

Success is a Journey, A Destination, and a Redefinition

In America, people believe they are goal-oriented. They want that new car, that vacation, that retirement home, that lottery prize, so these “goals” serve as motivating factors. In martial arts, people want that tournament trophy, that black belt, that school of one’s own, that recognition as a master. These “goals” motivate them to stay with their studies.

Then we hear that success is not a destination at all, but a journey. One is supposed to be goal-oriented just long enough to head down a path that, in the traveling, brings one rewards. Do what you like, we are told, and success will follow. How far behind it will follow is not made clear. In the martial arts, if you do only what you like and not what you need do to improve yourself, you become a sort of martial arts “wannabe” without an art, a style, or a teacher to direct your development. What feels good in the short run does not necessarily benefit in the long run.

If success is a journey, then there is no destination. The mountain of mastery keeps getting taller the higher you climb. How then do you know that you have been successful or if you are ever to be successful? Too often the martial artist responds, “Well, I can beat this or that guy in a fight,” or “I have a higher rank than this or that guy.” In other words, he is claiming relative success. His success depends upon someone else. If this were true, then very few people are ever really successful in the martial arts since someone else is always higher ranked, better at fighting, or has more experience or higher levels of skills.

What is a sincere martial artist to do? One may start by re-examining and perhaps re-defining success. There is incremental success, the kind measured by and directed by goal-setting. Then there is comparative success, the kind that uses the general condition of one’s peers as a measuring stick. Finally, there is satisfaction, a completely subjective sense of accomplishment that sometimes is supported by the other two items, sometimes not.

For the martial artist, **incremental success** occurs by achieving ranks or other pre-determined levels of recognition. Most martial arts have this automatic goal-setting program in place. Following the rank structure (as long as you don’t just squeak by exams or finagle a political rank) can give you a sense of momentum and an altimeter to measure your initial ascent. The rank structure gives a series of “destinations” to aim towards.

Comparative success can be a dangerous game — one can always find someone worse or someone better. I prefer the type of comparative success that measures today’s self against yesterday’s. Constant, never-ending improvement (*kaizen*) is the standard by which to measure yourself, and the “journey” you always hear about.

You attain **satisfaction** by working toward worthwhile goals (the increments) and regularly looking back to see where you have been, but satisfaction is much more subjective than that alone. Who is to say if 7 or 12 or 14 rank promotions will make you satisfied, or if improving yourself weekly, monthly, or yearly is

enough to put a sparkle in your eye? In order to know how you can be satisfied, you have to first feel satisfaction. So there is a little game you can play called “future pacing” (the term comes from Neuro Linguistic Programming). You simply see and feel yourself as satisfied. You then observe this imaginary situation to determine what makes you feel that way. Is it an initial black belt or a fifth degree black belt? Is it true self-defense ability or a history of earning the adulation of a tournament crowd? What is it you would like to have seen, been, done, accomplished, experienced in the martial arts by the time you are 97? Write it down. Now figure out your incremental goals backward.

If you do this exercise yearly, you will be able to adjust your destination in a way that will not only change the journey, but will result in satisfaction both on the way up and at the pinnacle.