

Conscious Running



A Journey of Discovery
by Steve Savage

All contents Copyright © Steve Savage 2007

Contents

Introduction: Why we Run

Chapter One: Discovery

Chapter Two: Learning to Listen to the Body

Chapter Three: Run Silent, Run Deep

Chapter Four: Running as Re-Creation

Chapter Five: Running and the Breath

Chapter Six: Pacing

Chapter Seven: Running in the cold

Chapter Eight: Swing Those Arms!

Chapter Nine: Running in Balanced Support

Appendix A: Stretching with the Breath

Appendix B: Warming Up and Cooling Down

Appendix C: Conscious Running Morning Tune-Up

Appendix D: Judging the Slope of Hills

Introduction

Why We Run

Conscious running is about listening to the body—tuning in to sensation, letting go of thoughts, worries and conflicts and letting the body and the breath find their own natural rhythm and coordination.

I have been running, more or less regularly, for over 40 years. Of course there have been periods in my life when running was not part of my regular routine—I am not compulsive about my running, I run for pleasure, for exercise and now, as I get older, to help stabilize my weight. I began running in college, more or less to relieve the stress of too much work and too little time. Running is a great way to encourage greater productivity and to relieve nervous tension. But for some runners, the running routine itself can become a source of stress and anxiety. This is when it may be time to look at ourselves and our daily patterns and see if running really fits our lifestyles. For me, running first thing in the morning is the ideal tonic: it helps me wake up, it enlivens my body and refreshes my spirit; it clears my mind and tones my muscles. As I have gotten older, I have learned to be a little more cautious in my approach to exercise in general and running in particular. I stretch a little bit more before setting out, I warm up with a preliminary jog, I pace myself along my route and I spend a good 10 or 15 minutes at the end cooling down and stretching. I have also learned to adapt my run to varying terrains and, yes, to my aging body. This book is about some of the things I have learned over many years of exploration, not just with running, but with bodywork, meditation and many modalities of body/mind coordination.*

Running, or any kind of formal exercise for that matter, should be fun, relaxing and refreshing. Otherwise, why would we continue to do it? It would be good to take a few minutes before beginning any exercise routine to look at our goals and our motives. Perhaps a doctor or other health-care provider has suggested that we “get outdoors” more, that we use our bodies a little more, that we try to counteract the effects of a basically sedentary lifestyle with an hour or two of exercise each day or, at the very least, two or three times a week. I think it is important to look at our motives if we are really to benefit from exercise and not just treat it as another “duty” in a life already full of other responsibilities. And perhaps running is not for everyone. Many people derive equal benefit from walking regularly, or from swimming, tennis, golf, etc. I think we all need to find our own paths and our own ways of keeping our bodies and our minds in tune and functioning fully.

But just what is full functioning? How do we really know when our bodies are beginning to run less smoothly? I think it is important to fine-tune our senses and to be aware of the signals coming from our own bodies. One way to do this is to practice sensory awareness as a kind of daily habit: to listen to the sounds around us (the birds, the computer, the car engine, etc.), to notice the smells, the sights, the temperature, etc., and not to remain locked up in our own thoughts, plans and memories. This is probably the first key to ease of functioning: letting the messages from the body get through the constant drone of thoughts, the on-going stream of consciousness. Naturally, large-scale signals—pain, for example—can break through the ordinary thought-processes and make themselves known. But it would be so much better for our bodies and for our mental health if we could just remain aware in an on-going way of the signals our senses are constantly sending us—a tiny crick in the neck, for

example, or a tightness in the left ankle. Then we can make equally tiny adjustments before more major ones become necessary (in this case, perhaps relaxing the neck muscles, rolling the head to the side and front; perhaps rotating the foot to loosen up the ankle). It is always better to be tuned in to these subtle signals from the body than to be so caught up in other activities that we ignore them. This is when tiny aches and pains can develop into habits of protection or compensation and then into major physical problems.

It is also important to have a repertoire of ways of dealing with these minor problems. Often a simple shift in posture can be immensely helpful—from slouching forward and down back into balanced support, for example, when sitting at the computer or when standing in line at the bank or the post-office. When exercising, it becomes even more important to be aware of the signals from the body—ignoring a tight muscle or a pain in a joint can lead to serious injury, and, as noted above, a tiny adjustment may be all that is required. In my running practice, I have gone through many phases and many ways of dealing with tiredness, laziness, pains such as shin-splints and potential injuries to knees, ankles, feet. In this book, I will share with you some of what I have learned over many years of experimentation and study. May we all keep exercising well into old age without pain and without injury!

*I am a Certified Middendorf Breath Practitioner and I have studied Reiki, Vipassana Meditation, Zen Buddhism, Continuum Movement, Body-Mind Centering, The Rosen Method, The Alexander Technique, LearningMethods and many other forms of body/mind work.



