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27,000 Miles to Buddhahood

The Tendai Monks of Mount Hiei take
the ultramarathon to a whole new level
by Pete Bampton

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The path of a marathon monk is never-ending.

Tendai Saying

MILE 20. But I don't cruise by this mile marker with the same breezy elation as the others I have passed. Another six miles to go? Crikey, I don't know if I can make it! It feels like an unbearable, interminable prospect. I am in trouble. My new British-made state-of-the-art running shoes are turning out not to be a very good fit. What on earth was it that possessed me to buy British, I wonder, as I am overtaken by a fellow countryman wearing Union Jack shorts and a pair of Nikes. My left big toe is crushed under a fold in the leather upper and feels like it is bleeding profusely. It throbs more and more painfully as I pound the asphalt up an on-ramp, which looms before me like a mountain . . . I gaze at the surroundings to try and distract my attention. Ominous tower blocks, barricaded storefronts, and sky the color of wet sugar and cement. I'm in the Bronx now, and the roaring crowds that fueled my heroic ascent up Manhattan's First Avenue have thinned out. And so have the runners. We aren't buoyed by each other's slipstream and spirit anymore. It's every man and woman alone with him- or herself grinding through "the wall," confronting the concerted rebellion of mind and body head-on. A pall of lonesome desperation descends upon me as I listen to the sound of my heavy feet echoing among the oppressive brownstone tenements. Then it starts to rain. The first few splatters are gently refreshing, like manna dropping from heaven, but it soon turns into a torrential downpour of Biblical proportions. Before long, I am soaked to the bone, my aching feet sloshing through streams of water. Our roadside supporters run for cover or batten down beneath umbrellas. No more smiling kids slapping high fives or offering bananas. And no mile marker on the horizon.

No mile marker . . . Where the heck is mile 21? Surely I must have passed it by now? I'm breaking up and my mind has gotten a foothold. *This is hell. You're crazy! You* hate *this. Why, why, why are you doing this?* I approach the next water station, and as I slow down to reach for a bottle in the pelting rain, I almost grind to a halt. All the momentum of mind and body coaxes me to stop: *You're injured; it's dangerous to carry on. There'll always be next year . . .* Suddenly I realize if I don't snap free of these voices, I'll be dead in the water—literally. I pull up my head and focus my inner antennae beyond the grey smudge of the Harlem skyline. Over there is the finish line in Central Park. A surge of energy arises from nowhere, and I see the next marker just ahead. Mile 21. I splash by with determined elation, riding above the pain in my toes. The rain begins to taper off a little and I speed up a notch. *I'm going to beat my previous time*, I think to myself. And I do. About forty minutes later I am euphoric as I cross the finish line. I've shaved off fifteen minutes!

The ordeal of this marathon proved once again to be a graphic illustration of the fact that going beyond self-imposed limitations of mind and body could open up hitherto unknown potentials. This was fortifying inspiration for any aspiring spiritual warrior, to be sure. But that was about as far as I had taken it. When I learned about a sect of Tendai Buddhists in Japan known as the Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei, however, I found out that they had taken it, well, quite a bit further. Their lofty goal was nothing less than Buddhahood in this life through the purifying practice of multiple marathons! I was intrigued, to say the least. And as I pursued my investigation further, I soon discovered something remarkable beyond belief, a phenomenon that takes the term "ultramarathon" to a whole new level.

The "One-Thousand-Day Mountain Marathon," as described in John Stevens's book *The Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei* and in Christopher

Hayden's documentary film of the same name, was initiated in the ninth century by So-o, the Grand Patriarch of Tendai Buddhism. After hearing the legend of "Priest Big Shoes," a revered walking monk in China, So-o had a dream that instructed him to follow in the legendary monk's footsteps. *All of the pilgrimage sites on Mount Hiei are sacred*, the voice informed him. *Visit them often*. And he did. Very often. But in the eleven centuries since So-o first set off up the mountain, few have endeavored to follow in his footsteps. It is only very rare individuals within the Tendai ranks who dare to undertake this formidable challenge. In fact, there have only been forty-six "marathon monks" since 1885. The Great Marathon is revered as the ultimate in austere practices. If you are curious to know why, then let me take you on a journey . . .

