

# THE ZEN of the trail

In the quiet alone-time of running long distances, the mind sometimes performs like a child. Josh Gale discovers the secret is to become the running

**W**hile running in the Tarawera Ultramarathon, Heather Andrews stopped to make an important phone call. The 40-year-old Tauranga resident passed the halfway point of the 85km course and was running well, but was distracted by an issue she could no longer quietly accept.

Taking out her mobile, she scrolled to event organiser Paul Charteris's name and pressed voice call. She was going straight to the top to have this problem taken care of once and for all.

But deep in the Tararuas, there was no cell phone coverage and the connection failed. The cause of Andrew's frustration? The aid stations had run out of Coca Cola, something she had become fixated on.

"I kept thinking maybe the next aid station would have Coke so I just kept going," she says. "But several aid stations later and after continually asking for Coke, I was getting grumpier and grumpier.

"On a long run these little things in the moment do affect your enjoyment. The head starts saying this isn't fun anymore and you just want it to be over."

This is absurd when thinking about it in the comfort of your armchair, but Andrews was on a long distance run where, as she says, small problems can easily become big ones.

A little niggle in the leg, for example, can become all consuming. A temporary phase of fatigue gives rise to doubt and despair, escalating to thoughts about quitting.

The powerful mind seizes on discomfort and wraps our mental attention up in negative thoughts about it.

And it's not just weekend warriors who battle these mental demons.

Top New Zealand ultra runner Vajin Armstrong has won the 60km Asics Kepler Challenge three times in a row, but still struggles with the mental side of ultra running.

On the 2011 Kepler, Armstrong found himself in a state of fear. Every few minutes he would look back to see how far behind other runners were and whether they were catching up.

"Halfway up the climb I wasn't enjoying it because there was this element of stress," Armstrong says. "I had to consciously refocus on what I could control which was running to the best of my ability.

"Doing that took me from that place of worrying back to the present moment."

Armstrong is a long time student of the late meditation teacher Sri Chinmoy so has benefitted from years of meditation training and practice.

Like meditation, running for Armstrong is a "transcendent activity" – something that helps him move beyond his mental and physical limitations. But he says all long distance runners, including him, encounter times on the trail when the mind runs amok.



Even top trail runners like Vajin Armstrong struggle with the mental side of ultra running

"When you're out there for a long time your mind can be your best friend or sometimes it can become your worst enemy," he says. "Doubts, fear and all those negative emotions can come to the fore.

"They're often the thing that causes us to really suffer and to slow down.

"In those situations, I use my meditation practice to get into a place of stillness, mindfulness and the present moment."

If this sounds like something better suited to a Buddhist temple than on the trail, you might be surprised to learn contemporary sports psychology is taking some of its ideas from eastern religions.

Sports psychologist Rod Corban, for example, uses a mindfulness approach based on Zen Buddhism to prepare the athletes he works with at High Performance Sport New Zealand. Drawing on principles from Zen, he teaches them to overcome mental and physical discomfort by simply accepting it.

He believes physical sensations such as fatigue and pain are "primarily a psychological experience", amplified by mental judgements and labels we place on them.

These cognitive interpretations, he says, alter our perception, often blowing physical sensations out of proportion.

Corban points to experiments where people were asked to submerge their hands in icy water for as long as they could. Those participants asked to visualise themselves wearing a warm glove could hold their hands in the ice for longer than those who weren't.

"Pain, or more precisely our experience of pain and discomfort, is psychological in nature," says Corban. "If we learn to reduce the psychological judgements we label physical sensations with, we may be able to better perform when our bodies are under physiological stress."

Auckland-based Zen teacher Amala Wrightson agrees, but only up to a point.

"Zen teaches that pain is just pain, and not in itself a problem," says Wrightson. "It's what we add to the pain which is so problematic – resistance to it, stories about it, tension around it. So a key skill is learning not to get caught up in our thoughts about the pain.

"But we have to be a bit cautious here and bring in another teaching because there are cases of runners pushing themselves too hard and collapsing, even dying.

"It's important to find a middle way between the two extremes of ignoring pain and indulging it."

The secret, according to Wrightson, is learning to release thoughts as they arise.

She says the 'peak zone' athletes aim to be in is another name for the Zen principle of self-forgetfulness, when there is no longer any separation between the doer and the deed. The doer becomes the deed.

When running, for example, there is only running.

Daily activities like doing the dishes, chopping vegetables or brushing teeth are a good way of practicing getting into the self-forgetfulness zone.

"I heard recently that the human brain usually burns 20 per cent of the body's oxygen," Wrightson says. "Perhaps some of that could be going to your legs if you can relax your mind and let go of your thoughts."

National Academy of Distance Running coach and director Greg Lautenslager likes to take his athletes on trail runs because the varied surface teaches them to focus. He also wants to teach them Zen meditation.

The four times Nelson sports coach of the year, with a hand in 185 New Zealand national medals, including 68 gold, comes from Texas and was a promising cross country runner. In his sophomore year at Texas Tech University he was having a disappointing running season. His mind wandered during races rather than focusing on the task at hand and as a result he was getting poor results.

But that changed when he learned the Zen of running.

That summer he visited a Catholic priest who taught Zen techniques. Father George Curtsinger had Lautenslager sit on a chair, close his eyes and breathe while he taught him about mindfulness.

He said the miracle of life was to walk on the Earth.

"On my 10-mile run the next day, I felt like I was floating on Earth," says Lautenslager. "I was not doing the run just to finish; I was doing the run to do the run."

Lautenslager continued his meditation practice the following season and the results spoke for themselves. The previous year he finished 28th in his region's cross country champs and the following year he came 8th, and 48th in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's cross country championships.

"In races I would listen to my breathing and focus on my stride and how each foot touched the ground," he says. "I stopped looking at the finish line and only felt what I was feeling at that moment.


"Father Curtsinger's teaching of Zen was the turning point of my career and I never would have achieved what I did in running without him.

"I have not taught Zen to my own athletes, but I plan to start, especially to those who have trouble focusing."

Since her craving for Coke, Heather Anderson has also learned mind techniques to stay in the zone. Acceptance, mindfulness, breathing and gratitude have all helped her running.

She's been working with sports psychologist David Galbraith who has taught her how to slow her mind down on long runs. She's also learned to repeat keywords to switch her brain off so it's easier to focus on putting one foot in front of another. As a result, Andrews is now more focused on her runs.

But as her trainer and New Zealand ultra-marathon champion Vivienne Cheng points out, all the techniques in the world won't ever make long distance running easy.

"That's why we do ultras," Cheng says. "It's the sense of achievement you get from knowing you overcame hard times and came out the other end" 



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