

GARY DUDNEY

# THE TAO OF RUNNING



YOUR JOURNEY TO MINDFUL AND  
PASSIONATE RUNNING

*The Tao of Running*

For Cassie, Barney, Hobbs, Jubilee, Bonkers, Sebastian, Hermes, and  
Patches:  
They showed me the Way.

And many thanks to those who have shared the many miles of trails  
with me: David Nakashima, Jeff Harber, Richard Schwarz, Karen  
Cruz, Kathleen Bortolussi, Robert Josephs, and especially my excellent  
friend, Rob Mann

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A decorative border with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns, rendered in a light gray color, frames the central text area on the left and right sides.

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Meyer & Meyer Sport

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*The author temporarily overwhelmed with the joy of running while crossing the famous No Hands Bridge at the Western States 100 Mile Endurance Run.*





# PROLOGUE

## JUMPING OFF

*“A good traveler has no fixed plans and is not intent on arriving.”*

*From Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching*

Imagine for a moment that you take a chair from your dining room and position it in the center of your living room. Now take off your shoes and step up on the chair. Watch your balance. Now jump off the chair onto the carpet, or, if you're landing on a hardwood floor, bend your knees a little more to cushion the blow.

That wasn't such a big deal, was it? It didn't require you to think about it much. You didn't get emotionally invested in it. It wasn't much of a commitment. It didn't involve summoning much passion on your part. It certainly didn't change your life, although if anybody was watching, they might have been looking at you a little funny.

Now imagine a second jump except this time you're going to jump from a platform on a bridge that spans a deep river gorge. It's going to be a bungee jump. You stand there waiting in a fever pitch. You feel the wind on your face. You feel your heart beating in your chest. Light pours down from a glaring sun. The gorge under you is monstrous. All your senses are ultra sharp. You can pick out streaks of white water on the surface of the blue river rushing far below as if you were inspecting it through a telescope. The cars that roar by on the bridge behind you sound like raging locomotives. You smell the exhaust from their engines.

Now you feel the harness being tightened around you, the carabineers snapping into place. The whole world narrows down to a single focal point: your intense and monolithic commitment to jump. It is like nothing else has ever happened in your life, and nothing else ever will. Everything is all right now. You summon all your passion, hear the final countdown, feel vast emotions wash over you, and then you step off the platform completely and utterly in the moment. You exit the life you had before the bungee jump and enter your new life, the one after the bungee jump.

Now here is the point. The running experiences you are having right now are like jumping off the chair in your living room. The running experiences you are going to have after you read this book will be like the bungee jump. You are going to learn how to *think* about running and how to appreciate all of the rich possibilities inherent in running.

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And it doesn't matter what kind of runner you are—a casual jogger, a solid 10K performer, a trail runner, a mud runner, a multi-time marathon finisher, a Spartan runner, an ultrarunner—everyone's running experience will be transformed and enhanced. You'll learn to bring passion, emotion, and total commitment to your running. You'll learn to be fully present in the moment, to live fully in the world, to run with the Tao.

Running is more than the sum of its parts. The physical side of it is pretty straightforward, but the psychological, the emotional, the philosophical dimensions of running are not as obvious. This book will deepen your understanding of those aspects of running, show you how running connects with the broader passions and aspirations in your life, and teach you how running can help you cope with life's challenges. You'll be motivated to run, eager to run, and ready to use running to transform your life.

In these pages, you'll explore how running connects with mindfulness, positivity, relaxation, the philosophy of existentialism, the concept of the Tao, the naturalistic elements of Buddhism, and other areas of life such as friendships. Each new perspective will open your eyes to the rich possibilities for self-growth and self-awareness that can be found in running. You'll learn new ways to think about goals and what is really important in the process of setting and achieving goals. You'll learn how to cope with the special demands of racing. You'll see how the friendships you make while running are unique. You'll discover the special benefits of trail running and learn how to become a "trail monster." You'll see how running works for many as a veritable fountain of health and youth.

If running has gotten boring for you or just feels like more work, this book will help you step back and see running in a whole new light. If

you've ever flagged during a workout, lost your will, broken down in a marathon, or even dropped out of a race, this book will give you so many ways to stick with the program when the going gets tough that your problem will be deciding which one to use.

