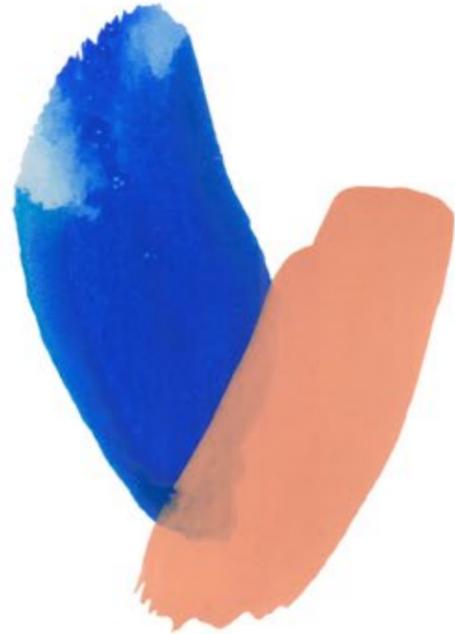


The Art of Endurance

From demanding physical feats to silent meditation, activities that push our bodies and minds to their limits are good for more than just a momentary rush.



Most of us thrive when we're nesting in our physical and mental comfort zones: a state of being where we feel safe and secure and have the general rhythm of our lives figured out. Anything that takes us out of this bubble becomes unsettling and uncomfortable, and we're generally apprehensive about—or do our best to avoid—situations that force us to face the great unknown. But the danger of subscribing to this philosophy of self-preservation is complacency—of becoming content with easy living instead of challenging our limits and tapping our full potential.

Pushing ourselves past our established habits can positively affect how we live our lives. One of the ways we can induce this effect is by engaging in endurance activities that thrust us far beyond our normal routines. These physical and emotional feats put our perceived limits to the test and can radically expand our capabilities and senses of what we can truly handle.

Endurance exercises have long been practiced across various religions, cultures and disciplines. For example, the Buddhist “marathon monks” of Japan participate in a seven-year training period called Kaihōgyō that involves walking more than 38,000 kilometers (23,600 miles) while engaging in intense meditation rituals. During a particular 100-day stretch in the final year of their quest, they cover 84 kilometers (52.5 miles) a day, which is twice the distance of a marathon. On the opposite end of the cultural spectrum, renowned artist Marina Abramović is well known for pushing the

limits of human patience. In her performance piece *The Artist is Present*, Abramović sat in a chair during the opening hours of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and invited gallery-goers to sit opposite her for as long as possible. To take it one step further, she also maintained an almost-silent vigil for the three-month period of the piece. Of the 1,545 people who participated—including Björk and Lou Reed—many were reduced to tears. One man sat with her 21 times, at one point for seven hours.

Misogi is another endurance activity that has its roots in ancient Japanese religion. According to Christopher Kavanagh, an East Asian religion specialist completing his PhD in Cognitive Anthropology at Oxford University, most sources trace this practice back to a legend relayed in *The Kojiki* (a sacred Shinto text with records dating all the way from the early eighth century). The legend describes how the deity Izanagi purified himself in a river after trying to save his wife from the underworld. “The core components of misogi rituals haven’t really evolved too much, but they’re constantly being adapted to fit the needs of different regional and social contexts,” Kavanagh says. Modern misogi rituals in Japan now include immersion in ice-cold water for extended periods of time, often with a meditation or fasting component added to the practice.

Enthusiasts outside of Japan have also drawn inspiration from misogi’s central tenets and have applied their own spin to them.

Two notable misogi practitioners are Dr. Marcus Elliott, a Harvard-trained physician who has worked with some of the world’s top athletes, and the fine artist R. Nelson Parrish. The pair has even completed several misogi challenges together: In one, they crossed the 27-mile-long Santa Barbara Channel on stand up paddleboards with professional basketball player Kyle Korver, and in another they teamed up with three friends to run a combined six miles underwater holding an 85-pound rock, taking brief breaks to surface for air. The latter trial lasted a grueling five hours.

Elliott explains that while their version of misogi is rooted in the Shinto tradition, it is “a psychological and spiritual challenge masquerading as a physical one.” Despite the physically demanding nature of the quests they undertake, both Elliott and Parrish stress that misogi isn’t designed to be an “adrenaline junkie punish fest” or a way to check off certain challenges from a bucket list. Instead, misogi functions as a tool to initiate self-reflection and dismantle perceived physical and psychological barriers. “Pushing through pain has little to do with the goals of a misogi task,” Parrish says. “Misogi is about reflection and constantly striving. It’s about finding the rough edges around your comfort zone, smoothing them out, expanding and then finding the next edge.”

Both Elliott and Parrish see misogi as a continual practice that has grown into an integral aspect of their lives: Parrish likes to take part in a misogi event every six months or so, as he finds himself

slipping into complacency a few months after completing a task. “The misogi philosophy is really something that should be practiced daily and can be as simple as holding your breath for three minutes,” Parrish says. “The big adventures are just the showcase events. The core of misogi is about challenging yourself out of your comfort zone on a daily basis.”

Endurance activities are incredibly arduous and take a toll on the body, but the psychological benefits they yield are equally as enormous. “We can talk about the chemical intermediates and hormones that are evoked in repetitive endurance exercises, but the truth is that there’s an insight—oftentimes spiritual and enlightening—that comes from these endeavors,” Elliott says. The effects of the sheer mental toughness required to complete these acts linger long after the last flight of stairs is scaled or that last bit of breath is exhaled: They translate into tangible real-life benefits, such as developing a thicker skin, broadening our perspective and giving us a stronger sense of self.

It’s easy for us to get too comfortable in the routines we’ve carved out for ourselves, but there’s immense value in prioritizing our self-improvement and challenging our minds and bodies to look beyond our perceived limits. By pushing our physical and mental faculties to the extreme, we can break through to a new level of what’s possible. So the next time life knocks us off-kilter, we’ll be able to right ourselves twice as quickly.