

The Theory of Action vs. State Orientation applied to Freediving

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You dive. You follow that rope at arms reach. You go down. All that you care for is that next equalization. Maybe you find that you are a bit tense in your shoulders, so you just let go of that. You know that everything is alright. You focus on a nice, majestic fin-kick, maybe you hear your favorite song inside your head. And you look at that rope that guides you on your journey deeper into the blue.

Then the situation changes. Maybe you start to feel the pressure building on your chest, or you hit a thermocline, or a spark of doubt lights up in your mind. No matter what the trigger is, a vicious circle gets set in motion and you feel helpless to stop it from spinning. Your negative emotions make you more sensitive to external stimuli, which in turn deepen your doubts (See for example Fredrickson, B. L. 2009) - in other words, the small pressure on now feels like an elephant standing on your chest, or this thermocline of probably two degrees seems to pierce the exposed parts of your face like daggers.

You literally lose your mind – you lose control over your mind, you panic, your body tightens up. You start looking for a reason to turn around. And it's easy to find one – being tense as you are, you most likely can't equalize your ears anymore, so you can't go further down the line.

You stop, you turn, you go back up.

Back on the surface you know exactly that there was no *real* reason to abort the dive, you know that you are physically capable of getting to the aimed depth. You know that the reason for aborting the dive is inside yourself: You were defenseless against your negative emotions.

“Action vs. State Orientation” is a psychological model of emotional regulation. This paper is about applying this model to freediving and providing tools to learn how to deal with negative emotions.

The model of Action vs. State Orientation

In 1981, the German psychologist Julius Kuhl stated in his model that some individuals cope with negative emotions and override anxiety, while other individuals just can't:

- *Action orientation* is, in essence, the capacity to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors to fulfill the intentions that individuals form.
- *State orientation* refers to the inability to regulate these emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. That is, these individuals are unable to modify their state – their anxiety, dejection, confusion, and uncertainty, for example.

Kuhl (1981)

According to this definition, the focus must be on inter-individual differences. For some it's possible to perform in an overloaded workday, go out every night, eat bad food, raking up a sleeping deficit, neglect training and in the same time still pull-off nice freedives. Sure they could go longer and deeper if they'd live more the sportsman's way, but that argument is missing the point. While a state oriented person does worry about how the lack of sleep or the fast food they had will affect their dive, action oriented people reach their goals *despite* a lifestyle that might be counterproductive for the given situation.

Action orientation goes along with *intuitive affect regulation*: Action oriented people feel disappointment just as much as everybody else, maybe even more so, as they allow it to be a reality to deal with. But they also celebrate success, maybe even excessively. But then it's over – life goes on.

Action oriented people don't have the tendency to cling to their past deeds (Kuhl, 1981), failures or successes, it's all about the moment, the now. Psychologists have arguments about how much of that intuitive affect regulation is automatic and not affected by deliberate intervention through our minds (Haidt, 2006). But this doesn't mean that an individual is just plain lucky and blessed with action orientation. As Moss (2008) correctly pointed out: "(..), an effortful, conscious strategy, when repeated many times, may eventually be invoked automatically and unconsciously". In sports, this learning process is focused under the term *training* – the ability to create automatic behavior by focused repetition.

In other words, we can train how to deal with our emotions in a goal oriented way.

Application to Freediving

Alleman, Job, Christen, and Keller (2008), investigated in more detail what state orientated people separates from individuals with action orientation.

- Table 1 shows in column 1 their four main findings.
- These findings can be interpreted as underdeveloped or not yet acquired skills (column 2).
- Each of these skills can be acquired by according training (column 3)

Table 1: Findings in state orientation (Alleman et al. (2008)) and matching skills

Empirical findings in <i>state orientation</i>	Skill to be aquired	Training Method to acquire Skill
Preoccupation with impending threats	Be in the moment	- Yoga - Meditation - Mental Training ..
Impoverished intentions	Come clear about what you want & need	- Introspection - Coaching ..
Likely to hesitate Difficulties to foster positive affect	Foster positive affect by creating sense of achievement	- Goal Setting Theory - Creation of contentment by doing what you can ..

