

What is Flow?

Flow

As a technical term in Basic Mindfulness Training, flow is defined as the movement, change, energy, or force present within a sensory experience. Flow can occur within active states (such as Touch, Feel, Image, or Talk) or within restful states (such as Relaxation, Peace, Blank, or Quiet). Flow is not something separate from specific sensory experiences; it is a characteristic that appears within a specific sensory experience as a result of continuously bringing clarity and equanimity to that experience.

Flow and Vanishing represent two sides of Impermanence (Pali, *anicca*).

The impermanent nature of things can be looked upon from a pessimistic point of view or an optimistic point of view. Pessimistically, everything passes, so to pin your happiness on any person, object, or situation is to set yourself up to suffer sooner or later. From this perspective, *anicca* is linked to *dukkha* (the suffering nature of life). Optimistically, impermanence is movement, and (as Newton pointed out) movement reflects an underlying force. By focusing on instantaneous rates of change in ordinary sensory experiences, we can come into direct contact with the underlying Force that molds them... Spirit. From this perspective, *anicca* is linked to *prāna* (the ebullient energy of life).

It would be convenient to have a word for this positive aspect of change, so I call it Flow. Note, however, that the word flow has this meaning only within the context of Basic Mindfulness, and may refer to something quite different in other systems. For example, in the “Positive Psychology” of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, flow refers to the pleasure derived from being in a state of samadhi as you do ordinary things, a notion different from (but not *entirely* unrelated to) Flow as we will be using the term.

Flavors of Flow

Flow comes in many different flavors. The main forms of flow I like to distinguish are undulatory flow, vibratory flow, and expanding-contracting flow. Undulatory flow is continuous, wavy movement, like a jellyfish, or an amoeba, or a lava lamp, or seaweed in a tide pool. People commonly experience this flavor of flow over their whole body.

The vibratory flavor of flow is like champagne bubbles or sparks of electricity. If you have ever experienced “runner’s high” or the muscular “pump” that weightlifters speak of, you have contacted this flavor of flow. A similar feeling is the invigorating sensation you get after taking a cold shower, or the refreshed feeling you have after making love, the afterglow. If you have the microscopic awareness to observe any of these experiences at a very fine scale, you will see your whole body is full of something like scintillating mist or effervescent champagne bubbles. Runner’s high, cold shower, lovemaking – what do each of these experiences have in common? Each one of them represents an intense experience of physical sensation in the body. In the relaxed period that follows, if you observe microscopically, you will discover a fine vibratory

phenomenon. This vibration is in fact the deep nature of all body experience, but it is easier to detect at such times because of the intense involvement with the body that preceded.

Expansion-contraction flow involves inward and outward movements, stretching and squeezing forces, or inward-outward pressures. Its essence is effortless puffing out and equally effortless collapsing in. This flavor of Flow underlies others.

More than one flavor of Flow can be present in the same sensory space at the same time.

A person's first experience of flow is usually in Body Space. Later they begin to notice flavors of flow in the other senses, including the thinking process itself. Of course not everybody experiences flow in the ways I have described, and you certainly should not struggle trying to get experiences of undulation, vibration, or expansion-contraction, and so forth. However, if you do detect flow, either as a result of formal meditation or as the result of some particular situation, it is important to understand what it signifies and how to work with it. Let's talk about that.

Flow as Purifier

When a body worker massages you, their fingers move through your muscles and transfer energy into them. This works out the kinks and lumps in the substance of the muscles. This is a good analogy for Flow. When you let Flow work on you, the energy in its waves and vibrations breaks up the lumps in the substance of your soul. It works out the kinks in all six of your senses. This is flow as a purifier, something that breaks up blockages, cleans out impurities, refines the ore of your essence. As this is happening, it may seem as though the very substance of consciousness itself is becoming soft and porous. You can actually feel the waves and vibrations of *anicca* churning up gunk from the depths of your soul. It seems to cull up this inner ooze, break it up, and then excrete it out. You can literally feel the substance of your soul being scoured at a very deep level by the flow of impermanence.

