



Running on Emptiness

Miles A. Yanick

I used to think of running as “meditative.” That was before I meditated, or ran much. What I meant at the time was that it was pleasant to get lost in thought during a run. And it was.

About seven years ago, at the age of 40, I started distance running. Perhaps coincidentally, I found the practice shortly thereafter. Since then, my relationship with each has deepened my understanding of the other.

In the early days of practice/distance running, I remember a long run along Lake Washington one Sunday morning, listening to Rodney’s series about death and dying on my iPod. Feeling my aliveness, thinking about death, excited about the dharma and the prospect of completing my first marathon in the near future. That was one way the two went hand-in-hand: the novelty, the striving, the idea.

The first marathon gave way to a second, a third. I liked the sweet and total exhaustion that I felt afterward. I liked the physical and mental challenge. And I liked too the thought of it: that I could do this thing that had once seemed so daunting. Before long, I was enamored of the idea of going farther. That led to the first ultramarathon (anything beyond a marathon—often 50 kilometers, 50 miles, or 100 miles—and usually on mountain trails). After running a few 50K races, the idea took hold that I should try 50 miles, which I eventually did.

It’s easy to look at the progression as akin to addiction (if a little is good, more must be better) or attachment. But there is a wholesome joy to the sport too. For me, running a long way is all about focus on the present moment, no matter how uncomfortable or how far off the finish. To stay in the body and breathe, letting go of all thoughts of how far I have gone or have to go, or when I will get there, or how it will be to stop. (Discarding the watch helped a lot.) To repeatedly scan the body, hold the form (upright, straight back, relaxed, arms swinging, picking up the feet), and stay ever mindful of this step, this step, this step.

Not to say I’ve ever sustained such attention perfectly for even a mile, just as I’ve never sat for 45 minutes without following a thought, but it’s good practice. There’s enough to concentrate on that I can no longer afford the distraction of music (or even Rodney on death and dying). I haven’t worn an iPod during a run in many years. And even on a run that takes (literally) all day, I am never bored.

More than anything else, it is the idea of a long run that makes it hard—and long. Before my first 50-mile race, I was downright scared. Even though I had run races of 30-35 miles, I had never done this. It was a hilly course, a hot day. If my pace fell to where it would take 14 hours, I would be pulled from the course. How would I do it? And like everything, the answer was: you just do, one step at a time; there’s no thinking your way through it.

Just as there is no thinking one’s self to the end, running reminds me not to eternalize the present moment: it is always too early to call how a race is going to be. I remember a 10-mile climb that started at

mile 27 of a 50-mile, 8,500-foot (elevation gain) course. It was a hot day, and much of the trail was exposed due to clear-cutting. I was nauseous, weak, and could not swallow any food. As I walked, shuffling some where the trail “flattened” out, my thoughts urged, “Just lie down. Here. Now. Get up when you feel better, or maybe not at all—you don’t have to finish.” I neither acted on nor argued with these thoughts but focused on just moving. It was a long three hours to the top. But the climb did end. I was able to eat something and felt better as I ran down the next six miles. By the final seven-mile leg, which rolled along a river in the cool shade, I felt as good as I had all day, and I finished feeling like I could have kept going.

Like this climb, each run, no matter how long, is “over before you know it.” In one moment, you are running—now stepping over this rock, now climbing this hill, now careful not to slip on the loose dirt going down—and then the moment rolls around when it is now over. Where did it go? I am stiff, exhausted to the core; I have a general recollection of having run all day through the mountains; I recall some specific moments, have already forgotten most; and now here I am, at the finish, not running. I often remind myself of this during a long run: when it’s over, it will be over, and you will not be able to get this moment back; don’t waste it; be present for this step, without resistance, even with its pain.

In this way, running has taught me to meditate; and by the same token, I don’t know if I could have extended or experienced running the way I have without the benefit of a meditation practice. But more than that, running has given me practice in being present in difficult moments, able to say, “Yes, this is hard; I am hurting; and I am taking the next step anyway—in it, and not anywhere else. Don’t miss it.”

More recently, running has taught me attachment. Attachment not only to the physical pleasure (and there is plenty of delirious, endorphin-infused pleasure in a long run—the longer, the better) but also to the idea of running that I realize was urging me on in the beginning, to the image of myself as one who could run far. I found myself signing up for races because that’s what I do; the alternative was to not be a distance runner, to lose this “power” and distinction of “me.” As long as I could do this thing, I was powerful, healthy (and would not die?). And although I was outwardly modest about my achievement, telling people I wasn’t fast (true), that anyone could do it if they worked up to it, still I liked the reaction I got when I told people what I did.

Once signed up, of course I had to train, so I was ready for the race. But I was not enjoying the runs themselves as much, carrying more and more thoughts of “Why, exactly, am I doing this?” I was being driven by attachment to ideas—should for should’s sake, the idea of a kind of self.

So this summer I quit—for a while, anyway; maybe for good. I quit near the end of my last race. It was my first DNF (Did Not Finish). I didn’t train or show up for the other races I had registered for this summer. I quit logging my runs, or planning them. Now I just run with no goal and no reason, sometimes fast, sometime slow, sometimes long, sometimes short, trying to reconnect with the purity of it, the relaxed intensity of heart-driven practice. Running has ultimately given me an opportunity to practice letting go of attachment to running itself.

With gratitude for what my body can still do, gratitude for the dharma in running, and gratitude for what running has taught and continues to teach me about the dharma.

