

Flowing like a river	1
Flow-Experience	1
Mindfulness.....	2
Consciousness.....	3
Flowing through Mindfulness	5
About the Author.....	6
Literature	6

Flowing like a river

Why bother our minds with theories about mindfulness, consciousness and awareness? What is the use of abstract concepts like “attention” or “volition” for our movement practice? Our bodies would much rather dance than reflect!

But what to do when we cannot find a way to engage on the dance floor? How can we intentionally dive into a river of continuous action, in which each moment gives birth to a new impulse? When I am feeling bored with my own moving patterns and I am struggling with my frustrations and hesitations, scientific theories are useful to me to come up with new ideas about where to generate movement from and how to approach the dance floor.

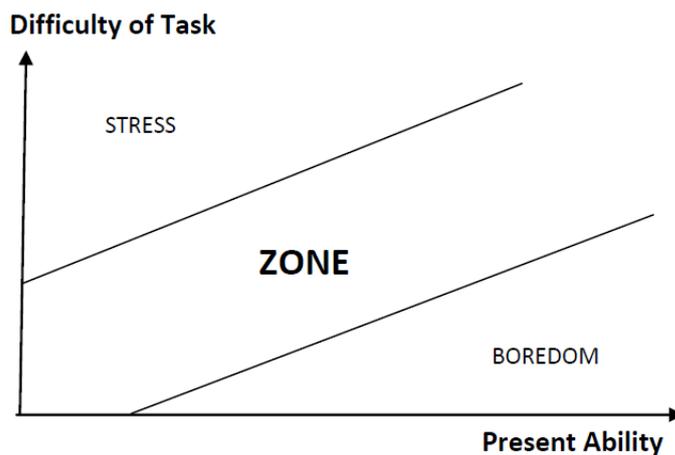
After giving a short introduction into the concepts “flow”, “mindfulness” and different aspects of our “consciousness”, I will try to show *how* and *why* mindfulness practices can function as a “flow-bringer”. This article is result of lap preparation for the collaborative research group “Mind the Point” in Paris 2012. Most empirical findings mentioned derive from my PhD dissertation about Contact-Improvisation as a “Life-Art” form.

Flow-Experience

In a questionnaire handed out at the ECITE 2006 (European Contact Teachers Exchange) 80 teachers where asked why they dance Contact? One of the most frequent answers besides (1.) the physicality/movement and (2.) social meeting/encountering was (3.) experiencing “flow” (Schmid, 2010). Csikszentmihalyi, an Hungarian psychologist spent over 30 years researching this state of mind, in which you are fully engaged with what you are doing. Your focus is so clear, that you “become one” with your action. There are no self doubting

thoughts, you are responding instantly from a very intuitive motivational level of behavior control. Being in the “zone” means finding the perfect challenge for you in that specific moment. Your ability matches the difficulty of the task you have chosen (Csikszentmihalyi, 2005).

Figure 1: Flow needs a balance between your present ability and the task difficulty. Exceeding the zone leads to stress or boredom.



One very typical indicator for being in the flow is losing track of time. But as soon as you are asking yourself, “am I in the zone?”, you will most likely drop out again. You can describe the flow-experience as a “no-mind”-state, lacking an “ego” that wants something. You are simply enjoying what you are getting. Just like an object in a river floating down stream. You are saying “yes” to that wants to happen, allowing yourself drifting into the future.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is about bringing one’s complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis. Returning to the river metaphor, Mindfulness can be understood as digging your feet into the sand of the riverbed and feeling the water embracing and caressing your legs. You feel the push and pull, but you are choosing not to respond. Instead of following the flow, you observe all your body sensations, emotions and thoughts with a very curious and nonjudgmental mind. You are accepting your observations as they are. Kabat – Zinn (1999) talks about stopping the autopilot and allowing a gap between stimulus and response. This gap is filled with awareness to the multiple contexts of the same present moment, it gives space for compassion and empathy towards others and also towards