Picture this. You awake at midnight. It's the middle of winter. Very cold. You attend an hour-long service in the frigid Buddha Hall, sip on some miso soup, and chomp on a few rice balls. Then you dress in a white vestment—the same garment you would be dressed in at your own funeral. You wrap the "cord of death" around your waist and tuck a sheathed knife inside. Why the cord and the knife? Tradition dictates that if you do not complete your prescribed cycle of marathons, you must commit suicide by hanging or self-disembowelment! You gather candles, food offerings, and a rosary for the 250 prayer stops you will make on your eighteen-mile marathon around Mount Hiei (some of which will be at unmarked graves to honor monks who died by suicide). You put your handmade straw sandals on your bare feet, and take a couple of spare pairs along in case they are destroyed by rain or wear and tear (sometimes you go through five pairs in one trip). Then, you pick up your paper lantern and head out into the icy night for the snowy trails of Mount Hiei.

Your running style dates back over a thousand years, and is poised somehow between walking and running. "Eyes focused about 100 feet ahead while moving in a steady rhythm, keeping the head level, the shoulders relaxed, the back straight, and the nose and navel aligned." You harmonize your pace and breathing with the inner drone of a mantra that you chant continuously. As you gain experience, you flow through the course, maintaining the same speed for climbing up and going downhill.

So this is the first of one hundred successive very early mornings on which you will set off for your marathon, finishing between 7:30 and 9:30 AM. Sound grueling? Well, you're just getting started. *This is just a warm-up!* Once you finish your hundred days, you are qualified to apply for the real deal—the full One-Thousand-Day Mountain Marathon of Hiei. If accepted, you will commit to a seven-year retreat, which will consist of nine hundred more marathons! The first three hundred will be undertaken over three years, one hundred days in a row, at some point between March and mid-October. From your fourth year, you will have earned the privilege of wearing socks and be allowed to carry a walking stick. However, along with these added luxuries, the stakes are upped considerably—you will now complete two hundred consecutive marathons each year!

If one were to liken the One-Thousand-Day Mountain Marathon to a mere twenty-six-mile marathon in New York City, then on completion of your seven hundredth marathon (at the end of five years), you are approaching mile 18. As you run up Manhattan's First Avenue toward the Bronx, you are about to hit that unpredictable twilight zone respectfully known among marathoners as "the wall." In a regular marathon, this is where you face down the devil as your body and mind start giving out and insisting that you *stop!* You may at times feel like you are going to die, but the only recourse is to *keep going* no matter what. In the One-Thousand-Day Marathon however, "the wall" is a literal confrontation with death known as *doiri*. You do stop moving, but not for a nice cup of tea and a sit-down. Rather, you go into a nine-day retreat that consists of seven and a half days without food or water or sleep (it's been reduced from the original ten days because a few too many monks before you died during the last day). You sit in a full lotus posture and chant mantras day and night. If you live through this forbidding trial, which is designed to bring you to the very edge of your mortality and plunge you into a resplendent vision of the Ultimate, then you will have attained the title of *Togyoman Ajari,* or "Saintly Master of the Severe Practice."

Hunger will be the least of your agonies. By the fifth day, you will be so dehydrated that you will taste blood. But at least you will be allowed to wash your mouth out with water, even if you can't drink it. Two devoted novices will make sure that you stay erect and awake. Your only break from the sitting position during this ordeal will be the 2 AM pilgrimage to the Holy Well. You will draw water, which you will then offer to Fudo Myo-o, the Unshakable King of All Light, a deity whose awesome energy you aspire to embody. This walk will take about fifteen minutes on the first night. On the last night, it will take you roughly an hour and a half, moving at a snail's pace across the stone floor, assisted by the novices. According to the marathon monks who have preceded you, you will find yourself in an extraordinarily rarefied, crystalline state of consciousness. You will feel yourself absorbing mist through the pores of your skin, hear ashes falling from incense sticks, and smell food being prepared in dwellings far away. You will probably lose about a quarter of your body weight.