Chapter One

Discovery

My journey began when I discovered what I now call “conscious running.” I typically run 12-15 miles per week, always including a couple of San Francisco hills in my running route. Adapting some of the ideas in *Master the Art of Running* (Balk and Shields),* I decided to run one day WITHOUT my iPod headset glued to my ears for a change, and to be open to the sensations and the experiences in my body and in my environment as I ran up and down those hills. The first thing I noticed was how much more I could tune in to my breath, my own rhythms (both breath and body motion) and the beauty of the day (at 7 am, the sidewalks and paths are pretty much deserted in my neighborhood, except for other runners). I was able to notice the way my feet strike the ground, really connecting with the earth with each step; I could sense the subtle differences in temperature as I went closer to Golden Gate Park (and the ocean) and then away from it; but most of all, I noticed an increase in vitality and energy because I was not bringing my normal “multitasking” into my running routine—not trying to listen to the news, practice my Japanese lessons, listen to lectures or seminars, etc., to distract myself from the activity I was actually involved in: running.

We get so accustomed to multitasking that it becomes second nature—talking on the phone while driving, eating while reading or watching TV, working at the computer while listening to music, etc., I have discovered the value of letting go of multitasking when it is really not necessary or appropriate. Why do we need to listen to music or the stock market report while running or working out? Can't we just listen to the body, or, in the case of running, to the birds and the wind and the sound of our own feet rhythmically striking the pavement like the endless rhythm of the waves or of our own heartbeat? In this way, running (or walking or swimming) can become like a meditation—a way of tuning in to the infinite forces around us and within us. Like almost any activity, exercise can become an expression of our inherent wholeness if we just let go of thinking, planning, remembering and multitasking, and allow ourselves to be present in the moment, to connect with the earth and our environment and to allow our bodies to find, explore and revel in their own natural rhythms. This is what conscious running is all about.

But just what do I mean when I say that multitasking diminishes the benefits of running? I don't mean to imply that multitasking is never appropriate—I consider myself an expert at it. I have been an active performing arts photographer for 30 years, and for the past 8 years, I have been building a Middendorf Breath Massage practice as well as developing and teaching workshops on bringing balance into our daily lives. In our rush-rush culture, multitasking certainly has its place. The problem comes when we apply the skills learned in our working environment to the rest of our lives.

As I was stretching after running the other day, I heard an animated woman's voice speaking loudly as she crossed the small park near my home in San Francisco, with a baby in a stroller. How sweet, I thought to myself, she

is telling the baby a story, or talking about the birds and the flowers. As she got closer, however, I realized she was talking into a cell phone—completely ignoring the child, an infant about six months old. When she got to the swings, she lifted the child with one arm and nestled him into the bucket-style swing seat and proceeded to push the swing, still chatting away. Is this the way you would want YOUR child cared for? Is this the way you want to care for your own body and its needs? The child was too young to complain, but it must have sensed that it was being ignored. Likewise with our own bodies when we are caught up in the crush of events, responsibilities and, yes, even the recreational activities that most of us engage in every day.

My point here is that we need to re-tune our senses so that messages from the body can get through the din of other stimuli in our daily activities. This is the essence of conscious running—learning to listen to the body and to adapt to its needs; to know when we are expecting too much of our muscles, joints, backs, etc., and to ease up a little; to recognize unnecessary rushing as we get caught up in the whirl of events in our lives and to take a moment to listen to the breath, really to SEE the world around us and to regain our own balance and integrity.

Experiment: If you are accustomed to using a Walkman or iPod whenever you are away from home (while running, at the gym, when walking to work, etc.), try NOT using it for a day, and see if you notice more about the environment around you. Are you able to hear the birds, see the landscape, smell the flowers better than you were before? Are your other senses more alert and more receptive when you are NOT putting half or more of your attention into your earphones?

Dr. Andrew Weil suggests that we take this experiment one step further

and try a “news fast”.** Rather than turning on the radio or TV first thing in the morning, try just listening to the sounds around you—the tea-kettle whistling, perhaps, or an airplane overhead; the ticking of a clock or the wind rustling leaves or shutters. There is a whole world of sensation out there once we allow ourselves the luxury of actually attending to it and being present with it.

**Master the Art of Running: Raising your performance with the Alexander Technique* by Malcolm Balk and Andrew Shields; Collins and Brown, London, 2006.

***Spontaneous Healing* by Andrew Weil, Ballantine Books, 1996.



Chapter Two

Learning to Listen to the Body

Other observers of body/mind coordination have written about letting the eyes be free, as when we are reading or working at the computer, not focusing rigidly on what we are looking at, but rather allowing our vision to be expansive and relaxed.* I have discovered that this sort of “seeing” is a valuable asset when running. Rather than fixating the eyes immediately ahead of me (on the horizon or just on the path in front of me), I find that “whole” seeing, which means letting the light, images, even the sense of balance come in from all sides (top, bottom, right, left, even, in some mysterious way, from behind) frees my entire body and allows me to run in a more integrated way—my breathing, my movement and my experience of the world is more open and more free. My vision becomes almost three-dimensional when I play with this sort of seeing, and my running becomes smoother, easier and more fun.