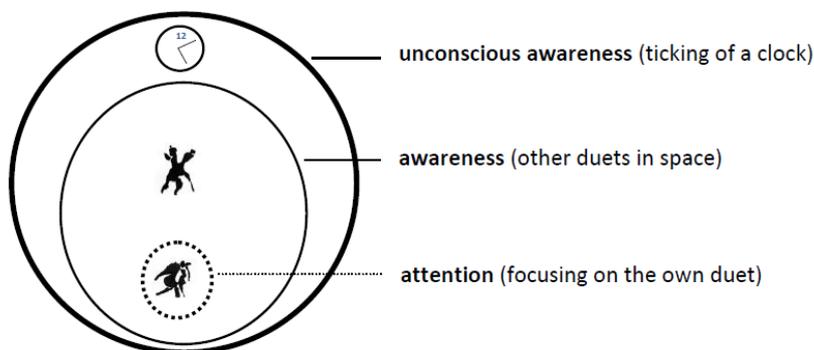
oneself (Großmann, 2006). While the flow-experience is highly related with the feeling of happiness, mindfulness on the other hand is more connected with our satisfaction with life (Sokolowski 1999).

In the following the concepts of awareness, attention and volition are introduced. Looking at these aspects of our consciousness helps to understand two generally different ways of how to be mindful in the realm of contact-improvisation.

Consciousness

The term “awareness” can be understood as the “background radar” that keeps track of our internal and external environment. So even if your attention is focused on dancing with one partner, you can at the same time be aware of other dancers in the space. This awareness also expands to a subconscious level: in one moment you are consciously aware of the big gym hall’s clock ticking and the next moment while still physically hearing it, you are consciously not anymore aware of it.

Figure 2. Awareness, Unconscious Awareness and Attention

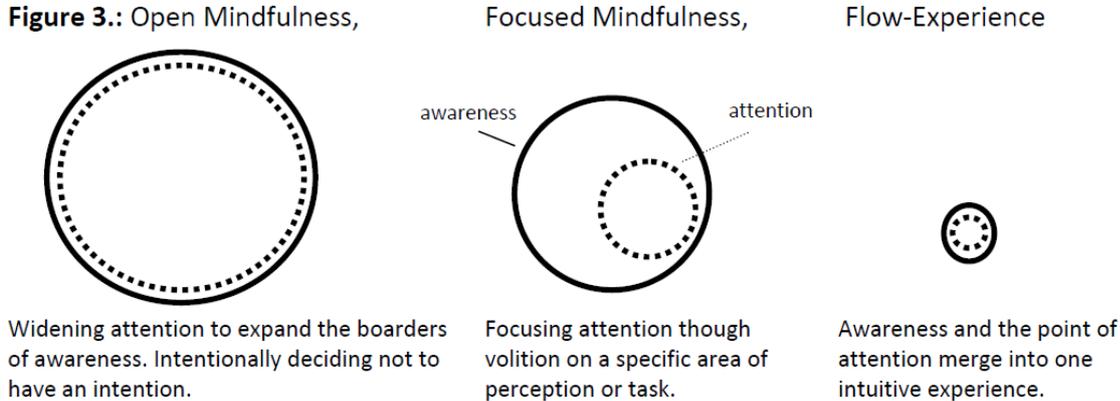


Within the borders of awareness our “attention” is like a flashlight that can highlight specific objects and qualities of our environment. You can intentionally decide to shift your attention window to the soles of your feet and then slowly let it wander to the crown of your head without activating one muscle in your body. As your attention is passing through your chest you might suddenly consciously be aware of your heart beat, although it has been there the whole time. Like the beam of a flashlight we can open the focus of our attention window and feel the whole body at once. Or we can also narrow the light cone to a beam focusing on just

the sensation of the pulse in our left pinky. The shifting, widening and narrowing of our attention happens most of the time fully automatically. Just like our breath: It can be controlled to some extent but generally breathing does not need to be paid any attention to continue.

Academic “mindfulness research” looks at two different kinds of mindfulness practices: One can be described as an open-meditation, the other as a focused-meditation. In the open-meditation you intentionally try not to have an intention. It is about pure observation, without responding. Although your mind can be jumping around like a monkey you just simply bring your attention back to the present moment. In these terms, the “small dance” by Steve Paxton is a form of open-mindfulness practice. We witness how our body manages to balance. We don’t try to influence or change anything. We simply observe with curiosity. This kind of “listening” may also occur during small pauses in our dance.