Once through the Wall of Death, grateful to be alive and moving toward the light—around mile 23 in the New York City marathon—you might be lucky enough to find yourself sailing on a second wind, tapping into mysterious sources of energy and resilience that lie beyond the seeming depletion of the physical body. As a marathon monk though, second wind or not, this is where you really break into supernatural territory. After the “seven hundred days of moving and the nine days of stillness,” followed by a brief respite of three weeks to recover your body weight, you enter the sixth year. You are required to complete one hundred consecutive thirty-seven-and-a-half-mile marathons that take fourteen to fifteen hours to complete. And on the heels of that comes the seventh and final year, the marathon monk's equivalent to that last all-or-nothing dash through Central Park to the finish line. It consists of two one-hundred-day terms. In the first you will face the absolute ultimate in ultramarathons: a daily fifty-two-and-a-half-mile marathon through the city of Kyoto. No, that's *not* a misprint. That's *two New York City marathons a day for one hundred days in a row!*

Accompanying you in this death-defying endeavor will be a trusty novice carrying a folding chair. If you are lucky enough to encounter red traffic lights, and other temporarily insurmountable obstructions, the novice will unfold the chair so that you can sit and catch the odd power nap. This is just as well, because you will be getting about two hours of sleep a night at this point. An old saying goes, “Ten minutes of sleep for a marathon monk is worth five hours of ordinary rest,” and although you won't be spending ten minutes at a stoplight, every little bit helps! While doing these double marathons through the streets of Kyoto, you will bless your devotees en route, pausing to touch their bowed heads with your rosary. During this whole period, you will still consume your routine ration of miso soup, tofu, a few rice balls, some veggies, and a glass of milk. According to physiologists, you should lose around fifteen to twenty pounds each month, but miraculously you will maintain your body weight and stamina. Nobody will know how you do this. Including you!

The final one-hundred-day term, back on the slopes of the mountain, tapers off like a soft alpine breeze, consisting of mere eighteen-mile daily marathons. Then, on your last day, as you scale the final set of very steep steps and reach the temple on Mount Hiei, your mortal coil will have traveled roughly 27,000 miles—a distance greater than the circumference of the earth!

Wouldn't you just long to be able to yell out with all your exploding liberated heart and soul, “Hallelujah!” or “Yesssssssss!” or some Zen equivalent like “Kensho!” at this inconceivably glorious moment of victory? Well, if your soul is set on scaling the sunlit summit of Buddhahood, you'll restrain yourself. Not just because it isn't kosher to openly express your emotions in Japan, but because, for the hardiest of the marathon monks, it isn't quite over yet.

If you are one of the rare few whose warrior spirit remains unquenched by the ordeal of the Great Marathon, then you can choose to cap it all, two to three years later, with the trial to end all trials: the daunting and fearsome Fire Ceremony. Indeed, this ritual is so forbidding that only six marathon

monks since World War II have undergone it. If you choose to embark upon this final rite of passage, you'll begin by fasting on root vegetables, boiled pine needles, nuts, and water for one hundred days. Why? This fast serves the purpose of drying you out (almost mummifying you in the process) so that you will not "expire of excessive perspiration" during the Fire Ceremony. The ordeal lasts eight days. It will require you to sit before a roaring fire, casting your devotees' prayer sticks into the scorching flames while chanting 100,000 mantras to Fudo Myo-o, who burns up evil passions and illuminates the darkest corners of existence. You are allowed a little sitting-up sleep (in front of the fire). Most monks regard this as the greatest challenge of them all.