In fact, I have found that if I can tune in to ALL my senses—the sounds around me, the smells, the temperature—I am much more PRESENT with my running, and with my life. I even find that the other senses have different lev-

els of resonance for me. When I allow my mind to be still and bring my attention to sounds, allowing “whole” hearing, like the “whole” seeing described above, the entire sound environment (birds, traffic, other runners, dogs, etc.) takes on a 3- dimensional quality as well—beyond stereophonic, it becomes MULTI-phonic. Likewise with smells, and with my sensation of temperature. There are layers of odors in the environment as I run (gardens, trees, exhaust, spilled beverages, new-cut grass, etc.) which all pour into my nose. And I have already noted in Chapter One how my sensation of temperature changes as I run—the day itself becomes warmer as the sun comes up, my BODY becomes warmer from the exertion, but I also run through many micro-climates as I run toward the ocean and back. In this way, running becomes a symphony of sensation for me. And there is no end to the discoveries as I allow myself to feel these sense impressions washing over me, around me, under me, above me. I end my run with my mind cleared, my body refreshed and my soul in tune with the universe. This can be a wonderful way to bring balanced functioning back into your life.

In the last chapter, I referred to the need to re-tune our senses so that messages from the body can get through. One of my primary teachers, David Gorman**, calls these messages “wake-up calls” that the body sends us in the form of symptoms—pain, anxiety, tension, etc.—when a situation or a physical activity is straining our bodies or our minds beyond the point of efficient functioning. In David’s schema, the “wake-up call” is the beginning of understanding – the thing that grabs our attention and forces us, sometimes at awkward moments in our lives, to attend to the body or to the source of stress or anxiety. In my running practice (I call it a “practice” because it is almost like a meditation for me) I have learned to be acutely aware of the messages from

the body, as described in Chapter One. I don't like to be distracted by an iPod or by conversation. I like to be able to listen to the sounds of nature, to notice the trees, the gardens, even the cars that I am running past. And, perhaps more important, I like to stay tuned in to the messages from my body. My habit is to extend my running route by a sixth of a mile each week and I would like to avoid strain and pain to my 62-year-old body if possible. This means that I need to be aware of every little message coming in from my legs, especially my knees and feet, and from my whole body.

Every so often I notice a twinge of pain in my right knee, especially on one of the major hills on my route. Generally a very slight shift in my stride or the angle of my foot is enough to make this pain subside. My point here is that we need to be listening for these subtle messages to get through the background din of thoughts, memories, plans and other sensations (even when we're NOT additionally distracted by an iPod or a Walkman or a running partner). I call these messages "wake-up whispers," and I think it is important for anyone who uses his or her body in any strenuous way, whether doing yoga, Pilates, running, swimming, dancing or whatever, to be tuned in to these "whispers" when they arise. Integrated functioning is all about being tuned in to sensation and knowing how to respond to it if a response is called for. To maintain a healthy relationship to our body/mind, we really need to listen to the whispers as well as the shouts.

And I believe that the "wake-up signal," (whether a murmur or a shout) is really just the first stage in allowing ourselves to return to balanced support. The second step is to RECOGNIZE the signal, to identify its source (my right knee in the example above). Then comes a moment of REORGANIZATION—

a slight shift in our weight or posture, perhaps the brief stretching of a sore muscle (a very slight adjustment in my gait and in the angle of my foot in my example). And finally, perhaps most importantly, we then FORGET about the pain or the symptom, and return to smooth functioning. This forgetting is really what integrated functioning teaches us. The body knows exactly how to stay balanced and at ease. We just need to get out of our own way and allow it to flow smoothly. So once tiny adjustments have been made (or larger ones when necessary), it is important to let go once again and allow the body to find its own perfect form. This is the core of balanced functioning and the essence of conscious running.

Experiment: The next time you sense a small pain or crick in a muscle or a joint, whether while running or in other daily activities, try the process I described above: first, IDENTIFY the pain (is it in the shoulder, neck, arm, chest, or whatever); then try ADJUSTING your body to relieve the pressure you may unconsciously be putting on the affected part (this could be a simple shift in posture, or a stretch of the arm, rotating the head to stretch the neck, etc.); and then see if you can simply LET GO of the initial symptom and return to integrated functioning. Identify - adjust - let go: this is the mantra of healthy maintenance.

**Eyebody*, by Peter Grunwald, Eyebody Press, 2004.

**see David Gorman's *The Body Moveable* (5th edition, 2002), and *Looking at Ourselves* (1997), both from LearningMethods Publications.