Let's have a look at the training methods mentioned in Column 3.

Exercises to “be in the moment”

Yoga, Meditation, Autogenic Training and others – these schools and techniques are means to learn to focus the mind on the moment, to stay in the “now”. Yoga adds to that the execution of movements and postures which can further enhance the freediver’s self awareness. I recommend reading Ken Wilber on how to create your personal daily praxis (e.g. Wilber, 2000).

All of these techniques and schools are largely covered in freediving literature and I won’t further discuss them here.

Introspection

Before engaging in any action, it is essential to come clear about what you want and why. This is a skill that has to be acquired and trained and this can be harder than one might think – separating copied behavior from true intentions is not something that comes easy in a world dominated by public relation, social media and advertising: The goal of these disciplines is to hijack people’s true intentions by suggesting wishes and artificial intentions in such a way that they start to accept them as their own, e.g. buying a watch of a certain brand.

To improve as a freediver, the first question is “why bothering?”. The following set of questions should be answered in full honesty (see Jostmann, Koole, van der Wulp, & Fockenberg, 2005):

- What do you want to do?
- Why do you want it to do?
- What skills does it take to do that?
- Where are you standing compared to that skill set?

The support of a *coach* can be very helpful, mainly to identify weak spots in the found answers. Even more so in the next step.

Based on the answer to question nr. 4, it is essential to setup a training plan to complete the required skill set – and stick to it. This might take weeks, months or even years of training. That’s why only answering questions nr. 3 and 4 is not enough.

The motivation of living up to ones own expectations comes from answering questions nr. 1 and 2 – or it doesn’t.

Goal setting theory

Fostering positive affect, putting one little pearl of success next to the other on a nice bracelet of achievement will build up an athlete's confidence in its own abilities. This will not work when the level of the challenge is set too low – the difficulties someone encounters on the way of to finish a job defines his or her perception of success. If it was too easy, there is no success.

Within their goals setting theory, Latham and Locke (1991) postulated a basis for positive goal setting, how to *foster positive affect*:

- Aim at a high but reachable goal
- Commit to the goal
- Divide the goal into sub-goals which are directly achievable through action (the application of the tools you learn in freediving courses)
- Work for the sub-goals
- Reach the sub-goals
- Enjoy the success
- Raise the bar by one step (but one step only)

Key is the creation of contentment by doing what you can. Nobody can learn a proper constant weight dive in one go, but by attending courses and regular training, freedivers learn all the separate skills it takes to do so.

Sure, the result of freediving performance can be measured in centimeters and seconds, but an observer, a coach, cannot go close enough to see every single piece of the puzzle that a dive represents. This is true for many other sports, too, but not many of them confront us with our deepest fears – the fear of not having enough air, the fear of drowning.

A coach can only work with what he sees and what the athlete describes – the latter takes greatest honesty and an athlete-coach-relationship built on trust. Here again, the identification of missing or not yet successfully applied skills is key to good coaching.

Conclusion: Triggers and Answers

For every external trigger presented in the little freedive-story at the beginning of this paper you can find a positive answer through training. Here are some examples:

- Look down and see how far it still is to the bottom? You've been there a thousand times. You can relax and enjoy the view. Then turn your head back into perfect position.
- Notice leg burn or a sensation of fatigue? No news there, you know that feeling from your grueling pool training, or you even find confidence as this sensation indicates also the peripheral vasoconstriction of your mammalian dive response.
- Feel the water pressure on the chest? It feels just the same in your daily lung (negative) stretches and your FRC dives – you know that feeling. And you take it in small steps, so no danger to hurt yourself.

For every trigger that comes your way, you can find an answer within yourself. That's how you turn the vicious circle of negative thinking into positive affect. That's what allows you to wander the edge of your personal limits. Even though it's challenging, you enjoy doing so, because you have the confidence that you are up to the challenge. You enjoy the *Flow*.

References

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