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A Question of Motivation

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*A Question of Motivation

Knowing why you participate in the martial arts will likely determine your degree of success and how long you stay active in them. There's not a single correct answer, although some motivations will serve your goals better than others.

Motivation is important not only for the "outcome" of how you perform but also for the process of getting there. It will affect which art you choose, how much you enjoy it, how often you train, how much effort you devote, how you handle setbacks and how you persist when things get tough.

What you think and how you feel about participating in a martial art is driven largely by how you interpret, understand or explain your experience. They are attributions—the explanations you create for yourself about how and why things happen the way they do. Sports psychologists point to three kinds of attributions that affect motivation. They're important because they affect your emotional response to past performances and expectations for the future.

If you execute a kata at a lower level than expected, are you likely to attribute the performance to factors under your control or outside your control? Knowing the answer, the author says, can help you maximize your martial arts training.

The first category is stability, or whether your performance was caused by some factor or condition that's stable (permanent) or unstable (temporary). Imagine that you're rehearsing a *kata* to prepare for a belt test but consistently make mistakes. You might decide that your poor performance is the result of a relatively stable factor—like a lack of coordination or athleticism—or an unstable factor—like not having had sufficient practice or being tired.

The second category is locus of causality, or whether your performance was caused by something internal you did—like devoting extra time to practice—or by something outside your influence—like your instructor being in a bad mood on test day.

The third category concerns the locus of control, or whether your performance resulted from something you control—like



your preparation—or something beyond your control—like a slippery mat.

Psychologists often talk about motivations as being intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic rewards are those that come from inside yourself, like feelings of accomplishment or fun. Extrinsic motivators are rewards given to you—such as prize money, belts, trophies and praise—for your participation or performance. The top athletes in nearly every sport possess a high degree of intrinsic motivation. They may also receive abundant extrinsic rewards, but if that becomes the primary reason for competing,

it can suck some of the enjoyment out of the sport.

The 1980s saw a surge of study focusing on the achievement-goal theory. Researchers found two main dimensions of achievement motivation in sports, commonly referred to as task orientation and ego orientation. Those with a high task orientation are motivated by feeling competent at what they do, giving their best effort and constantly improving their skills. Those with a high ego orientation are motivated by feeling that they're better than others, showing their ability and winning.

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Most athletes, particularly those who compete, tend to lean toward one or the other. The worst case is to be low on both dimensions. In some studies, athletes high on both tended to be the highest achievers. Whether you're a martial artist or an instructor, knowing and monitoring the balance of goal orientations can pay huge dividends in training and competition.

British sports-psychologist Chris Harwood proposed the following question for assessing your achievement-goal profile: When do you feel most successful in your sport?

- When you're the only one who can do a certain skill.
- When you're the best.
- When others mess up and you don't.

Athletes with a high level of ego orientation tend to agree strongly with those replies. Athletes with a high task orientation identify more with the following answers:

- When you perform to the best of your ability.
- When a skill you learn feels right.
- When you show clear personal improvement.
- When you overcome difficulties.

Here's another way to look at it: When you read the following two sets of words, which one immediately appeals to you?

- Learning, improvement, mastery
- Winning, ability, superiority

The first set obviously relates more to task orientation, the second to ego orientation. The question is not so much whether you have a preference but whether that preference is balanced in favor of your performance.

Having, or developing, a strong task orientation has advantages for the martial artist looking to excel. Research shows that task-oriented athletes are more confident, less anxious, have a more stable appraisal of their skills and abilities, set more challenging goals and are more persistent in adverse circumstances.

From a coach's perspective, developing task orientation is worth the investment because it causes a martial artist to more actively seek and better use instruction and feedback. Although temperament and early sports experiences may predispose a martial artist to lean in the direction of ego or task orientation, these motivations can be cultivated in training. ✘

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