Chapter Three

Run Silent, Run Deep

When I was learning to swim as a child, I remember being taught that the best dive was one that caused practically no ripple in the water—the goal was that my body would slide silently into the water even after a beautiful jack-knife or swan-dive and that I would then plunge deeply into the pool or lake, perhaps even touching the bottom with my hands, before heading back up toward the surface. I have found something of the same principle applies to my running. When I am running with perfect balance and coordination, my footsteps are nearly silent on the side-walk or path—my hips, knees and ankles all work together to produce a fluid motion of the legs and a minimum of jarring to my spine and torso. This does not work so well if I make silence my conscious goal—then it's possible to begin manipulating my stride, leaning forward from the hips, consciously bending my knees, perhaps turning my foot downward slightly so that I land on the balls of my feet. But if I can just let my body organize the movement, my running becomes fast, efficient and virtually silent.

One of the basic principles of conscious running is that we just need to get out of our own way and let the body/mind coordinate our movements and

activities in the most efficient way possible. I have found that a little preparation for my run makes this coordination much easier. Of course a good warm-up is essential. I generally spend 3-5 minutes stretching, observing my breath and generally preparing myself for the exertion to come. Then I jog gently for the first 5 or 6 blocks of my run. This gives my body a chance to get used to the pavement, to the temperature of the air and to the various demands I am placing on my muscles and joints. Only then does the actual running begin. At this point, I make a conscious choice of smooth coordination and efficient use of the various parts of my body involved—my arms and shoulders are loose and swing freely, complementing the motion of my lower body; my legs and feet are free to find their own rhythm and to adapt to the various changes in the terrain as I run. Like all runners, I find this easier on some days than on others. Some mornings my body needs just a little more stretching, a few more blocks of warm-up jogging and a more gradual increase in speed and momentum. It is important to be alert to the “whispers” from the body I spoke about in Chapter 2 and not to try to force a pattern of movement onto a tired or resistant body. Check in with your muscles and joints and be alert to their signals.

On the days when the running comes naturally, or when I have enough time really to stretch properly and to warm up thoroughly, my running is, in fact, practically silent. And there is also a quality of connection with the earth as I run: each footstep is a soundless reminder of my oneness with the infinite, with the birds and the trees, the earth and the sky and, yes, even with the cars and busses that careen past me. We are all one with the breath, with the earth and with the universe. It is almost as though I am reaching into the earth with my steps—sometimes the ground itself seems to become resilient and elastic. This is the ultimate experience of conscious running—my body becomes free

and flexible, and almost floats across the ground. At times, my body seems to go into “automatic pilot” mode—it is almost as though I am no longer in conscious control of each movement, but rather that my running is in perfect tune with the natural forces around me: the pull and support of gravity, the flow of air and wind across my body, the gradually brightening light of early morning. It all supports my experience, and makes my running more “conscious.”

Experiment:

The Middendorf Breath Work that I teach encourages us to be aware of the sensation of the movement of breath at all times, and I find that this is a great key to efficient functioning as I begin my run. I like to take a moment to notice the shape, the depth and the rhythm of my breath as I begin stretching.

Try tuning in to the breath before you stretch and see if this makes a difference for you. Notice how each stretch tends to bring an INHALE, how releasing the stretch is the perfect moment for an exhale, letting go of tension and holding as the muscles relax. Try not to hold your breath (or the stretch) as you work, but rather let the stretching (and the breath) be free, finding their own natural rhythm as you prepare your body for running. I generally begin by stretching my legs by leaning with arms outstretched up against a telephone pole. And I like to finish my stretching with a whole-body stretch I call my Salute to the Sun. See Appendix A for more details about this and about my whole stretching routine. What is important here is to let your breath be your guide. Stretch until your breath is full and free—sometimes this will take just a few minutes, while other days it may take 15 minutes or more. Be guided by your breath and the feeling of breath movement

in your body. When the breath is moving freely, the body is ready for anything. Notice the connection with the earth that each step provides as you begin to run, and how the breath and the footfalls form their own harmony and rhythm.



Chapter Five

Running as Re-Creation

I think often about the question I posed in the Introduction to this book: just why do we run? As I have indicated in the preceding chapters, I feel as though my running routine is a kind of “practice,” almost like a meditation or an hour of yoga or breath work, a time of contemplation, a time to order my thoughts and perceptions and a chance to tune up my body and my mind in preparation for the day ahead. For me, running is a true form of recreation – in the original sense of that word, a re-creating or re-imagining of my life and the path ahead of me (literal and conceptual). It is NOT, as the common pronunciation of the word might suggest, an opportunity to WRECK myself in the interests of fitness or weight-loss or life-extension (although all of these things are side-effects of my practice). At the physiological level, when I run I am actually accelerating the process of cell-replacement that goes on in the body all the time – literally RE-CREATING myself. And of course the breath, which is my teacher and my guide, falls into a steady, deep and satisfying rhythm after the first couple of miles, as the interchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen is stabilized and regulated by the exertion of my muscles and the stimulation of my mind.

