Leggo My Ego

Stephen R Balzac

Competitions frequently get a bad rap in the Danzan Ryu community. A popular saying is that Danzan Ryu is about self-defense, not winning a sporting competition. It's been said on more than one occasion that winning and ego have no place in jujitsu practice, that a focus on winning interferes with developing skill. Such statements raise a host of questions.

First, and most obvious: is the claim correct? Do a competitive nature and a desire to win actually interfere with skill development, or do they help drive skill development? After all, those Olympic athletes many people watch every four years seem to be awfully skilled at what they do. If a focus on winning does interfere with skill development, why? Leaving aside such pithy Zen sayings about, "keeping one's eyes on the path," and the like, it would seem logical that a deep desire to be a successful competitor would spur a student to develop their skills to the utmost. If that isn't the case, why not?

It takes a certain amount of ego to believe that one can be successful in any new activity or endeavor. Thus, it seems odd, to say the least, to expect a new student to believe he can master the skills of Danzan Ryu sufficiently to obtain a shodan, much less a higher rank, and yet expect him to also shed his ego. So what's going on here?

Research shows that a person's motivation for learning a new skill or activity can be described as either mastery-oriented or outcome-oriented. The mastery-oriented person seeks to develop skills, deriving enjoyment and activity-based self-confidence from learning new skills and incrementally improving existing skills. In other words, she wants to perform better this week than she did last week, and hopes to perform still better next week. Failure is viewed as a temporary setback, simply requiring more effort to overcome. In a competitive setting, the mastery-oriented person will often feel successful even after losing a match, provided that she perceives that her performance improved since the last time. In a typical jujitsu setting, the mastery-oriented person strives for constant improvement and is unconcerned about her place in the belt or competition hierarchy, so long as she is continuing to make progress.

The outcome-oriented person, on the other hand, derives enjoyment and confidence from outperforming other people; in other words, from winning in various forms, which may include progressing more rapidly through the ranks, winning contests, etc. In other words, she wants to do better than the people around her. In a competitive setting, she's happy when she wins, and bases her self-image and confidence on her competitive successes. In a jujitsu context, the outcome-oriented person may be driven by a desire to advance more rapidly than other students, overtaking those who were initially ahead of her. Kata and freestyle contests are valued primarily as another way to win, not as vehicles for developing skill and focus.

This distinction has some interesting implications. If someone bases his self-image on winning or, at the very least, doing better than other people, he is, in effect, grounding his ego on something outside of his control. No matter how hard you work, there is no guarantee that the other person won't work harder. No matter how much talent you have, there will always be someone more talented.

On the flip side, a series of victories against easy opponents can create a sense of false confidence, easily shattered by a loss to a highly skilled opponent. For someone whose confidence and enjoyment are based upon being the best, this can prove devastating. Essentially, the outcome-oriented person risks self-image on events outside of his control.

Furthermore, someone focused entirely on the outcome can end up judging every act, every move, in terms of its perceived effect upon that outcome, instead of as feedback as to how he is doing *at the moment.* This

deprives the person of the pleasure inherent in performing the activity. As psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi observes, regular feedback is critical to attaining a state of total absorption, a condition known as *flow*. Flow is important exactly because it is a state in which maximal enjoyment of the activity will occur. People who only concern themselves with the feedback at the end of the activity (victory or defeat), and whose goals therefore cannot be fully controlled, deprive themselves of a flow experience. Decades of research have found that people with a strong outcome orientation are more prone to depression, gain less enjoyment from their activities, and tend to avoid situations in which they would look bad. In other words, for these individuals, failure is to be avoided at all costs. Based on this argument, it would certainly appear that mastery orientation is the way to go.

Of course, it's never quite so simple. While generally healthier than outcome orientation, mastery orientation has problems of its own. Most notably, the mastery-oriented person may have no sense of urgency. So long as there is progress forward, the mastery-oriented student may be satisfied, even if progress comes at a glacially slow rate. Despite that fact, mastery-oriented students will often tend to be more successful than outcome-oriented students.
In fact, it might even appear that there is little use for outcome-orientation at all. Appearances, however, can be deceiving. It turns out that most of those Olympic athletes mentioned earlier reported that winning was not their primary goal in practicing their sport. Rather, their primary motivation was perfection of their skills and pushing their bodies past the normal limits. In other words, they are highly mastery-oriented. Despite this, they are amongst the most competitive athletes around.

"People who only concern themselves with the feedback at the end of the activity (victory or defeat), and whose goals therefore cannot be fully controlled, deprive themselves of a flow experience."

It turns out that the optimal motivation style is one combining high mastery-orientation with high outcome-orientation. In this combination, many of the problems that beset either orientation alone are reduced or eliminated. The drive to win provides a sense of urgency, but the drive to mastery provides the fuel that enables the athlete to enjoy the process. Losing a contest or failing a belt exam may sting, but it's not the ego-crushing experience that it can be for someone who is solely outcome-oriented. And, of course, successes improve the student's sense of confidence and self-image through both the mastery and the outcome paths.

Is that it? Not quite.

It's not enough to be high mastery and high outcome-oriented. The training environment must be one that supports mastery without denigrating or destroying the value of competitive outcomes. For example, a mastery-oriented dojo can still encourage students to participate in, and enjoy, competitions. Instead of being about winning and losing, a competition can be framed as an opportunity to test a skill set under stress. A student who does well in competition can be congratulated without the trite refrain, "Of course, we all know this doesn't mean anything." Actually, it means that on that particular day, that particular person managed to execute his skills better than the others in the competition. In a mastery environment, the goal of competition is less focused on winning and more focused on successfully executing the skills that were tested. Denigrating the student's success serves to deny him the gains in self-efficacy that he may have obtained through his performance.

A highly competitive training environment, on the other hand, will tend to make mastery-oriented students miserable and focus people on outcomes instead of processes. In other words, don't expect students to develop a strong mastery orientation in an environment that values outcomes more than processes. Just as the best athletes combine high mastery and outcome orientations, the best training environments will teach students how to use competition as an important - but not exclusive - tool for building mastery.

In the end, is a desire to win such a terrible thing? If that's all that

matters, then yes. However, if the desire to win is coupled by a strong desire to learn and to perfect skills for their own sake, then the desire to win can be a powerful and healthy motivating force.

References:

Cox, R. (2002). *Sport Psychology, Concepts and Applications (5th Edition).* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper Collins.

Franken, R. (2002). *Human motivation (5th Edition)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth

Gallwey, W. T. (1974). *The inner game of tennis.* New York: Bantam.

Hall, H., Kerr, A., Matthews, J. (1998). *Precompetitive Anxiety in Sport: The Contribution of Achievement Goals and Perfectionism.* Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, Vol 20, pp. 194-217.

Thompson, M., Vernacchia, R., Moore, W. (1998). *Case Studies in Applied Sport Psychology.* Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.