This cathartic aspect of impermanence is related to important ideas from other spiritual traditions. The words used in those traditions may not seem to refer to anything like impermanence conceptually. If you just looked at the literal meaning of these words, you would never in your wildest dreams imagine that they had anything to do with what Buddhists call impermanence. Take, for example, what in the Chinese medicine is referred to as *qi* (*ch'i*, or *ki*), which is described a kind of energy that flows through us in certain regular channels. When you receive an acupuncture treatment, and really tune into what is happening with the needles, you will have an experience called *deqi*, or "getting qi." You feel expanding, contracting, vibrating waves going out from that needle, doing stuff that seems to be good for your body. You would never think that would be related to the Buddhist notion of Impermanence, but it is. As you'll remember in Buddhist practice we get insight into impermanence by being very precise and very open to things. When the acupuncturist puts a needle in your skin, it produces a sensation of pain, a pin prick. It is not a big sensation, nothing more than a mosquito bite, so it is fairly easy to be completely open to that sensation, especially if you believe that the needle is going to help you. So when you are needled in acupuncture, it is easy to have *equanimity* with these little pin pricks. It is also easy to be very *precise* about them, very mindful about exactly where they are located. We even have a verb, to pinpoint. To pinpoint something means to be precise about it. So receiving acupuncture gives you an automatic experience of precise and equanimous body

awareness. Compare this to what we do in mindfulness practice. When we meditate on the body, we attempt to be very precise about the locations of sensations and we try to have equanimity with them, to the best of our ability. In essence what we are doing is taking the ordinary aches and pains we experience while sitting, and converting them into a kind of acupuncture stimulus. Then they start to vibrate and spread in waves through us, and we experience deqi, we get the qi flow, which in Buddhism is described as “Insight into the impermanent nature of body sensations.”

Impermanence is also related to what is called the Holy Spirit in the Western tradition. The phrase Holy Spirit may sound sort of mystical-schmystical, maybe even scary and off-putting. But the English words “holy spirit” come from the Latin *spiritus sanctus*, and the Latin phrase is just a translation of the Greek *hagia pneuma*, which in turn is a translation of the Hebrew *ruach ha-kodesh*. In Hebrew *ruach* means “the wind,” i.e. something that has power, but is insubstantial and constantly moving. The Holy Spirit is a kind of wind that blows through us and comforts us. It is the Paraclete, the comforter, which purifies us, and links us to our Source. It is the vehicle through which God’s grace is directly conveyed to us. So activating impermanence, receiving the Holy Spirit and getting qi, are very different words from very different traditions, but they are not entirely unrelated.

Put succinctly, we need Spirit and Spirit kneads us!

Flow as a purifier can in some ways be compared to the process of digestion. During digestion, the undulation (peristalsis) of the stomach and the intestines breaks the food down into its components. Then what is useful among those components is absorbed and becomes part of our physical body, and what is not useful is excreted by further peristalsis. I have spoken about the fact that we all have a sort of pool of poison and pain within us deep down in the unconscious that consists of holdings from the past, or what we might call a kind of residue. When impermanence is experienced in its purificatory guise, we can literally feel its peristaltic movements reaching down into this reservoir of pain, and breaking it up. The impermanence literally digests and absorbs what is nutritive from the past to enhance the content of our being. At the same time it sort of excretes out in all directions what is not nutritive in a kind of releasing process, wherein the “toxic” aspect of this residue is expelled. I realize that this sounds very weird and metaphoric. However the experience itself is very real, very direct, and completely unmistakable.

When we speak of flow it is very important to realize that it is not something separate from ordinary experience. There is not some special world of flowing energy into which we withdraw until we are forced, as it were, to come back out into the clunky and lumpy world of the everyday. On the contrary, the energy flow *is* the regular, ordinary world, but experienced with radical fullness. In the science of enlightenment, complete experience is the name of the game. Many people who encounter energy flow don’t realize this, and so they fall into the belief that the World is one thing, and the Spirit quite another. This creates a frustrating dichotomy between Spirit and Matter, between God and the World. This is a very common misconception, and in a way it is easy to see how people could fall into it. The energy or flow of impermanence is just the ordinary operation of the senses experienced completely. God is what the world feels like when experienced “to the root.” Bottom line: *spirit is matter experienced completely, i.e., with complete clarity and equanimity.*

When people experience flow in any of its flavors – expansion, contraction, undulation, vibration, bubbles, electricity, kundalini, and so forth – there is a tendency to want to focus only on that, to see that as the “good stuff,” the goal of meditation. But the goal of meditation is something deeper and more subtle. The goal of meditation is to gain the Insight, i.e., to *know* that spirit energy is simply what happens to ordinary experience when it is greeted with extraordinary clarity and equanimity. And conversely, to know that the materiality of objects, the somethingness of the self, and the rigidity of the space that embeds these, are simply what happens to the flow of spirit when it encounters the nebulousity and viscosity of the average human nervous system. Drawing a metaphor from Einstein: “Matter is frozen energy.”