For me, running is really the best way to achieve these things. Fast walking is great – I studied *Dynamic Walking** for many months a decade ago. Swimming is excellent for a complete-body workout, engaging, as it does, arms, shoulders, hips, legs, feet all working in synchrony. When I lived in Berlin, I swam regularly in one of the many impeccably maintained municipal

pools when the weather was too inclement for running (whether because of too much snow or too much rain), and I can attest that this is a great way to keep the body in shape and the mind alert. I have also spent whole years of my life bicycling regularly as a kind of functional exercise, doing errands, visiting friends, attending meetings, etc., all with the bicycle as my primary means of transportation. But for the sheer joy or “re-creating” myself, I have always come back to running. And I do not mean here competitive running – I have little interest in marathons or other races. I run for fun, for pleasure, to refresh my mind and to enliven my body, and for me, there is really nothing else like it. My running is not about going faster than the other runners I meet in the early morning hours (most of whom are decades younger than I am), and it is not about running further or up more hills. It is really about ME and how it makes ME feel. Like a meditation, it prepares me for the day ahead and gives me a chance to contemplate my relationship to the world around me. It is my chance to re-create myself.

Experiment: Try walking a short distance, letting your body find its own natural coordination. Notice the rhythm of your breath and the rhythmic movement of your arms and legs. Gradually begin walking faster and notice how the rhythm changes and the breath grows deeper and fuller. At some point, begin gently jogging, letting the arms swing freely, elbows bent and shoulders loose. Try increasing the speed of the jog and see how this affects your coordination and your breath. If you feel comfortable running, gradually speed up a bit more until you are in a full sprint. Again, try to keep track of your breath-rhythm as well as the rhythm of your stride.

Then reverse the process: slow to a run, then a gentle jog, then a fast walk, then a casual walk. How do you feel? What do you notice in your body? Do you feel “re-created”? And of course take a few moments (or more) to stretch after this simple “experiment.”

*see Maggie Spilner’s book, *Prevention’s Complete Book of Walking* for a detailed description of the complete Dynamic Walking program.



Chapter Six

Running and the breath

One of the great pleasures of running is the general effect on the rest of the body. My breathing, especially, seems to benefit from the exertion. When I start out, with a slow, warm-up jog, my breathing rhythm begins to speed up slightly to provide my muscles with a little more oxygen. The pause between the exhale and the next inhale becomes shorter. Each breath becomes deeper and fuller. If I am completely “conscious,” I can even feel my whole body breathing as I move. I know that this deeper breathing is good for me— I can sense my thoughts becoming clearer and my body gradually letting go of tension and anxiety as I move. Sometimes when I run, I can actually feel my mood changing from the morning grumpiness I sometimes struggle out the door with at 7 am to an even-tempered calm and acceptance, and finally to exhilaration at my own sense of accomplishment as I finish that 3rd or 4th mile (and the end, and a hot shower are in sight!). Sometimes I feel as though the exhilaration is more than just the usual “endorphin high” that runners speak of. Sometimes it feels as though I have actually purged my body of the causes of the grumpiness, whether they are hormonal, circulatory or just mental constructs. Certainly my circulation is improved with the running, just as my breath becomes deeper, fuller and more steady. And certainly there are other changes in body chemistry, perhaps in the hormones or liver enzymes which seem to have an affect on my mood and my endurance.

In the breath work that I practice,* we teach that the breath comes and goes on its own, that it is able to find its own natural rhythm depending on the needs of the body/mind. When we are concentrating very hard, learning a new language or a flute concerto, perhaps, we need a little more oxygen. Likewise when using the muscles, whether carrying groceries (or children) or when exercising, the breath will grow and transform if we allow it to find its own path. If we can learn to observe the breath, to be sensitive to its movement and development, this gives us a great way to monitor our bodies AND our minds, to keep track of stress, and its effects on the body, and to be aware when we might need to relax the body to allow the breath to find its own way. The breath is something that is always with us, always available for “checking in.” And the breath is a completely reliable indicator of what’s going on in the whole body/mind.

Listening to the breath can become almost like an on-going meditation. Many traditional forms of meditation (Zen, Vipassana) use the breath as the access-point for calming the mind. If we can just let go of thoughts for a moment and listen to our bodies, we are much more likely to stay tuned in to the body’s needs and to be aware of any problems that might arise. In running, this is an important discipline. Minor injuries can easily be avoided by noticing the “wake-up whispers” the body sends out as we use it in any vigorous way. The breath is a great gauge of efficient functioning. If the breath is moving smoothly and effortlessly, then probably the whole body is functioning that way. Similarly, if we are focusing hard on a mental task, we can check in with the breath to see if tension, stress, anxiety or other negative states are impacting our bodies. If we can allow the breath to flow naturally, truly to fill every cell of our bodies, tension and anxiety melt away.

