



## THE GOAL OF NO GOAL

BY PHILLIP MOFFITT

On the very last day of 1986, soon after my fortieth birthday, I did something that many people have since told me they long to do: I completely abandoned my professional identity, with all its security and privileges, in order to devote myself to finding more joy and meaning in my life. It was a good life that I left—some would even say a great one. I was editor in chief and chief executive of *Esquire* magazine, having bought it with some colleagues when it had fallen on hard times and slowly nourished it back to financial health and prominence. I liked what I did, was reasonably good at it, and as both creative and operational leader, I got to do things my way—a rare situation. But to the astonishment of people in the New York magazine world at the time, I gave it all up to dedicate myself fully to exploring the inner life and to understanding the mystery of this human existence, with all its glorious wonderment and its endless suffering, all its joyous possibility and its devastating despair.

When I walked out the door at *Esquire*, I had no plans. I did not know what city or even what country I would be living in, let alone what I would be doing with my time. Had I known that I would spend most of the next few years living in various meditation centers in rooms so small that I often could reach out and touch both walls, I might not have so cheerfully left my comfortable Manhattan apartment.

And yet I was not completely naive about such matters. At the age of twenty-three, I had begun a hatha yoga practice in which I learned to put my body into various poses and to hold them for long periods of time. I soon added the breathing exercises called *pranayama* and within a year a meditation practice. By the time I turned twenty-six, I was doing yoga for at least an hour and a half each evening. In fact, I became so immersed in my practice that I came close to withdrawing from the conventional world at age thirty, but then I backed out at the last moment.

It was my groping for some motivation to keep me enthusiastic about my worldly existence that led me to purchase *Esquire*, a magazine that I had always admired for its literary quality and hip style. During those first years at *Esquire* I lost the momentum of my spiritual practice. Despite my best efforts to live in both the New York publishing world and the inner world, I found that I could not access the impulse to do yoga or meditate. Perhaps this was due to my conflicted feelings about not pursuing the inner life full-time. Or perhaps it was because I misused certain yogic concentration and breathing techniques in order to energize myself to

work ridiculously long hours. (I later discovered that this was a very unskillful act, and I may well have alienated myself from my own fountain of energy and bliss.) It was a painful and humbling experience to go from having such a strong practice full of ecstatic states to being someone who could not even make himself do a yoga pose. I felt exiled from my own heart.

My preconceived idea of the Eightfold Path before I gave myself over to it was that it was simply a means to a goal—to achieve liberation in the future. Such a view can be inspiring and highly motivating, and I thought I would just naturally respond and embrace this view. But I quickly discovered that it is also possible to walk the Eightfold Path as a moment-by-moment goal that is not future-oriented but now-oriented. This “just now” perspective will serve you well if, like me, you have a tendency to get fixated on the future at the expense of the present.

For this reason, I took the goal of having no goals (even spiritual ones) as my primary practice in the years immediately following my departure from *Esquire*. All my adult life I had been organized around making goals for the future, and I had the ability to realize many of them. But the trouble with goals, at least for me, is that they tend to elicit a sense of identity bound up in time. The ego will usurp

*Artist Gregg Chadwick writes: “As a contemporary painter my first obligation is to the work. My art demands an engagement with the physicality of canvas and paint as well as the duty to really see the world. My current paintings are filtered through my experience of September 11, 2001. I was visiting my father in Thailand and had spent the morning following the saffron-robed monks on their small morning pilgrimages. I hopped a flight for Bangkok and while waiting for a connecting flight to San Francisco I watched in horror as the planes hit the World Trade Center. On my return to the U.S. later that week I began to paint Buddhist monks, privately at first, as a form of meditation. Only later did I grasp the Dharmic sense of responsibility inherent in this new body of work. I needed to paint these paintings. And I found that the audience I had developed over the years felt the need to see them. They have given me their trust that I will create paintings that speak of our times but also provide clues to a future path away from the darkness.”*

even your loftiest goals and use them to further entrench itself at the center of your being when it really belongs in a supporting role.

My practice during this period, which I call my time of wandering in the desert, was to focus my attention on the intention of just being fully present for this moment, this step on the path, as best I was able. It was a difficult practice, and it was impossible to explain to others how “non-doing” represented a profound practice. I had spent twenty years in the larger-than-life roles of editor and entrepreneur. What I accomplished was “heroic” in the eyes of the media world and those around me. I naively thought that once I surrendered my worldly position, I would have a new ego identity: that of someone who was a seeker of answers to life’s big questions.

Instead, for the first five years after I entered my new life, it was my “hero” identity that would wake up most mornings ready to slay dragons. This well-established ego wanted and needed a sense of purpose that involved action, challenge and satisfaction. But there was nothing for him to do! It made my mind restless and unsure.


I never regretted leaving publishing to pursue the inner life, but during those early years I constantly questioned the manner in which I was practicing. Was the goal of no goal wise, or should I use my hero energy to create a spiritual identity?

But I couldn’t do it; it seemed artificial. Given my desire to accomplish and become, my only genuine course seemed to be the path of non-doing. Acting solely on intuition, I would urge myself, “Just now. Just be present in this moment.” I repeated this many times each day, week after week.

Periodically I “fell off the wagon” and got involved in various projects that gave me ego satisfaction, but I always came to my senses, dropped the projects, and resumed my moment-to-moment practice of living without goals. After several years, a shift in my ego identity occurred that felt as though part of me had died. Initially it felt like a great loss. But eventually a new internal organizational structure emerged that felt spacious and freeing. For the first time I felt capable of meeting life just in the moment, rather than compulsively seeing and interpreting every experience in the context of future goals. This inner change was the genuine beginning of the path I had long sought. ☺

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