In order for this Insight to arise, we have to go through the following sequence over and over again:

1. An ordinary, solid sensory event arises.
2. We greet it with clarity and equanimity.
3. As a result (after minutes or months) it breaks up into flow and energy.

But in order to do this, we have to be willing to look at the parts of our experience that are still solid and separate. That means that we have to be willing, and indeed enthusiastic, about the prospect of focusing on what is solid and opaque, and not only want to focus on what is fluid and transparent. So when you start to experience flow and energy, if you only want to experience that, and are not equally interested in watching ordinary sensory experience – touch, sight, sound, feel, image, talk – then your spiritual path will be self-limiting. You will dissolve to a certain degree into the flow, but be unable to go any deeper, because your spiritual reactor has run out of fuel. $E = MC^2$. The source of further spiritual energy (E) is the remaining mass (M) of ordinary, opaque, solidified sensory arisings.

So the true goal of meditation is achieved through a dialectical process that alternates between dissolving into flowing nothingness and discovering subtler and subtler instances of solidified somethingness.

The correlation between spirit energy and ordinary experience is very important. We must watch how an ordinary experience becomes waves of impermanence over and over – a hundred times, a thousand times, a hundred thousand times – before we will really believe that *every* ordinary experience is by nature extraordinary. We must do this with tremendous patience, equanimity, and openness. Eventually it sinks in that every experience we have is impermanent. Ultimately we come to realize that in essence there is no sensory experience at all; there is only vibrating vacuity. When experience flows unimpeded, the oneness of spirit arises. When experience gets blocked or congealed, the multiplicity of matter arises. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with the world of multiplicity and materiality, as long as it is not the *only* world in which we are constrained to live. Unfortunately, this is exactly the case for the great majority of human beings. They are consigned to live in the world of solid objects, rigid space, and a separate self *all* the time. That’s sad.

Flow as Unifier

Another facet of flow is as an integrator or unifier. At the beginning of mindfulness practice, our job is to make distinctions. We have to make a clear distinction between mental experience and somatic experience, so that when these two arise together, they are not confused or muddled. We discover that when we are able to keep these two forms of experience distinct, they merely add together and are manageable, but when they become conflated, they multiply with each other into overwhelm. Furthermore, we learn to break mental experience into visual thinking (“image”) and auditory thinking (“talk”). And we learn to break somatic experience into emotional flavors (“feel”) and physical flavors (“touch”). All of these are empowering distinctions. Being able to track the thinking process in terms of visual and auditory components allows us to experience thought as a tangible sensory event. Being able to consciously detect the often subtle emotional flavors that arise in the body prevents them from distorting our behavior.

So in the beginning, Vipassana means literally *vi-passana*. *Vi* is a Pali prefix that implies separation, and *passana* is the Pali word for seeing. But as this process of “seeing-as-separate” reaches finer and finer levels, we start to contact an underlying commonality. When you study anatomy, at first you learn to distinguish the various organs and their parts. But when you get to the level of cells, you see that there is a unifying principle underlying the separate components of the body. Furthermore, at the level of that unifying principle, the human body, and the body of a worm, and even the body of a tree are all comprised of essentially similar “stuff,” cells. In the same way, at a microscopic level of observation, the mental images, internal talk, and emotional feelings that constitute the “I” can all be experienced as being made of the same stuff, the vibrating flow of impermanence.

This integrates your sense of self at a profound level. Your personality becomes a single flow, a pure doing, an integrated activity. This is what is behind the apparent paradox – *those who vehemently claim that there is “no thing called a self” usually have powerful and well-defined personalities!*

The same flow of impermanence that is the nature of the “Feel-Image-Talk” self, is also the nature of the “Touch-Sight-Sound” other. In other words, both the I of the inner self and the It of the outer world are made of the same stuff...flow. Knowing this breaks down the fundamental barrier between inside and outside, unifying the subjective and the objective into a single I-Thou Activity.

To the extent that we pay attention to the underlying flow, there is no fundamental distinction between mind and body, or between inside and outside. A single arabesque of energy cuts across them all. Perhaps the following metaphor will be useful. Imagine a valley containing several kinds of vegetation which are quite distinct. Imagine also that wind is continuously blowing through that valley. If you focus on the different kinds of vegetation themselves, you get a sense of separateness. If you focus on how the wind is moving through them, you get a sense of unity. In the same way, as you attend to the Feel-Image-Talk self as a wave and the Touch-Sight-Sound world as wave, the two waves flow together, into a single Self-World Spirit Wave.