There are many ways of using the breath to enhance the running experience. Pranayama yoga suggests a variety of exercises for controlling the breath and forcing it into various rhythms and patterns.** Of course each runner should play with whatever tools he or she has available to see if they fit his or her life and body/mind. I have found that we can discover our own tools so easily that it is really more satisfying just to play with the breath on our own, ultimately letting the breath itself be our guide.

Experiment: Try breathing through your nose during the first part of your run. Then perhaps shift to inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth (in classic yoga style). Then, as the body's need for oxygen increases, it makes sense to inhale AND exhale through the mouth. Observe how the body responds to each of these changes. Do you feel more alert and invigorated with more oxygen, or does the body seem to take care of its own needs no matter what you do? The key here is just to be aware of what's going on as we play with the breath. And the goal is to find the kind of breathing, the pattern, depth and rhythm that really fits YOUR body at THIS moment. It is important to stay in the moment – not to let thoughts or other sensory input interfere as we really LISTEN to the breath. The breath can become our teacher and, yes, our friend, if we just allow its message into our awareness. Try it. It's the most natural thing in the world.

* for more information on Middendorf Breath Work, see my breath website, www.mybreathexperience.com, or the main US Middendorf website, www.breathexperience.com. For those who read German, you may also refer to Ilse Middendorf's website, www.erfahrbarer-atem.de.

**see Khalsa dn Bhajan, *Breathwalk* (2000), or Andrew Weil's *Breathing: The Master Key to Self Healing* (Audiobook, 1999), for specific breathing exercises derived from pranayama.



Chapter Six

Pacing:

Short-Term Goals

Become Life-Long Habits

I have learned over the years that pacing is an essential part of my running program. And when I say “pacing,” I mean both how much I run on any given day, how much distance I add as I feel my body’s capacity increasing, and also how I pace myself on any given run. As noted in Chapter One, my habit for many years has been to add a sixth of a mile (two city blocks) each week to my regular running route. Often I will add this extra distance at the end of my run, rather than extending the actual distance out (which puts me further from home at the point when I add the extra distance). I come back into my own neighborhood and run around an extra block or two – often around the large hospital complex near my home, which fills an entire city block. Then after a few days with the added distance near home, I add the same amount of distance to the middle of my route, exploring new neighborhoods or new parts of the park. I find that I can continue this practice of adding distance for six or eight weeks at a time, often adding a mile or more to my whole route, before some event intervenes which puts my back where I had started: a vacation in a place where I cannot run; a business trip (when I often have no time to run); an injury which keeps me from running; a bad cold; etc. I have learned over the years not to let these “setbacks” bother me. I just go back to my “basic” route (in my case, this is approximately 3 miles) for a few days, then begin the adding process all over again. Using this method, I have discovered that 5 miles is about my limit in terms of time and energy expended.

Any more than this and I feel as though my body begins to break down – my immune system seems to be weakened and I become prone to injury and to colds. This is an important lesson for any runner – just what are your limits and can you respect those limits?

I also tend to apply simple pacing techniques to each individual run. Often this makes the run seem a little easier, especially on those days when it's a struggle getting out the door. And sometimes this allows me to add my extra distance more easily and more painlessly. I set short-term goals – the next stoplight, the edge of the park, a friend's house, etc. – and check them off in my mind as I pass them. This gives me a sense of the “roundness” of my run – I know exactly when I reach the half-way point (typically this is when I circle around and head for home), and I am better able to judge when I reach the point of fatigue when I might become careless and injury-prone. As noted above, it is important to listen to the body for guidance: how far can I run on any given day? At what speed? Am I aware of stress or strain in joints or muscles and is this just laziness or am I really approaching exhaustion? These are all questions that any runner must be prepared to answer. I find that seeking out guide-posts or bench-marks along my route helps me to pace myself and give me a clearer sense of how fast I am moving and how well my body is handling the actual run.

In running as in many other repetitive tasks, I find that the half-way point is a significant benchmark. On my morning run, whether my route takes me into the park or just around my neighborhood, the point where I turn toward home makes the rest of the run seem easier, almost as though it is “downhill” in my mind. Oddly, I sometimes have this same sense when working on many projects – a long photo-assignment in my career as portrait photographer; a long airplane trip to, say, Berlin or Tokyo; even a long play or opera – somehow that halfway point makes the rest of the event seem easier, like running toward home and a hot shower.

Experiment: Try estimating the length of your regular running route, if you have not already done so (I will sometimes measure a new variation on my route using a car or bicycle odometer). Notice how you feel when you reach

the half-way point. Does it feel like you are “heading home” at this point? Do you have the sense that it is “downhill” for the rest of the route?

