

Flow FAQ

What is Flow?

Flow is a term specific to Shinzen Young's Basic Mindfulness™ (you can refer to page 51 of his manual, provided in the members area, for greater detail.) It is a synonym for the terms Anicca or Impermanence in Buddhism or Qi in Chinese medicine and martial arts. Flow refers to the ever changing nature of our experience, detected in real time, through mindful awareness.

What is the value of focusing on Flow?

Experiencing Flow interrupts our habit of perceiving ourselves and the world from an unconscious position of separateness. From the point of view of mindfulness, this habit causes suffering. Knowing ourselves as flow, consistently, is therefore an antidote to suffering.

Additionally, our most fulfilling moments in life can be traced to the experience of oneness or unity. We may commonly know this experience through intimacy with a loved one, compassion for humanity, or connection with nature. Contacting Flow helps dissolve the imaginary boundaries we hold fast to. From the position of mindfulness, oneness is actually our true nature, available to us all the time, everywhere. When we are able to know this through our senses, moment by moment, this realization is ultimately fulfilling and liberating.

How can I make Flow happen?

Flow is always happening and what makes it happen is the ultimate mystery. Our ability to detect flow, fluctuates. As our mindfulness skills improve we tend to detect flow with greater frequency, precision, depth and continuity. This is an empowering but not necessarily linear process. Sometimes you may just spontaneously drop into a heightened Flow state and sometimes you may work hard to contact flow and be unable to, to your satisfaction. Overall though, by practicing consistently over time, you will tend to have more and deeper experiences of flow. That said, not all advanced practitioners experience Flow frequently, yet they can still derive the ultimate benefit of practice.

Stable Vs. Flowing:

Part of developing spiritual maturity is having no preference for what is occurring at any given time. So, for example, you may be intending to focus on flow but instead discover stability in your experience. Stability can be a beautiful gift when we are not pre-occupied with desiring a different state. If stability is the predominant theme in your experience, do your best to slow down your internal clock to match its timelessness. If, on the other hand, your experience is flowing, go with the flow.

How do we experience Flow in our senses?

Any time we detect change in our senses, we are experiencing flow. Even a banal shift in attention from one sense to another or looking at one object and then another, is an example of flow. As we become more and more sensitized to flow, the banal may become extraordinary. Physically, we may experience bubbling, tingling or waviness which can reach ecstatic proportions. Emotionally we may experience bliss or poignancy. We may experience sound as waves reverberating to completion in a greater ocean, rather than hearing a sound as a contained static event, separate from ourselves. Visually, we may experience the world as a rubbery, elastic extension of our own being. These are some ways we may experience flow in the senses.

What are Expansion and Contraction?

Expansion and Contraction are terms referring to the fundamental forces of flow, that comprise all of experience. They are described in Shinzen Young's Basic Mindfulness™ (page 56 of the manual.) The terms are co-opted from Zen Master Joshu Sasaki Roshi (my teacher and Shinzen's teacher.) Shinzen translated for Sasaki Roshi for many years.

In Basic Mindfulness practice, we can sensitize ourselves to these equal, opposite forces through each of our senses, via our mundane experience. Every time you breath in, for example, the lungs expand and the muscles moving the lungs, contract. Every time you breath out, the lungs contract and the muscles release, expanding. Sometimes our experience of flow can seem chaotic or varied, like a churning ocean. But, the ocean is forever moved by the tides, going out and coming in. We can choose to focus on this aspect of experience, reflected in our senses. This is a very deep yet simple way to

work.

If everything is Flow, why use any of the other terms for my experience?

The terminology is provided to support your practice. It's up to each individual to decide where they want to draw the line and how they want to use the terminology. What's essential is to practice consistently and not get caught on those types of details.

Here are a couple of reasons the terminology can be useful:

1. For developing sensory clarity, having a range of terms can improve and support our power of discernment.
2. One of the key facets of mindfulness is accepting where we are at any given moment. If we are feeling separate and solid, it's important to welcome that and be open to working with it.

As a happy medium, some people refer to any movement in their "mundane experience" (for example, their ordinary experience of breathing) as Flow.

I prefer to draw the line differently. If I feel basically solid and separate but I want to work with movement in my senses, I consider that **sensitizing** myself to Flow (which is mainly what we are doing in this course on meditating with music.) In that case, I stick with the regular terminology. In this course those terms are: Hear Music, Picture Music, Blank, Feel Music, Peace, See Show, Relax

Whenever I perceive any sensory event as blurring or softening my sense of separateness in any way, or as heightening my experience of energy or change, compared to my base level, I call that Flow.

Speaking from my own experience, over the years my base level has elevated. So, the sporadic, wondrous experiences of Flow I had 15 years ago, have evolved into my ordinary, every day experience. Over that time I've gotten my "sea legs," acclimating to this dramatic shift in my inner environment. Our relationship to Flow is ever-evolving and paradoxically, unique to each of us.