So never mind the dining room chair. Get yourself out of the living room and out the door. Get into the sunlight, feel the wind on your face, summon your passion. Then don't just step off that platform, leap off of it into the clear air.

## WHY THE *TAO* OF RUNNING?

There is a traditional subject matter in Chinese painting of the three vinegar tasters. One interpretation of this subject matter holds that the three tasters represent the three great Chinese religions: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. The Confucian taster reacts to the vinegar with a sour expression, supposedly signifying how his philosophy finds life sour since the present is thought to be out of step with the past. The Buddhist reacts with a bitter expression because life, according to his philosophy, is bitter in that it is full of pain and suffering. But the Taoist tastes the vinegar and takes on a sweet expression. Sweet?

For the Taoist, the taste of the vinegar is not the issue. The Taoist recognizes that the vinegar is simply being vinegar; it is being true to its nature in the natural order of things, which for a Taoist is intrinsically good. By experiencing the vinegar as it is, non-judgmentally, the Taoist himself is recognizing and participating in the flowing and harmonious universe that Taoism posits.

A key goal of Taoism is to fit into this harmonious flow in our approach to all things and in all our actions. A Taoist has a particular way of

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appreciating and learning from and working with whatever happens in life. Any situation one finds oneself in, like tasting the vinegar, might be unpleasant or it might involve conflict or some disconcerting change, but the Taoist brings an attitude of acceptance to life and recognizes that whatever the situation, this is life just being life and things change and evolve.

Now, instead of three vinegar tasters, let's think of two runners. They take the same path through a park and run the same distance, but how they experience the run, their perception of the run, and their attitudes toward the run may vary widely. One runner, like the Confucian taster or the Buddhist taster, may find the run stressful or uncomfortable—that is, sour or bitter—and finish the run with no appreciation for it. The other runner may take a Taoist approach, accept the run as it is, see it clearly, learn from it, perhaps discover a new essence in it previously unknown or unappreciated, and sink down into the experience of the run. In this book, we will take the Taoist approach. We will explore ways to see running clearly, to discover the essence of running, and to sink down into the experience of running. We will search for the Tao of running.



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*Why are we so eager to run? Why do we enjoy running so much?*



# CHAPTER 1

## WHAT IS IT ABOUT RUNNING?

What is it about running, anyway? We go out for a little jog, a little exercise, and the habit grows. Each day we go a little farther. Our sights lengthen. One mile begins to feel paltry, and we extend ourselves. Before long, we are training, preparing for a race. The training gets more focused. The number of minutes it takes to run each mile shrinks as our speed and power grow. The habit has caught on. We circle a track, chasing seconds now, cleaving the quarter-mile time or the half-mile time as precisely as a diamond.

## WHAT IS IT ABOUT RUNNING?

We pile up the intervals and the training sessions and then find ourselves in a 5K or a 10K, straining to hold our pace. The middle miles of the 10K become a test of character, the final mile a test of will, grit, and courage. Our sights lengthen again, and we take on longer distances. Each week we pile up the miles; each weekend we extend our long runs. Eventually we line up in the big cities with thousands of others, with the goal far away—26 miles away. A gun goes off, and we launch into a rite of passage, a bucket list quest, a journey that will take us far along the road and deep within ourselves.

The agony near the marathon's end is like fire, burning fiercely but cleansing. At the final moment, we burst out of the flames, cross the finish line, and are reborn into our lives, returned from a deep inner journey. But having returned, we are not the same.

Really, we had only thought to go for a little jog, but one thing led to another, one run led to another, and now running has insinuated itself into our very being, and we are runners, as, it seems upon reflection, we were meant to be.

## THE RUNNING BOOM

In the United States, mass participation in running exploded onto the scene in the early 70s, inspired by American Frank Shorter's victory in the marathon at the 1972 Munich Olympics. And what remarkable Olympic Games those were! It was Germany's first stint as host of the Summer Games since the infamous Games in Berlin of 1936. By 1972, television coverage had improved and expanded, so people could indulge their passion for the Games. People in the United States had always loved the Olympic ideals of peaceful competition, pursuit of excellence, and supreme victory of the individual athlete over competitors from around the world. And here were the Games right in our living rooms.