Then try subdividing your route even further – into quarters or eighths and see how it feels to tick these benchmarks off in your mind as you pass them. Does this make the run go more easily and more quickly? Of course do not forget to remain tuned in to the other sensations during this pacing experiment: notice the texture or hardness of the running surface, notice the sights, smells, sounds around you as you run, and especially, notice how your body feels as you pass one benchmark after another. Do you feel more fatigue or more energy as you approach the last quarter or eighth of your running route? Do you have a sense of being in the “last lap” or “home stretch” as you approach the end? Does that help give a sense of roundness and completeness to the whole run? And, above all, does it make your running more “conscious”?

Appendix A

Stretching with the breath

Everyone who runs, and most people who exercise at all, know the value of stretching. Stretching helps the muscles and joints to prepare for exertion, to begin to move more freely and easily and, literally, to begin to bring warmth and circulation to the body. In my breath work, I have learned to let the breath be my guide when exercising (see Chapter Five, Running and the Breath). While stretching, I feel that it is important also to allow the breath to find its own path and to stretch with the rhythm of the breath. Here are a few of the techniques I have evolved over many years of running. As you will see, I find that stretching briefly before running and thoroughly after running leaves me mostly without aches and pains no matter how vigorous the run itself.

Before running:

Before each run, I stretch my legs by leaning with arms outstretched against a light-pole or other solid object with my body at a 45-degree angle to the ground [Figure 1]. I work with one leg at a time, both knees flexible, the forward foot crossing over slightly in front of the knee of the leg being stretched to stimulate the sacrum and lower back. I bend the knee of the forward leg to lengthen the muscles of the leg I am working on. I allow the back knee to bend as needed to facilitate the stretch. Of course the maximum stretch happens when the back leg is extended (and not bent) as I lower myself slightly toward the ground. I often move up and down gently,

inhaling on the downward motion, and exhaling back up. This helps to lengthen the arm-muscles (extended in front of me against the pole) as well as giving me a chance to stretch the various leg-muscles individually: the hamstrings, the Achilles tendons, the calves, etc. My preferred mode of stretching for this and the other stretches I describe below, is to allow the stretch to invite an inhale: to notice the fullness and spaciousness of the lungs, and the whole body, as they fill with air. Then, in my own natural breath-rhythm, I exhale, often with a little “whooshing” sound, and allow the muscles to relax, still maintaining my position with arms reaching overhead to the pole, one leg stretched out behind me. I find that a couple of breath-cycles, with full stretch on inhale and slight relaxation on exhale, gives my muscles just the right amount of stimulation to awaken them for the exertion to come. I work briefly in this way with one leg, then the other, sometimes repeating the process if one leg seems a little more sluggish or stiff on any particular morning. This short period of preparation, usually no more than a minute or two, also gives me a chance to prepare myself for the run itself—I can look around, and FEEL around, to see what the weather is like, whether the streets are damp from rain, what the temperature is, etc.

I prefer to be dressed warmly for running and unless the temperature is above 60 when I first leave my apartment, I always run with a hooded sweatshirt. When it is cold (I generally don't run if the temperature is below 35°—see Chapter Seven: Running in the Cold) I can pull the hood over my head and tie the drawstrings. When it is warm, I can unzip the front of the sweatshirt to keep my body at a relatively stable temperature. In San Francisco, where I do most of my running, the temperature often varies by as much as ten degrees as I run toward the ocean and back again, so I like to be prepared. I also feel that it is important to remain warm during the cool-

down period AFTER my run, when I am often damp with sweat, but no longer using my muscles as vigorously.

As noted in the chapter on pacing (Chapter Six), after a brief period of stretching, I begin my runs at a gentle lope, often little more than fast walking except for the up and down motion that characterizes jogging. After a block or two, this becomes an actual jog. Often I do not reach my full stride until half-way through the run – the point at which, as noted in Chapter Six, it begins to feel like it's down-hill, no matter what the actual terrain. Students in my Conscious Running Class have also experienced my way of interspersing jogging and running—I like to add a brief sprint (or a major hill— not both together except perhaps at the very end of the run when we are totally warm and fully engaged). In my classes, we sprint for a half-mile or so, then go back to jogging for a mile, then sprint again, etc. This encourages the body to warm up gradually until full operating efficiency is reached and we can really run full-out.

Cooling down:

I generally end my run on a series of gentle hills, which gives my legs and feet a chance to move in different ways than they have done on the run itself. Then I spend a moment or two jogging in different directions, to loosen up muscles that may have become too accustomed to the repetitive movement of running in a straight line on relatively flat surfaces: I run backwards for a few yards, then sideways, moving in one direction while turning my head in the opposite direction, side-stepping with my feet; then turning around to the other side, turning my head the other way, still side-stepping in the same direction. This helps to loosen up the neck, the sacrum and the spine as well as allowing the legs to move in more different ways. I follow

this with another round of leg-stretches against a pole, and of arm and shoulder stretches.