The focused-mindfulness on the other hand is about focusing on a specific task, like following the rolling point of contact. This task is about commitment and presence. It takes willpower to honestly devote yourself to follow without leading. The psychological “muscle” we need and train to control our attention and to stay focused on a task like this is called “volition”. While the flow-experience is all about “letting go” and following impulses, mindfulness is about intentionally bringing your attention to the present moment and cultivating the inner observer. In contrast to flow, by using your volition you can decide to be mindful. Flow is a form of so called “motivational behavior control”, whereas mindfulness is a result of “volitional action planning” or “impulse control”. Figure 3. illustrates the relation between awareness, attention and volition for the two forms of mindfulness practice and flow-experience.



Open-meditation tries to widen our attention window to expand the edge of awareness. Focused-meditation intentionally narrows and focuses the attention “spotlight” to a specific field of interest. Entering the flow our perceptions blur into an unconscious information processing. Our attention is automatically following the demands of the moment without any hesitation or reflection. In the flow we are becoming one with our action. Our attention merges into a holistic feeling of “oneness” between our awareness and attention.

Flowing through Mindfulness

In my PhD dissertation it could be shown that through a regular routine of contact improvisation the trait Mindfulness and the frequencies of Flow-Experiences in your dance and in your daily life are significantly trained. In an internet survey with over 750 contact dancers and improvise theater actors the trait “mindfulness” was the best predictor for the amount of “flow” experienced (Schmid 2012).

For me personally, what contact teaches me the most, is becoming present. Finding your flow dancing is all about diving into the present moment. But just like falling asleep, the Flow-Experience is something you can only invite. It is impossible to force its appearance. Practicing Mindfulness is a way of preparing a “river-bed” for your flow of movement-improvisation, allowing yourself to be taken by the ongoing invitations of the present moment. At least for some moments you can decide to be mindful and to bring your attention back home to the “here and now”. Instead of going into resistance and judging yourself for having disturbing thoughts and doubts, you can choose to shift your attention to witnessing your perceptions, your body sensations, gravity or momentum. Following the score by Nancy Stark – Smith “come as you are” you commit to observing and accepting the moment as it is. Through practicing focused or open mindfulness, we start calming our greediness of wanting a certain experience. Through open mindfulness, observing all our emotions, thoughts and impulses, we gain the chance to find out, what our current needs are. Becoming aware of how we feel and what we want is an important precursor to finding a motivating task that matches our ability (see figure 1).

In our dance we can also choose to intentionally listen to small details, to focus our attention. We can give our self little scores like dancing with no hands, or falling into the backspace. Practice different kinds of focused-mindfulness we can not only resist all the little

“mirco-flows” of instant gratification, we can also “walk up stream”, collecting energy by holding back. Just like a water-barrage, waiting in a patient stillness for the right moment to release. We then surrender to the intuitive intelligence of our body.

A satisfying contact duet often reminds me of raindrops flowing down a window glass. Eventually pausing in stillness, they are collecting more water and concentrating energy, to then break through in an unknown moment with a new momentum.

About the Author

During my first experience dancing Contact over 10 years ago, I was deeply touched by the satisfying feeling of "wholeness". It felt like coming home, like remembering something very essential I had almost forgotten. After studying psychology in Marburg (Germany) I wrote my PhD in the field of Psychomotricity – a science investigating the "Body - Mind Inter-Action". In my research I focused on the question: how Contact-Improvisation influences our psychological health and the quality of life. Since 2006 I was dancing and teaching Contact all over the world, interviewing experienced dancers, giving work-labs and conducting experiments to explore the implicit therapeutic effects of CI. My most influential teachers were: Jörg Hassmann, Dieter Heitkamp and Angela Doni.

At the moment I am working as a family therapist with adults and children in a mental hospital as well as in private practice. Touch and movement play an essential role also in my professional life.

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