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But in the second week of the Games, Palestinian terrorists upended everything using the enormous stage of the Olympics to proclaim their grievances and murder Israeli athletes. A photo of one of the masked terrorists on the balcony in the Olympic Village fixed the horror in everyone's minds for all time. Then came the courageous decision by the Olympic Committee, the German officials, the Israeli government, and the athletes to continue the competitions, and thus the stage for running the marathon was set.

Americans were watching by way of a live satellite feed from Munich as the runners circled the track in the stadium, which really looked at first like a common track and field ho-hum affair, but then suddenly all the runners followed a line of barricades off the track into a large tunnel that whisked them right out of the stadium and onto the streets of Munich. We were used to seeing Olympic competitions staged inside stadiums or in field houses, in giant swimming halls or in gymnasiums. It was stunning to see the marathon runners out on the streets and sidewalks, people walking, cars driving by, life going on as if a major Olympic event weren't happening right under their noses.

Shorter hung back from the leaders in the first stages of the race in about tenth place. Nobody expected anything special of him that day, but at mile nine, he made a bold move, a breakaway right off the front, opening up a significant lead. When no one came to chase him down, he remembers saying to himself, "They're making a big mistake."

Shorter never faltered. In a white racing singlet, blue shorts, wearing number 1014 just below the "USA" emblazoned on his singlet, the mustachioed Shorter ran solo the rest of the way. The runners behind him were tying up, bending sideways trying to relieve awful cramps, collapsing to the ground, but Shorter ran along unfazed. He maintained a strong, upright, almost relaxed-looking stride. His face was impassive.

## WHAT IS IT ABOUT RUNNING?

At home, Americans could hardly believe what they were seeing. This was the marathon, the province of only true fanatics and Olympic gods, a distance really quite unimaginable for most of the viewers, who would have considered five miles an extremely long run. Here was an American winning, looking relaxed, and making mincemeat out of the competition. How incomparably, unutterably cool was that?

At the end of the race, some joker in a track outfit snuck through the barriers and cruised around the track in the stadium just as Shorter arrived. The crowd was jeering, realizing the hoax, which made Shorter wonder what was going on. Jim McKay and the other American announcers were beside themselves. McKay claimed Shorter was confused. “He doesn’t know what to do,” he said. The other announcer, Erich Segal, spoke as if directly to Shorter, “Frank, you won it...Frank, it’s a fake, Frank.” But Shorter said later he never even saw the other runner. He was not confused about winning, just about why the crowd seemed to be jeering instead of cheering.

Meanwhile, back home in the United States, people were fired up. The seeds of the running boom had been flung far and wide across the land. Running was suddenly a very “in” thing to do at a time when being “in” was really very “in.”

People took to the streets in droves. You didn’t need a track team. You didn’t need smelly liniment oil. You didn’t have to do laps on a track. You could just go outside and run on the roads. The fusty old running federations and local committees that held running competitions and focused mainly on the most competitive runners gave way to organizations that were more inclusive. Running clubs formed. Races sprang up everywhere. Women were allowed into the Boston Marathon. Shoe and apparel companies got on board. Frank Shorter became one hero among many, including Bill Rodgers, Alberto Salazar, Steve Prefontaine, Jim Ryun, Mary Decker, and Grete Waitz. In 1984, in Los

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Angeles, Joan Benoit matched Shorter's feat with a going-away win at the first ever Olympic Marathon held for women.

The incredible interest and thirst for information about running became apparent in 1977 with the publication of Jim Fixx's, *The Complete Book of Running*. At the time, it was the leading best-selling non-fiction hardcover book on the market. The jacket cover of the book, a striking deep-red, featured a close-up of Fixx's own legs with every muscle, tendon, and sinew sharply defined. The legs sprouted out of red running shorts and were punctuated with classic red and white-striped Onitsuka Tiger racing flats.

Fixx jumped into his topic on page 1. He was not out to help you drop a few pounds or introduce you to a neat fitness technique. No, Jim Fixx was going to change your life, and dramatically, if you would only run on a regular basis. Fixx proselytized for running. He saw running as a magic elixir, a fountain of youth, a key to physical and mental health. This message was pretty much news to people back in 1977. Of course, running had always been considered good exercise. It was something US Marines supposedly did for five miles every day. But people didn't imagine it was going to change their lives. What exactly was Fixx smoking?

