

Goal Setting: The Two-Edged Sword

By Laoshi Laurince McElroy

Self-help guru after self-help guru writes about and speaks to the importance of setting and tracking goals. Common sense seems to dictate that the way to be successful when people begin a diet or make a commitment to a new workout regimen is that they first determine what it is they seek to achieve by making that commitment.

I remember participating in a sales training program a few years ago. The head of the program was insistent that goals not be general in nature. In other words, he did not allow things like “close more” or “get in front of more people”. We had to set specific goals for the number of phone calls to make, number of those calls that were to generate face-to-face meetings, percentage of face-to-face meetings that would close, etc.



Being specific about what one wants from stepping onto the mat or into the gym also seems to make sense. “I wanna be able to touch my toes” is much more specific than “I wanna be more flexible” and “I wanna be able to see my toes” is much more specific than “I wanna lose a few pounds”.

Building the business or getting in better shape becomes the carrot, but the goals are the stick.

There’s the rub: Goals are the **stick**. Goals can become that traditional Chinese instructor standing behind you with the bamboo staff prepared to whap you on the back of the head when you come out of your stance training too soon. They mock you. They beat you up. When they do these things, they can very easily become what discourages you instead of what inspires you.

They can also blind you to the path that is necessary to find success. It would be hard to be involved in the martial arts and not know the parable that I call *The Way to Get There*. Water Tiger’s version has been repeated in the room and on the mat many times and has also been featured in a past edition of our newsletter. For a point-of-reference, here it is:

The student comes to the teacher and says, “Laoshi, I want to master your art; how long will it take me?”

“Five years,” comes the answer.

Disappointed in the concept of such a long period of time, the student counters, “What if I were to come and study each morning, each evening, and fill the weekends in study with you? How long would it take then?”

“15 years,” comes the answer.

In disbelief and disappointment, the student asks, “What if I were to give up my job, live in the studio and study with you from dawn to dusk every day of the week? How long would it take then?”

“30 years.”

“But, Laoshi,” cries the student, “why is it that every time I promise to increase my commitment to learning to master your art, you tell me it will take even longer?”

“Because,” replies the teacher, “with both eyes focused on your destination, you will be unable to see the way to get there.”

“Exalting the Journey” is emblazoned on our various pieces of Water Tiger fashion, posted on our website and our Facebook page, and printed on our marketing materials. It represents the Taoist precept that it is the journey that should be exalted and not the destination. As we move through our life, each step on the path leads to the next step — like one rung on the ladder leads to the next. There are no shortcuts for it is the experience that holds the lesson and the opportunity for growth.

However, there's an issue focusing on one step at a time. In a nutshell: You have to know where you're going or you might end up somewhere that does you no service. If you have no destination, how do you know what direction you should be going? Granted, one may have to go south to go north. But, if you don't know you need to go north, how will you know that you will eventually need to find a way to change direction? Without a goal, the practice can lack purpose.

As we know from the mat and the room, intent is the at the root of all we do. If the movement has no intent, the movement has no life. If the practice has no direction, the practice will not bring us to success.

There's the conundrum. We need goals, but they can be a distraction. We need to exalt the journey, but we need to know the direction we should be traveling.

I'd ask you to think about the closing wisdom of the parable above: "... with **both** eyes focused on your destination, you will be unable to see the way to get there." I added the emphasis to make my point. We have two eyes. It doesn't serve for both of them to be focused on the goal. But, I'd ask you to consider what happens if one eye is on the goal and one eye is on the path.

With careful consideration, one can come to understand that our approach to goals will have an echo of the wisdom of Forrest Gump regarding destiny: "I don't know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just floating around accidental-like on a breeze, but, I think maybe it's both."

Goals are important, but it's the journey that gets us there. The journey's important, but it's having a destination that takes us out the door in the first place.

Travel well .

