

Mindfulness and Flow Experience

Nobo Komagata*

Sachiko Komagata⁺

*[insi2.org](#)

⁺Holistic Health Studies Program, Georgian Court University

First written: June 24, 2010, Last revised: July 27, 2010

Both of the notions of “mindfulness” (as discussed in the Buddhist literature) and “flow” (as discussed in positive psychology) have been quite popular for some time. While some people casually use them synonymously, others disagree. For example, Ronald Siegel (2010) describes flow as “mindfulness while accomplishing something.” LeeAnn Cardaciotto (2005) views flow as “low present-moment awareness, high acceptance” compared to mindfulness. Daniel Siegel (2007) states that flow, being “non-self-consciously immersed in the sensations of an experience,” lacks mindful awareness. Bryant and Veroff (2007) points out that “intense [mindful] self-awareness disrupts the process of flow,” citing Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002). Thus, it would be useful to clarify this confusing situation. As seen above, while there must be some connections, there must be some differences. With better understanding, we can use these terms more accurately and appropriately in our discussions.

First, it is beneficial to review the notion of mindfulness in contrast to the notion of concentration, as developed in Buddhist psychology (Goleman 1988, Gunaratana 2002). Below, we distinguish three levels of concentration. At the baseline, we tend to have fairly weak concentration. In such a state, our minds are actually wandering wildly; this is also called “monkey mind” in the Buddhist tradition. Through an activity focusing on a certain object, e.g., meditation and athletic/artistic work, we can increase our concentration. The first significant milestone along the path of concentration is called “access concentration.” At this level, the mind is highly focused on the object with *mostly* subdued distraction, although there still can be some distraction. The person still experiences sensory perceptions, including surrounding noises and bodily feelings, with normal consciousness. Normally with substantial effort, the mind becomes completely focused on the object, with no distraction. At the same time, sensory perception including pain, the normal awareness of one’s body, and even the sense of time disappear. Except for the one-pointedness on the focused object and possibly the sense of bliss, normal consciousness disappears. This level of concentration is called “full absorption” (*jhana* in Pali, the language of the original Buddhist writings). This level of concentration is not easy, even for Buddhist monks. That is why monks build meditation halls to reduce distractions.

Note that Buddhists distinguish multiple levels of *jhanas* and thus there are much more to it. Now, mindfulness is a mental state of being aware of the outside and inside of oneself at present without judgment, i.e., with full acceptance. Mindfulness is in principle orthogonal to concentration but in reality, these are tightly coupled. The fact is that it is too difficult to be present or be aware of subtle phenomena without some concentration. Thus, meditators often develop access concentration in order to practice mindfulness effectively. There is an alternative to practice mindfulness without first developing access concentration (called “bare insight”). In this case, as mindfulness develops, the person actually deepens the level of concentration as well. As for the connection between mindfulness and concentration, it is important to note that if one reaches full absorption, she loses normal consciousness and can no longer be mindful. In other words, *beyond access concentration, concentration and mindfulness cannot coexist*. This situation is summarized in Figure 1 below. The vertical dimension is used to indicate the level of concentration and the horizontal one, the level of mindfulness.

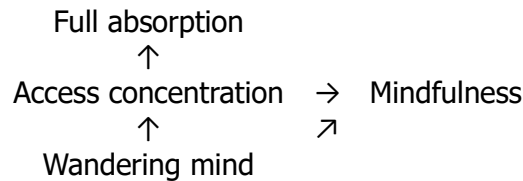


Figure 1: Concentration and Mindfulness

Next, let us review the notion of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Flow (also called zone) is described as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” and “the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.” Often, flow is experienced when experts are immersed in their own area of activities. Flow is also characterized with the following properties (key phrases are highlighted):

- High degree of **concentration** on the engaged activity (to the extent that one can reach a point of great hunger or fatigue without realizing it)
- **Loss of self-consciousness**
- Merging of action and **awareness**
- Having a clear **goal**, immediate **feedback**, and sense of **reward**
- Sense of **control** over the situation
- Appropriate level of **challenge**
- **Transformation of time**, i.e., experience of time is altered

Now, for each of these properties, we examine its connection to mindfulness as well as concentration.

Concentration: The level of concentration required for flow is not clear with respect to our discussion above. However, if one reaches the level of concentration in which she does not

realize even great hunger or fatigue, this suggests the level of concentration beyond that of access concentration.

Loss of self-consciousness: This again suggests the level of concentration beyond that of access concentration.

Awareness: The type of awareness involved in flow is rather narrow, only as much as one recognizes that she is a flow and not as much as reflection. In fact, the literature describes the state of merging action and awareness as increasing concentration and narrowing awareness. Thus, mindfulness does not seem to be a huge factor in flow. Nevertheless, recognition that you are a flow suggests a certain level of mindfulness.

Goal/feedback/reward: In a sense, if one tries to increase mindfulness and/or concentration, she has a goal. However, whenever judgment is involved with respect to the goal or anything, i.e., not accepting the reality as is, one cannot be mindful. Thus, even when feedback is available, the mindful mind would not use it for evaluation. Furthermore, the sense of reward would obstruct mindfulness as it cannot coexist with non-judgmental acceptance. Note that it is definitely *not* that mindfulness practice is *not* rewarding; in many cases it *is*. But the state of mindfulness does not involve such judgment.

Control: This suggests the state of not being mindful since mindfulness is to accept the reality as is *without* control.

