



Photo: Ashley Knedler

GOALS

The question of whether it is Good to have goals is something that I've struggled with for a long time. In looking out and around at the world, I cannot help but notice the immense power they possess. But I have felt deeply the emptiness of goals achieved. There is a sense of satisfaction there for sure and contentedness, but they are only momentary. And soon, very soon usually, the urge for yet another goal comes on.

My spiritual teachers are telling me to throw out goals altogether, even the goal of spirituality itself, even the desire to do acts of charity and good works. They say there is too much of the ego in goals, too much attachment and expectation.

As attractive, as liberating as this advice may be, it leaves me feeling somewhat confused. Isn't everything we do in life ultimately directed at a goal—to stay alive? Can we really abandon that? And what of striving? What of seeking to give your best to God? What of serving your family? Your community? What about your duty?

Again, I think this is where words get us into trouble. The sense in which we view a "goal" as a thing or an object that we can possess is what should be avoided. But, perhaps, there is another sense, another way to think about "goals." What if

a "goal" was simply another way to be, rather than some end state or thing? We if we looked at goals as just another kind of experience or event? A process?

So instead of pursuing a goal to "achieve it," we pursue a goal to experiment "being in a certain way," or in other words "playing a role in a certain way." With this shift, we can take out all the ego-baggage from goals, all the attachments and emotional dependencies that come along with the things we try to possess.

Thought of in this way we can have as many goals as roles we can play in a day. Suppose you are a father. The question becomes not "what do I want to achieve as a father?," but rather how do I want to be as a father? What characteristics do I want to embody? How do I want to behave day-in and day-out? How am I going to handle stress? Conflict? Adversity? How am I going to discipline?...This switch is subtle, but it really changes perspective. Goals retain their incredible usefulness in motivating and guiding our conduct but lose all that negative baggage that comes with attachment. When you think of goals in terms of outcomes, you are really engaging in an impossible task anyway. What control do you have over the external world? It is better to be goal-oriented in conduct rather than outcomes.

Another idea I've been experimenting with is to frame goals in terms of activity rather than outcomes. This has been particularly helpful with the writing process. As I sit down in front of the computer to write I don't say to myself "I am going to finish this article" rather I say something like "Ok, Nick, let's write for 30 minutes and see what happens" or "Let's write until we get to at least 500 words." I've found that this creates a far better psychological environment for creative work. And almost every time, I end up writing for much longer than the 30 minutes or the 500 words. I don't feel any of that pressure that comes with looking for a specific

external outcome and, as a result, the writing is better.

I really believe that I've stumbled across something important here. I've been experimenting with this in many areas of my life for a few years now and have noticed a great improvement in my performance, productivity, energy levels, attitude...etc. Interestingly, I'm still "achieving" all the external outcomes I want to achieve—maybe even more. I am very curious to see whether this can work as well for others. So if you end-up experimenting at all with these ideas, please reach out and let me know how it goes.