My favorite shoulder stretch is to grab something at shoulder height with the fingers of one hand—a chain-link fence works great for this—then turn my body in the opposite direction so that the muscles on the inside of the shoulder are stretched. Using my left arm, I rotate my body to the right, and vice versa [Figure 2]. I often accompany this with additional leg stretches, while still holding on to the fence, reaching forward and to the opposite side with the leg on the same side as the shoulder I am stretching, and bending the other leg gently down, and then back up, to stretch the shoulder-muscles in different ways. Of course I do this with both shoulders, so that both sides of the body are equally stretched, taking time to let the breath come into the stretch and letting the muscles relax fully with each exhale. Again, a couple of breath cycles of stretch-and-relax seems to give my arm and shoulder muscles the greatest benefit.

Then I turn toward the fence, grab it with both hands at about elbow height, and squat down, stretching my arms overhead [Figure 3]. In the squatting position, I rock gently from side to side to allow the shoulders to loosen and to move in different ways, always moving in the rhythm of my own breath—slow and steady at this point, several minutes after the end of my run. If possible, I then find an overhead object (a horizontal ladder, common in many playgrounds, works well for this), reach up with both arms, and hang from it briefly, again stretching both arms and shoulder-muscles. If it is a ladder, I swing my legs up and hang for a moment with my back parallel to the ground, again rocking gently back and forth the stretch the shoulders in different ways.

Back on the ground, I follow this with a gentle squat, holding onto

something at about thigh level (horizontal ladders in playgrounds often have vertical ladders attached or adjacent to them) and allowing the breath to fill my body, especially the knees, spine and arms, which are all actively engaged as I move down into the squat, arms extended to hold on to the ladder in front of me. I breathe INTO the muscles briefly, for one or two breath-cycles, sensing the way they expand and fill on inhale and relax on exhale. The whole body is compressed in this position, and it is fascinating to feel the torso (chest and abdomen) expanding against the tops of my thighs as I squat for a moment or two. Then I pull (with the arms) and push (with the legs) to bring myself upright with an exhale, often making a “whooshing” sound as I come up. I find this really satisfying and a great way to bring the whole body back together again after working on the shoulders, arms and legs separately.

I often repeat the shoulder stretches at this point—again finding an object at shoulder height to grab with the fingers of one hand, extending the arm, and turning my body in the opposite direction. And again, I like to feel the inhale flowing into the arm, expanding the muscles as they are stretched, then relaxing them slightly as I exhale. Sometimes I will stay in the stretch for two or three breath-cycles to observe the different ways the muscles and joints fill and relax. As with the squat, I like to release my grip, and the stretch itself, on an exhale, perhaps again making a little noise to myself or just tuning in to the movement of the breath upward and out. Of course I do this with both shoulders, and often follow up with another squat, holding onto something at about waist level, and coming up on an exhale.

One of my favorite ways to end the whole cycle is to do what I call a Standing Salute to the Sun. I stand facing the sun, if possible, and notice the quality of the light, the clouds, the blueness of the sky, the sound of the

birds (or the traffic), the smells in the air, etc. I bend forward from the waist and allow my arms to dangle toward my feet, bending with gentle effort, with hips, knees and ankles all loose and flexible—it is not so much about stretching at this point as about relaxing and loosening the muscles and joints. I stay in this position, bending over at the waist, arms brushing the ground, for two or three (or more) breath-cycles. Then, with an exhale, I lift my arms gently upward, unbending at the hips as I go, uncurling my spine and reaching upward until my clasped hands are over my head. I arch my whole body backward slightly, allowing an inhale to fill the stretch, then exhale back to a standing position, hands coming down to my sides, and acknowledging once again the brilliance of the sun, the blueness of the sky, the sounds of the birds around me.

I generally conclude my cool-down with a brief walk back to my home, usually four or five blocks, occasionally rolling the shoulders and stretching my arms as I go. Sometimes I pretend that I am paddling a canoe, with shoulders moving in opposite directions, or rowing a boat, with shoulders rolling in the SAME direction. Both are great for keeping the shoulder muscles and joints loose and limber in preparation for a day of work. It is also possible to do the Standing Salute to the Sun while walking—just raise the arms overhead, arch back a bit, hold for a couple of steps, a breath-cycle or two, then bring the arms down. With all of these stretches and movements, the breath just comes and goes on its own—finding its own natural rhythm, slowing down as the body cools down and stabilizing in size and shape after the exertion of the run and the relaxation of the stretching.



Figure 1: Leg Stretch



Figure 2: Shoulder Stretch



Figure 3: Squatting Stretch