Imbibing the phenomenon of the Marathon Monks left me marveling in wonder and disbelief. The more I tried to imagine what it would be like to undertake such an ordeal as the One-Thousand-Day Marathon, the more I felt in awe of their achievement. I also found myself reflecting on the role of ascetic practice in spiritual life. The Buddha, who wandered all over northern India during his long ministry, did fast himself to the door of death before finally rejecting extreme asceticism and proclaiming the Middle Way, the enlightened path between all pairs of opposites. Ascetic practice may not have given him Enlightenment, but as John Stevens points out in his book, there would be no doctrine of the Middle Way if Gautama had not so exhaustively pursued the ascetic path. In this way, it was an essential part of his trajectory toward an absolute transformation, and maybe this is why austere practice has always remained at the heart of Buddhism.

One of the most moving scenes in the documentary film, made in 1993, is where we hear the simple yet profound words of a radiant ninety-six-year-old Tendai abbot: "It is not the pain that matters. Pain is only a symptom of the effort that you put into the task," he tells us. "When a person sets his mind totally on achieving something, he begins to realize the inner power that he has." But what is particularly beautiful, and deeply inspiring, in the case of the Marathon Monks, is that this "inner power" is realized for the benefit of all. The first five years are a solitary ordeal. The monk is alone in surmounting the limits of body and mind and in so doing becomes as one with the mountains, the stars and the sky, the stones, the plants and the trees. In the last years however, after traversing the near-death experience of the *doiri*, the monk's austerities become a practice for bestowing merit, as he glides through the city streets of Kyoto spreading blessings to all.

So what do these intrepid spiritual athletes have to say about their experience? One monk, when asked what he had learned, replied with disarming humility: "Gratitude for the teaching of the enlightened ones, gratitude for the wonders of nature, gratitude for the charity of human beings, gratitude for the opportunity to practice—gratitude, not asceticism, is the principle of the [One-Thousand-Day Marathon]."

Special thanks to Millennium Television for the use of their images of the Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei. www.millennium-tv.com

Epilogue: Sakai the Supermonk

The most remarkable portrait in John Stevens's book is of a monk called Sakai. After a stormy life in the world, Sakai ordains at the late age of forty. He undergoes intense trials under the tutelage of his abbot Hakozaki, who is revered and feared as the harshest taskmaster on Mount Hiei. At one point, Sakai is attacked by a wild boar and as a result suffers from a festering wound that swells his first two toes to twice their normal size. The toenail on his big toe falls off and Sakai screams in pain with every step. Unable to continue, Sakai pulls out his knife and lances the wound. Blood and pus gush out and he almost loses consciousness, but he points the knife at his throat so that if he falls, he will remain faithful to his vow to kill himself if he fails to complete the course. After a while, he recovers and proceeds, albeit slowly, to the temple, where a crowd of devotees await his arrival. Sakai apologizes for the delay saying that he had "overslept." This experience gives him faith that he is being propelled by a higher force. Despite the fact that his injury never properly heals for the duration of the One-Thousand-Day Marathon, amazingly he completes his term.

This earns him the respect of his master Hakozaki, and the old abbot

presents him with a *haiku* in his honor:

The path of practice:

Where will be

My final resting place?

But even this is not enough to quell the spiritual ardor of Sakai. Not long after finishing his first one-thousand-day term in 1980, he decides, at the age of sixty-one, to go for a second! *Yes, that means he does the entire Great Marathon again!* He finds it easier than the first and shaves a year off his time—it takes him only six years! Sakai's only gripe is about the increased pollution in Kyoto; "I nearly choked on the smog," he says. But when asked about the practice, Sakai's spirit shines: "Human life is like a candle," he says. "If it burns out half-way it does no one any good. I want the flame of my practice to consume my candle completely, letting that light illuminate thousands of places. My practice is to live wholeheartedly, with gratitude and without regret. Practice really has no beginning or end; when practice and daily life are one, that is true Buddhism."