons – performed twice.

FIFTH YEAR: 100 consecutive days of 26.2 mile marathons – performed twice.

On the 700th day, the monks undergo a 9 day fast without food, water, rest or sleep – a mind-boggling feat which would result in certain death for most human beings, before having a short rest of a few weeks and increasing their gruelling schedule:

SIXTH YEAR: 100 consecutive days of 37.5 mile marathons.

SEVENTH YEAR: 100 days of 52.2 mile marathons and 100 days of 26.2 mile marathons.

Throughout the night they run and pray, stopping at different stations along the way to recite prayers and perform ritual chants. Upon completion of each day's marathon, the monks perform chores such as cleaning the temple and they continue to pray throughout the day, until retiring at 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. The ritual begins again a few hours later.

If at any time the monk finds himself physically or mentally unable to complete the 100-day ritual, he is duty-bound to commit suicide by hanging himself with the belt from his robe or through ritual disembowelment.

And you thought the London Marathon was difficult!

Testing Your Own Endurance Limits

The marathon monks are indeed the greatest athletes of all time, but now there are people from all corners of the globe performing incredible feats of running endurance. Things have certainly changed since the days of the marathon "boom" of the late 1970's when the traditional 26.2 mile marathon was considered by most runners to be the pinnacle of endurance. In the 21st Century, finishing a marathon is a fairly commonplace achievement, albeit a worthy one. Today, tens of thousands of runners regularly complete runs longer than 26.2 miles and of this group there are thousands who can complete "ultra-marathon" races of between 50 - 100 miles.

Is it physically or mentally healthy to push the limits of your endurance?

Like any sporting endeavour, running ultra long distances is an individual thing; it comes more easily to some than others. Women in particular, seem to possess the ability to trot along for hours on end. In addition, advances in nutrition and supplementation, along with high-tech gear and shoes have made ultra runs easier than they used to be. For all of us however, running like this will take its toll on joints, tendons, and connective tissue. Furthermore, the training can be time-consuming and tiring. It's tough to squeeze a 20 mile training run into a busy schedule, as unlike the marathon monks, most of us have full-time jobs, families and children to raise, on top of our athletic goals.

So, should you try to stretch the limits of your own endurance? Well, there are some pretty good reasons why you might want to. As with anything in life, the maxim "nothing ventured, nothing gained" applies. Psychologists believe the only way for each of us to be truly happy and content in life is to know that we are striving towards and accomplishing something each and every day. The human mind needs goals, something to focus on. Our bodies too need to reach, stretch, achieve and excel. We gain energy by using energy. We conquer our limitations by literally conquering or surpassing them. Yet the investment of time you need to make in endurance sports is substantially larger than in say tennis, football or golf – but otherwise there are no other requirements needed to try to double or triple your mileage or run more marathons more frequently than you have before. Sure, someone else has probably already done it, but by reaching beyond what you think you are capable of, you stand to learn a lot about yourself.

How do the Marathon Monks Train?

Interestingly, in order to qualify as a mountain marathon runner, a trainee monk has first to master seated meditation, with major emphasis placed on deep abdominal breathing. Other essential factors are chanting, proper rhythm and intense concentration which enable the monk to cover meters and meters on each breath, keeping pace with the beat of their *mantra*. An experienced monk flows along naturally, maintaining the same speed for climbing up or down the mountain paths and does not allow himself to become distracted by any obstacle, whether external or internal.

In his book about the monks, John Stevens details the end result of their practise:

“In the last 300 days of the marathon, the focus shifts...a balance is struck between practise for one’s own sake and practise for the benefit of all. At the end, the marathon monk has become one with the mountain... The joy of practise has been discovered... The stars and sky, the stones, the plants, and the trees, have become the monks trusted companions; he can predict the week’s weather by the shape of the clouds, the direction of the wind, and the smell of the air...and he takes special delight in that magic moment of the day when the moon sets and the sun rises, poised in the centre of creation”.

What can we learn from the Marathon Monks?

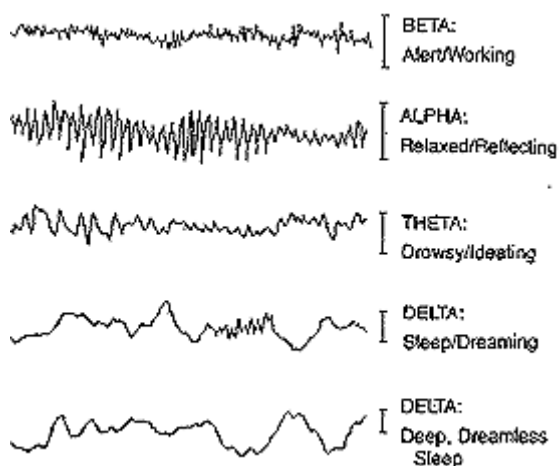
Sports Psychologists are fast coming to the conclusions long known by those following Eastern traditions – that is, that the mind rules the body. In any aspect of training, it is always the mind that quits first and the body that follows – hence, the marathon monks’ training for their 7 year long ultra-endurance feats are almost entirely about training the mind to ignore distractions of any shape or form, from physical pain, mental anguish, loneliness, boredom etc

Here are some things you can do to train your mind to maintain a calm, even and neutral state, which will allow your body to move uninhibited and keep you free from doubt, anxiety and all other mental symptoms.