From today, looking back some forty years to when running became widespread, we can see that Fixx wasn't smoking anything. On the contrary, he was on to something. Running has persisted. The running boom had legs!

Running or jogging became the go-to exercise routine for millions, and the increase in the number of structured running events has reflected the growing demand. In addition to the proliferation of shorter distance races, we've seen the establishment of a vast circuit of marathons,

## WHAT IS IT ABOUT RUNNING?

most of them big city affairs that draw participation in the tens of thousands and constitute a whole lifestyle subculture for many. Clubs form just to facilitate their membership, entering marquee marathons all over the world. In addition to the popularity of the marathon, you have millions stepping off road to sample trail running with the result that trail races have become commonplace, and there is no shortage of runners who are stepping up to the more extreme distances of ultrarunning. Even one hundred-mile races are getting so many entrants that lotteries must be held to determine the starting field. In short, not only has the running boom not faded with time, but it has grown and spawned new formats to meet an insatiable demand for the sport.

Generally speaking, other sports can't make similar claims about their lasting popularity. At the same 1972 Summer Games where Shorter prevailed in the marathon, American swimmer Mark Spitz totally dominated in the pool, winning seven gold medals over an impressive mix of events. But where was a lasting wide spread swimming boom? Greg Limond won cycling's Tour de France three times, an unparalleled feat for an American, but though interest in road cycling went up, there was no lasting cycling boom. Nadia Comaneci and her perfect ten at the Olympic Games in Montreal in 1976 inspired enormous interest and participation in gymnastics, but the movement only went so far. The same can be said of soccer in America, mountain biking, skiing, hiking, golf, and surfing. Interest in these activities grows and wanes. Lots of people enjoy these sports and get a lot out of them, but all pale in comparison to what has happened with running.

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So what is it about running anyway? Why does running appeal to so many people? Why does running invoke so much passion and commitment? Why has completing a marathon, for example, become such a singular goal, a bucket list goal, for so many?

## RUNNING IS IN OUR GENES

In evolutionary terms, running, in many important respects, is who we are. Our bodies exhibit many adaptations that not only allow us to function as bipedal, upright walkers, but also appear specifically suited for long-distance running. We have tendons, ligaments, and muscles that act like elastic springs, briefly storing and releasing energy, propelling us forward efficiently when we run. Our muscles are loaded with fatigue-resistant, slow-twitch muscle fibers. Increased joint surfaces spread out the shock and force applied to joints when impacting the ground. The plantar arches and the prominent Achilles tendons are specialized features that enhance running ability. Our large gluteus maximus muscles promote stability. All these adaptations are far beyond the requirements of just being able to walk upright. They combine with several other adaptations to make us long-distance champion runners in the animal kingdom.

Our *Australopithecus* precursors mostly lacked these specific features. At some point on the way to *Homo erectus*, running apparently became a critical survival factor, and, according to the endurance running hypothesis, the human body evolved rapidly to maximize its ability to outlast other animals when on the move. A critical component of this development was an increased capacity to dissipate heat and to store and utilize energy. Put us out in the heat, and sweating keeps us cool for long periods. The animals we're chasing, on the other hand, can only stay cool for a while by panting. Eventually they overheat. We also

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have an advantage in how our energy stores are utilized and the way we can vary our diet to meet prolonged energy demands. Put all these advantages together, and, the theory goes, we are uniquely evolved to run down our prey, especially in hot conditions.

No wonder, then, that when we run we experience a profound connection to our physical selves. Maybe at first what we perceive most are our joints creaking, our muscles tightening and aching, our respiration laboring, and our cooling system failing to do the job, but as we gain fitness and all these components of running adjust and improve, we begin to feel like the running animal that we became as the result of eons of natural selection. We run and we engage our bodies in just the way that our bodies were designed to be engaged. The movement of running is harmonious with the body we are moving, and the body that is being moved, well, that is you. And as the body is engaged, so, too, is the mind. The mind exists in association with the body, with the physical, so there is no surprise that your mind responds to this natural motion, this momentous coming together of you with your body's most fundamental essence.

