

ZEN IN MOTION: RUNNING WITH PURPOSE, PLEASURE, AND PASSION

by Frank D. Young PhD., R.Psych.

It is written in a book that you cannot learn Zen from a book. You probably can't learn Zen even from an article in Impact magazine. But you can develop an understanding and appreciation of Zen while running.

Zen is pure process. The blending of subject and object in a seamless form, a smooth and powerful force. The activity is harmonious in all its parts, and fully achieves its proposed end, and often that end is merely the development of a sense of self or unity transcending ego. While I am running, it is as if life is breathing me, rather than me breathing life, or I am the breath that enlivens me. But let's not get too lost in vague philosophy.

The practical fact is that you will run better when you adopt certain mental postures or attitudes about your relationship to running.

Running can be transformed into a Zen or Flow experience by building into it the 8 major components of enjoyment. Dr. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (he even has zen in his name), formerly at the University of Chicago, dedicated his life to the study of Flow, or the process of optimal experience. By interviewing athletes, artists, musicians, and creative and passionate people from all walks of life, he discovered and assembled common elements of the Flow experience. From his research evolved these steps toward enhancing the quality of life:

- * We confront tasks we have a chance of completing.
- * We must be able to concentrate on what we are doing.
- * The task undertaken has clear goals.
- * The task has a built-in design to provide immediate feedback.

- * We act with a deep but seemingly effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life.
- * Enjoyable experiences allow people to exercise a sense of control over their actions and emotions.
- * Concern for the self disappears, yet paradoxically the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over.
- * The sense of the duration of time is altered: hours pass by in minutes, and minutes can stretch out to seem like hours.

The combination of all these elements causes a sense of deep enjoyment that goes beyond the elation of the endorphin rush or physiological "runner's high" that is so thrilling. It is a sense of inner peace and harmony when the meaning of life seems to be integrated around the total absorption of consciousness in the process of running.

Your mission. In order to integrate these elements of enjoyment into your running program, let's begin with the end in mind. As you complete the running event for which you are training, what is it that you want to be, to become, to develop, to appreciate? What capacities of you as a person will become deeper, wider, and more inclusive? How will others be incorporated into this personal development? Who is the team of family, friends, teammates, and opponents or foils that will help you sharpen your skills and expand your abilities to this level? Develop an overall goal state in pictures, words, and feelings that generate the emotions of joy and passion. Post a collage or mural representing this passion in your special area of your home.

Balance. Find a time and place to train that will integrate within your personal ecology. A balance between running and your other commitments, relationships, and life goals is essential, or else you will likely run into a crisis of meaning or dissolution during the most crucial phases of training. Even more probable is the likelihood that, if you dedicate almost all of your free time to training before a competition, you will invite a considerable let-down post-competition. With that caution in mind, it is still understandable that in the intensity phase of training about two months before a race, time and energy can get temporarily compromised for the sake of sport. Provided that this is a relatively short phase, it can be okay for the runner and their support system. Still, in the long run a running program that does not have this balance is flawed from the outset, and one may wonder what you are so desperately running from, rather than what is it that is leading you forward in life? Balance is also essential in maintaining the loyalty and consistency of your support team.

Reframe the process. Transform how you talk to yourself as you train. For example, I often recommend that you call your event a run (that is, a process) rather than a race (that is, an outcome orientation).

Containment. Make sure that your training environment is contained. That is, do not allow other demands from your external life (schedules, duties, budgets, business, etc.) to infringe on your **focus during training**. An excellent counterexample, the epitome of non-Zen running, is someone running while talking on his cell phone, especially if he is using his call-waiting feature.

He is likely unaware that research on depression has revealed that one of the most potent aspects to running as a form of therapy is that it removes the runner from the stressors of his/her external life for at least a half hour per session. This meditative break is almost as therapeutic as the run itself.

Set clear and realistic goals in terms of learning and performance enhancement. Use yourself as the baseline, rather than ordinal placement or standings relative to the other players in the field. Remember: you could run a personal best on a day in which they all ran their personal bests as well. You could finish last, and still have the best running day of your life!

For each goal, try to devise at least 3 ways of measuring progress in that dimension. This is to provide feedback of progress even in some plateaus where development is slow as you consolidate recent gains in skill or performance. Use colors on charts and bar graphs. **Colors engage emotion**, and you want to feel positive emotion and passion about your running.

Use imagery training every day. Daily mental imagery activates your positive habits and inspiration by keeping the goal state in mind. Make sure that you fantasize about the **enjoyment** you will experience when you have arrived at your goal and as you make progress towards it. Enjoyment is the key to emotion, and **emotion is the fuel** that will keep you on the path.

Use imagery to plan your run for that day. And while you are running, **use imagery to refocus and overcome fatigue** or momentary exhaustion. For example, sometimes it is hard to maintain speed when you do not have an opponent or rival in sight. In these situations, e.g., climbing a long hill alone, you imagine that there is another runner ahead of you wearing a bright orange T-shirt. As you get closer to the steep part of the hill, you imagine gaining on him. Finally, as you both come over the crest of the hill, you finally pull ahead of him. You will overtake someone else in a different T-shirt on the next hill.

Imagery and mental challenges are your partners and silent companions as **you make a long run into several shorter segments**.

Every marker is a signal to quietly celebrate the progress you made on the segment before. Use your senses to become curious about sights sounds, colors, shadows, and forms you encounter along the way. Tune inward to listen to your internal music, and feel the cadence and rhythms of your breathing and pacing. Tune in altogether as you take comfort in a deeply meditative trance, almost oblivious to the outside world. Then return relaxed and refreshed to the next segment of the run.

Simulations. Sometimes, if you are not deeply experienced with the setting in which you will be competing on the day of your event, it is possible to get quite distracted by crowds, confusion, media interviewers and cameras. You may need to build into your training simulations of crowds, noise, heat, humidity, and other competition distractions, so that you can focus through and beyond them. Simulations of delays due to weather or equipment failure are also worthwhile, so that if they happen in real life, you will be able to maintain your focus while others wilt under the strain. Simulations need to happen frequently and as vividly as possible for reliable results.

Enlist the group support of family and friends. Even the strongest individual needs regular social support to sustain a vigorous running program. It is especially helpful to include in your support group at least one **role model** of someone who has successfully made the run for which you are now training. Even if it is your project, friends can keep you on track by giving you technical (how to do it) and emotional (cheering you on) support. Also, friends also serve as a public witness to your progress, so celebrate goal attainment frequently with them to maintain your momentum.

Your support net is especially helpful in motivational slumps or valleys that can occasionally develop while training. These are times of strain, self-sabotage, or external stress that tax your personal resources to stay on your training program. At those times you will need a way to

regroup and return with renewed commitment. The time to plan for this is now, before you begin the journey. A contingency plan might include the answers to these questions:

1. How is a setback most likely to occur, and how can you prevent it?
2. Who are you going to call? What are you going to do? If you are strained or injured, what money or time will you need to set aside to refresh yourself? How will you reward yourself for maintaining whatever parts of the program are still within your ability?
3. How can you relate the break to a renewal of commitment to your program? There may need to be contact with your positive role model.

To summarize, as you run with Zen in motion, consider that being is the process of becoming; the journey, not the destination. This is the code of enjoyment, or Flow. These are some principles designed to enhance purpose, pleasure, and passion for living in the practice of Zen through running.