Meditation Training:

Very simply, meditation is the art of sitting quietly, doing nothing but focusing on your breathing. Breathing is obviously the most important of all your bodily functions - your very life depends on it - but it is probably the most widely neglected of all our daily activities. Breath is the first thing given to us and the last thing taken away, the most precious thing of all, yet we generally ignore it or pay it minimal attention.

The brain undergoes subtle changes during meditation. Research shows that meditation can actually train the mind and reshape the brain. Tests using the most sophisticated imaging techniques suggest that meditation can actually reset the brain, changing the point at which a traffic jam, for instance, sets the blood boiling. What the scientists discovered through these studies is that with enough practise, the neurons in the brain will re-shape themselves, and many parts of the brain responsible for taking in information, actually slow down or go off-line altogether during meditation, enabling the practitioner to have a more positive experience of themselves and detach from negative feelings and situations.



Meditation also results in a pronounced change in brain-wave patterns, shifting from the alpha waves of aroused, conscious thought to the theta waves that dominate the brain during periods of deep relaxation. Contentment and a real sense of inner peace are the natural result.

How to Practise:

1. Hide your car, switch off your mobile phone and tell everyone you've gone to Alaska! In other words, find a quiet time and space where you won't be disturbed by everyday activities.
2. Sit on a chair, with your feet firmly on the floor or sit cross-legged on a cushion on the floor. Make sure your back is straight, your shoulders are relaxed, your chin is tucked under and the crown of your head is lifted up towards the ceiling. Place your left palm inside your right palm (palms facing upwards) and gently press the tips of your thumbs together. Rest your hands in your lap.
3. Once you are comfortable, concentrate on your breathing, specifically, on counting each breath. e.g. Breathe in and breathe out and count one. Breathe in and breathe out and count two. Breathe in and breathe out and count three. The idea is to count each breath from one to ten. If you lose your place by getting distracted with other thoughts, gently bring your mind back to what you're doing and start again from one. When you get to ten, start from one again.
4. If thoughts come up, which they invariably will, just let them pass through your mind like clouds moving across the sky on a windy day.
5. Relax fully. Do not try to take deep breaths, just be mindful of keeping your body posture strong but relaxed, and quietly focus on counting your breath.

What to Expect:

Over time, you will gradually find your breathing becomes deeper and slower. You may also feel heat in the lower abdomen because as you learn to relax, your breathing will naturally deepen and you will find your lower abdomen moving up and down as you breathe in and out, rather than your chest and shoulders.. If at any time during your practise, you feel dizzy or light-headed, simply stop training and rest quietly for a while. Continue the next day. Over time you will find yourself getting physically and mentally stronger and feeling more relaxed.

Introducing Distractions

Once you can meditate peacefully without distractions, try to introduce some background irritations. For instance, you can try meditating while the kids are getting ready for bed or while the radio is on or with a clock ticking away in the background. Also, try meditating while you are physically uncomfortable, for instance sitting on the edge of a chair or kneeling on the floor. This way you are introducing mild annoyances, which you must learn to ignore, while you continue to concentrate on your breathing.

You can then progress to moving while you mediate. Practise your deep breathing while getting ready for your run or event, while putting on your training kit and shoes. Revisit this state in the locker room at the gym, with other people buzzing around. Practise your meditation for a few minutes while on the starting line of your next marathon and of course, focus on breathing long, deep and slowly while on your next run. Each time your mind gets distracted by your watch, tight calf muscles, a stitch in your side and so on, calmly and quietly bring your mind back to your breathing.

Chanting and Mantra's

You don't have to be religiously or spiritually inclined to practise mantra meditation – the constant repetition of a phrase, either quietly to yourself or spoken aloud in a constant refrain. Any phrase that taps into your potential and focuses on what you want to achieve will suffice.

Try keeping part of your focus on your breathing, while calmly reciting over and over again (either aloud or in your mind) any of the following phrases - or make up some of your own:

I am Lean, Strong and Relaxed.

My Running is Fluid, Smooth and Relaxed.

Powerful and Graceful, I Can Run This Way For Hours.

Easy Does It. Stay Relaxed.

Further Reading

The Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei by John Stevens (Rider, 1989)

Slow Burn by Stu Mittleman (HarperCollins, 2001)

Running Within by Jerry Lynch (Human Kinetics, 1999)

Feedback on this report and your experiences with the training suggestions is gratefully appreciated.

Please visit my website www.chipowersports.com for more information.