## THE RUNNING ESCAPE

For most of us, running represents a sharp contrast from what we are doing with the rest of our day. At work, we are tied to a desk, sitting, bombarded with emails, phone calls, demanding bosses, and stress. Or we are performing a repetitive, annoying task on a workshop floor, or we are wheedling information out of a customer, looking for an opening to make another sale. At home, we are overburdened with chores, family problems, money concerns, and the constant lure of mostly trashy entertainment. The chance to escape, at least for a little while, from our cares and concerns, to leave it all behind, and to go out for a

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run is a golden opportunity to connect back with ourselves and forget temporarily about life's tribulations.

We hit the locker room, or the bedroom, or wherever the liberating changing of the clothes will occur. The shirt and tie or the silk blouse comes off and on goes a slinky, breathable, technical t-shirt. Off comes the pleated skirt or the neatly creased slacks to be replaced by loose, lightweight running shorts. The legs are blessedly free now—free to stretch, free to move. On our feet, we trade leather for a pair of magical, modern, highly designed, protective running shoes, or fun little slippers if we have gone down the minimalist path. We apply the sunblock, don the hat, and are out the door.

The first few strides on the pavement or in the dirt feel like a release from bondage, a launch into space. We almost gasp at the transition from sedentary, constrained, physical inaction to the pure natural motion of running. Our minds lighten, and our spirits soar. Just the motion alone is cathartic and transformative.

Who can blame us if, in those first few steps out the door, we feel like we're flying?

## THE RUNNING BODY

Once we're running, many things begin to happen. Just in terms of exercising, running is the bomb, especially when it comes to cardiorespiratory or cardiovascular fitness. Running promotes lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol, greater bone mass and stronger muscles, and revs up your metabolism. As a calorie burner, running is a blast furnace, topping most other forms of exercise, and the burn continues after you stop. Regular exercise contributes to what is called

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*excess post-exercise oxygen consumption*, that is, while you're sitting around after exercising watching TV, your body is still gobbling calories at an accelerated rate.

Running fights age-related bone loss. The old shibboleth that running is bad for your knees is not borne out by studies, which instead show that runners don't develop osteoarthritis any faster than non-runners, and runners, in fact, often show improved knee health. All the many health benefits derived from running, not surprisingly, contribute to longevity. And while you're living longer, you're staying mentally sharper as the regular exercise running provides has been shown to reduce age-related mental decline. Regular exercise has even been shown to lower the risk of contracting cancer. So what's not to like about running? You slim down, you live longer, you're healthier, and you can still do the tough crossword puzzles in the Sunday paper. Running also gives you a nice espresso shot of self-esteem.

## THE RUNNING MIND

The physical benefits of running alone are worth the price of admission, but they are only part of the story. We run, and the mind is set free, or, more precisely, the mind begins to operate in the context of the body in full physical realization of its genetically engineered potential. The rhythm of the stride, the metronome of the swinging arms, the exertion, the working of all the key running muscles, and especially the concentrated, regular, deep breathing create conditions much like one experiences when one meditates. The mind moves away from the mundane concerns of everyday life and is free to engage in more creative or more fundamental thinking.



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If nothing else, running is a break from the work world or the world of daily nagging concerns. Running time can be a worry-free zone. Once you're out the door, on the streets, or on the trail, there is no obligation to think about problems. You're fixing a problem. You're getting your exercise and making yourself healthier and stronger so that you can go back and face up to your concerns. But, paradoxically, running can promote a state of mind in which, if you do focus on a work problem or a relationship issue, you often discover creative solutions or at least new possibilities that would never have occurred to you sitting at your desk or folding laundry. When your mind is free to roam, it often finds its way to new places.

Running draws your mind away from its usual concerns and into the physical world, both because you are performing a physical exercise and because you are now surrounded by and immersed in the physical world—the sights, sounds, smells, and feel of the outdoors. Suddenly life is very immediate, very sensual, and very real. For the time we are running, we are in touch with the natural world and in touch with ourselves in a very direct way. Many runners find this extremely gratifying and will tell you that they run because they like to be in the mountains, in the forest, or out in nature. Wouldn't a good hike accomplish the same purpose? Apparently not. It's the running in conjunction with being in the mountains or in the forest that seems to bring on the magic. Trail running is a massive phenomenon right now with explosive growth in the numbers of participants and organized events. Do we see the same growth in hiking? Not so much.

