

Joy vs. The Grind

From RATIONAL GRIT (last week): Since a martial arts class is laden with correction and...criticism, he would have been banging his head against reality hoping that someday the teacher would find him worthy. In other words, he might have eventually achieved [success] but at the price of being less happy than he wanted.

Judo and Tae Kwon Do currently are, and in 2020 Karate will be, Olympic sports. If a martial arts school trains athletes for the Olympics, you can bet that the training is stricter than the open-to-the-public training and that the training itself is not what motivates the athletes to show up early or stay late. Rather, the motivation to continue the grind is provided by the idea of being in the Olympics, acquitting oneself well in world-class competition, and personally achieving a gold medal. Were it not for the big event, very few potential Olympic martial artists would put up with the sacrifices, financial, temporal, and physical, that it takes to achieve the thrill of victory and avoid the agony of defeat.

Most martial artists are not potential Olympians. Most do not intend to push their bodies and minds to their limits in order to achieve a competitive goal. Even local competitive martial artists, who train with the idea of competing in a series of weekend tournaments, do not train to the point of enduring a constant grind. The weekend warriors and martial artists who train for self-defense or self-development do not mind grinding once in a while, but they find joy *in the training itself*—a moderate training—not in their success in a specific event. Sure, they do not want to skimp on taxing themselves if it means they can get demonstrably better at their skills, but there is a limit. Too much taxation means less take-home bliss, i.e. too much grind means less joy in training.

The average martial artist endures the constant corrections and adjustments, the constant feeling of always having another ledge to which to climb, partially because of the rank that is dangled before them like a lesser version of Olympic gold, but also because they can feel themselves improving and, in my opinion, mostly because the training is fun. Fun-filled training has its dangers, of course. Consider the quality of the martial artists graduating from a kids class that plays tag and kick-ball variations in uniforms cinched with multi-stripped, multi-colored belts. Sure, they'll sign up again next year, but when they get to the adult class their skills will be closer to a larger person's kiddie-karate than to a well-trained martial artist's. But neither does a hard-edged drill-oriented training in a kids' class produce high-quality martial artists—mostly because the majority of kids will quit before they are mature enough to see the value in what they have been learning.

Adults have more tolerance for the grind; in fact, without a little grind, they feel cheated. I have known a couple of kempo schools that make their training occasionally taxing and their exam triply taxing not because it truly tests for technical quality, but because they want to make the examining student feel that he/she has *earned* his rank. Ironically, their “grind” does not produce Olympic-quality form, speed, reactions, or fluidity, but it certainly helps retain students. If their students see a colored belt as their version of a medal, any sort of grind is tolerated.

Many schools, however, more eager to produce happy, confident, *and* competent students, balance the grind with fun learning—a learning that can be measured against last month’s skill-level. Their practice is not necessarily easy, but it is interesting and enjoyable, so enjoyable, in fact, that the Joy outweighs the Grind. I suggest that this last kind of school should be the model for most non-sport martial arts schools because it inspires, retains students, produces measurable success over time, and leaves the student happy that he/she is a martial artist.

Most athletes burn out either from overtraining in the short run or training hard for too long a run. If martial artists wish to train for a lifetime, a regimen that balances Joy and Grind, but leans toward Joy, might just be the formula for ongoing success.