Challenge: The sense of perceiving an activity as a challenge is judgment. As such, this too would disrupt mindfulness. Note that increasing mindfulness and/or concentration is certainly a challenge. The point is that the state of mindfulness does not make such judgment.

Transformation of time: Mindfulness is said to realize the most realistic sense of time. On the contrary, with a wandering mind, one's sense of time is actually distorted. Thus, with mindfulness, one would experience transformation of time by gaining a realistic sense of time. With full absorption, one's sense of time will be lost. Thus, again, this qualifies as transformation of time, albeit in a quite different way. So, transformation of time variously occurs when one escapes the state of a wandering mind. In flow, one's experience of time varies; while time seems to pass faster in most cases, it may also pass slower in some cases. This suggests that flow is not just concentration but at least some mindfulness is involved.

We now return to the comparison between mindfulness and flow in the literature mentioned at the beginning of this essay. First, Cardaciotto views flow as "low present-moment awareness, high acceptance" compared to mindfulness. Although the first point is not entirely incorrect as flow involves more concentration, the second point does not seem to be correct. While mindfulness achieves the highest state of accepting everything as is, flow involves certain properties, such as reward, control, and challenge, which would obstruct complete acceptance of the current situation.

Ronald Siegel's description of flow as "mindfulness while accomplishing something" suggests that flow is a special case of mindfulness. But this does not seem to be correct either. That is, the high level of concentration and loss of self-consciousness are not associated with mindfulness. In this respect, Daniel Siegel seems to be correct in stating that a person who experience flow would be "non-self-consciously immersed in the sensations of an experience," lacking mindful awareness. Bryant and Veroff's point that "intense [mindful] self-awareness disrupts the process of flow," following flow researchers Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, appears to confirm this point as well.

However, we need to be careful here. What would it mean to say that mindfulness disrupts the process of flow? Furthermore, if Buddhist psychology is correct about the impossibility of coexistence of mindfulness and concentration beyond access concentration, how could some properties of flow coexist at the same time? It seems to me that the answer lies in how we understand the notion of flow. If we stick to the notion of flow as a *state* of mind, i.e., existing at a single moment, coexistence of mindfulness and a high level of concentration do appear contradictory. With more research based on the distinction between concentration and mindfulness, it might be possible to analyze flow more in detail. Another, more realistic way is to see the notion of flow as "experience" *across time*. That is, when a person experiences flow, she may actually be crossing a series of state which, at some points, increase concentration beyond access concentration but losing mindfulness, while at other points, it may increase mindfulness with the level of concentration at no more than access concentration. Also at times, when mindfulness is suspended, there can be states with judgment. With this interpretation, there won't be any contradiction associated with the notion of flow. However, if we take this position, it is actually inappropriate to say that mindfulness disrupts flow, as mindfulness can be a part of flow.

Both mindfulness and flow are referred to in connection to pursuit of happiness or the sense of fulfillment. For example, the notion of flow is essential in positive psychology, a subfield of psychology most strongly associated with Martin Seligman (2002). Note that Seligman discusses both flow and mindfulness without clarifying the connection between them. For their sense of fulfillment, Buddhists aspires to be mindful all the time and their meditation techniques integrate both mindfulness and concentration. Note that beyond access concentration, they focus on either mindfulness or concentration, although they may go back and forth between them (Gunaratana 2001). Thus, if we observe a Buddhist who develops mindfulness and concentration during their training across time, they may well go through an experience similar to flow, and their experience may indeed be positive. However, since flow experience leans more toward concentration, the benefits of the experience may be limited to the duration the state of concentration. This is why Buddhists value mindfulness so much because the benefits of mindfulness can be experienced below the level of full absorption. In this regard, it would be interesting to interview the people who had significant flow experience again near the end of their lives. The question would be whether their lives have been fulfilling even after their flow experience.

In conclusion, we note that mindfulness and flow are connected, especially around the state of access concentration. However, they are not the same. In particular, mindfulness cannot be sustained beyond access concentration and flow involves both mindfulness and the level of concentration beyond that of access concentration. One position to avoid the contradiction associated with the properties of flow is to view flow as experience across time, not as a state. Thus, when we consider a period of time, not just a state, we can see flow as combination of mindfulness and concentration as well as some additional properties.

References

- Bryant, Fred Boyd and Veroff, Joseph. 2007. *Savoring: a new model of positive experience*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Cardaciotto, LeeAnn. 2005. *Assessing Mindfulness: The Development of a Bi-Dimensional Measure of Awareness and Acceptance*, Ph.D. thesis, Drexel University.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1990. *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Goleman, Daniel. 1988. *The meditative mind: the varieties of meditative experience*. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher.
- Gunaratana, Henepola. 2001. *Eight mindful steps to happiness: walking the path of the Buddha*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Gunaratana, Henepola. 2002. *Mindfulness in plain English*, Updated and Expanded ed. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Nakamura, J. and Csikszentmihalyi, M. 2002. The construction of meaning through vital engagement. In *Flourishing*, eds. C. Keyes and J. Haidt, 83-104. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Books.
- Seligman, Martin E. P. 2002. *Authentic happiness: using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York: Free Press.
- Siegel, Daniel J. 2007. *The mindful brain: reflection and attunement in the cultivation of well-being*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Siegel, Ronald D. 2010. *The mindfulness solution: everyday practices for everyday problems*. New York: Guilford Press.