It is small wonder, then, that running can lead us into a Taoist frame of mind. As we enter deeper into the rhythms of nature, as we let go of our egos and free ourselves from daily superficial thoughts, we seem to come into harmony with the world around us. Taoists liken becoming one with Tao to water being poured into water. Running can be seen

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in a similar light. In the physical act of running, we pour ourselves into the physical world. The running takes on a flow and seems effortless, natural, and profoundly satisfying. There is a lack of restraint in the way we move, and there is an openness to the beauty of things around us.

But there are other ways to think about running, other ways to interpret the deeper inner pathways that we explore when we pursue running consistently and passionately. Running can be an excellent vehicle for practicing mindfulness, for quieting our overburdened minds, and for focusing with full attention on the present moment. Running can also be a very existential activity, leading us to feel directly alive in the moment in a way that we seldom experience in any other aspects of our lives. As we run, we tend to drop all our social roles—our pretenses, our masks, our self-defense mechanisms that crowd into our daily existence. Out on the trail, these things are essentially irrelevant. While we are running, we tend to just exist very intensely. We are, as existentialists say, simply “being in the world.”

In whatever philosophical light we may bring to examine running, the universal experience seems to be transcendence. In running, we transcend our usual selves, our workaday egos, and we are freed to explore things that are perhaps more profound.

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*Runners explore not only a vast outer landscape, but a vast inner landscape of the mind as well.*

## RUNNING WITH PASSION

In conjunction with this deep dive into our minds that running promotes, running evokes in many a very deeply seated passion. Just look at the marathon craze and the way completing a marathon has become a singular, overarching goal for so many. The world's greatest marathons now draw crowds of thousands and thousands, but what is special is that the crowds are not there to watch and experience the sport vicariously; the crowds are there to run the race, to participate, to actually be in the arena. And having done the training, endured the race, and tasted the supreme satisfaction of the finish, many runners come back over and over again.

And, of course, there are the ultrarunners for whom even the 26-mile distance is somehow not enough. They complete a 31-mile 50K race, graduate to the 50-mile race, go on to the 62-mile 100K race, and then, as if they were just getting warmed up, they take on the mythic challenge of running 100 miles in a single day. And when they are done, dirt covering their legs, bleary eyed, limping and listing to avoid antagonizing the blisters covering their feet, they look up and with wonder in their voices tell you that it was like living a whole lifetime out there.

Running is replete with goals—setting goals, striving for goals, reaching one's potential, finding one's limits, gaining self-knowledge, being passionate about the goal, and by extension being passionate about one's own life. We can pursue running a particular distance. We can pursue running a particular time. We train toward a whole set of intermediate goals. There are daily goals, weekly goals, monthly goals, and lifetime goals. The goals in running are wonderfully concrete. You want to break 40 minutes in the 10K. You will either do that, or you won't. There is not going to be any ambiguity about it. You want to finish a marathon. You either cross the finish line, or you don't. Case closed.

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But, oddly, in the end, reaching the goal is not really the point. You may accomplish your goal because you had the genetic potential to run a three-hour marathon, and you trained really hard, and you cultivated the mental attitude that allowed you to endure such a hard, fast pace, and you made it. But then maybe you didn't make it. Maybe as hard as you tried, you just didn't have the potential to run that far, that fast. Maybe the training wasn't all there. Maybe the strain broke you psychologically when you hit the wall. It doesn't matter. It's not really reaching the goal that matters. What matters is the journey.

The journey of running is the issue here. That is what I want you to understand more fully: the amazing, passionate, mysterious journey of running and how running can promote self-awareness and self-improvement. In the pages that follow, you will find many ways to think about running, many perspectives from which you can examine your running experiences, many frameworks that you can use to better understand and appreciate what is happening to you as you run. Being aware of these connections between running and mindfulness, running and Taoism, and running and the pursuit of goals will help you get more out of your running and almost certainly more out of your life.

## WHAT IS IT ABOUT RUNNING?