

Lead story

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# Go with the flow

Accessing the power of flow unlocks our stores of creativity, inspiration, productivity and joy. Living in a state of flow is to live in the arms of the universe, engaged in effortless action. **Nandini Sarkar** shows us how to achieve this marvellous state

**A**sim banged on the bathroom door in great anxiety, “Ritu! Ritu!” he shouted. There was no response. The banging continued for 10 minutes. In the deathly silence, just as he was turning away to fetch help, the door opened. Sixteen-year-old Rituparna stepped out. Her face was glowing ethereally. “What the...” Asim started angrily, but she stopped him mid-way, thrusting a sheaf of papers at him. “Baba, look! I have created a new mathematical theory,” she said excitedly. Asim looked over the notes and found a complex probability logic that a 16-year-old was not supposed to know. Rituparna, granddaughter of the legendary Bengali lyricist, Mohini Chowdhury, went on to smash every record at the Indian Statistical Institute, and eventually also became one of the youngest associate professors at the University of Chicago. Her proud father, a family friend, would tell us, that she would frequently go into spells of deep absorption, hearing nothing, acknowledging no one, needing no food or sleep, lost in her own world of figures. Rituparna was not a boring geek with spectacles – she was pretty, sociable, pleasant mannered, and a talented singer, enthusiastically participating in competitions. What separated her from the regular crowd was the ability to concentrate deeply, and to reach levels of inspiration that others could never achieve.

In the daytime, Jaykumar worked for the Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation. After

five pm, he was the resident poet and music composer at my father-in-law’s schools. His stirring creations enlivened hundreds of school processions and events. His wife, Krishna, told me that he would quietly slip out for a morning rendezvous with the lake, carrying a notebook, every day before the household woke up. The expansive murmuring lake, the drooping hoary trees, the gently chirping birds, and the warm touch of the early morning sun rays transported Jaykumar to another world. Inspired, he would start writing. Sometimes, he would carry his guitar, and a small crowd would gather around him as he sang, bringing his words to life.

### **Inspiration flows effortlessly**

People like Rituparna and Jaykumar are examples of ordinary people, who are in a state of ‘flow.’ They are not geniuses or Nobel Prize winners. They are people who enter and retain a state of natural concentration, in which inspiration flows effortlessly. To be in the flow means to be creatively occupied, and completely immersed in doing things you enjoy. When you are in the flow, you work with passion, motivation, and single-minded concentration. Engrossed in your activity, you even forget the need for food and sleep. Being in the flow is thus a giant step in the happiness journey. It allows you to switch off from disturbing events or the monotony of everyday events, and enter a beautiful dimension where nothing can disturb you, and no external event can invade your consciousness. Moments of deep absorption on a rock in Kanyakumari transformed the young unknown student Narendranath into the giant Vivekananda, whose clarion call, ‘Worship God in man! Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached,’ transformed entire generations of young men and women, inspiring them to give up self-centred lives for the cause of building the nation.

In its extreme and charming state, flow led the famous Greek inventor, Archimedes, to run out naked on the streets, straight from his bathtub, shouting ‘Eureka!’ Archimedes had been thinking deeply over a problem in the bath, when the solution suddenly flashed to him and he could not contain his joy.

The good news is that flow happens even to ordinary people, who do regular things. Flow envelopes musicians, painters, and artistes, when they are in deep concentration. It becomes euphoria for writers, who suddenly find the words after an agonising writer’s block. It blossoms in the joy of the mother, when she bakes the perfect chocolate cake for her kids. It assumes the quiet confidence of the sportsman who has returned to form after recent failures. It rises as the ecstasy of the meditator, who has emerged from an effortless retreat, and in the gratification of the scientist who has found the next best thing in enzymes after years of faithful R&D or in the excitement of the salesgirl, whose powers of persuasion have sent products flying off the shelves.



Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: the creator of the flow concept

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Anybody experiences flow, when able to do the things he/she enjoys with skill and dexterity. In all cases, flow emerges from a determination to make life purposeful, and to learn to be skilful at what we enjoy doing. People complain that they lose the flow in the battle of life, surrounded by mundane responsibilities. The funny thing is that during much of the day, we live filled with the anxiety and pressures of our work and obligations, while during our leisure moments, we tend to live in passive boredom. The key, according to the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who evolved the concept of flow, is to challenge ourselves with tasks requiring a high degree of skill and commitment. Instead of watching television, write a book; instead of chatting, join volunteers in cleaning the Yamuna. In short, learn the joy of complete engagement with life.

There are certain common experiences that people report, when they are in the flow:

- Experience of timelessness; for example, you realise that you have been working for five hours when it actually felt like only one hour
- Euphoria, feelings of great joy, contentment, achievement, or enhanced creativity that fill your being
- A sense of wholeness, peace, and unity with the universe

Popular American astrophysicist, Neil Tyson, challenges us to think – when we look for things like happiness, meaning, and motivation, why do we assume that they are sitting behind a tree or under a rock. The most successful people recognise that to generate flow, they must think of themselves as co-creators with the universe. Our ego or maya makes us believe that we are born into the universe as though we came from somewhere else, rather than from it, a part of it, made in its image, and empowered by it to express ourselves as creatively as it does. Vedic philosophy reveals that all matter is actually the visible projection of an invisible God or Spirit. Modern science is categorical that all matter is the manifestation of intelligent energy. So how can we be separate from the vast, creative source from whose bosom we have sprung? It is like saying that the tree is separate from the seed. The chief problem is that being conditioned from birth; we believe that only set patterns can make us happy.

We are programmed to think that happiness is about getting a bread-winning education, about competing to stay ahead, about marriage and family, about enjoying the good life with perhaps some social service thrown in, and then slowly fading into our sunset years. Somewhere down the line, the formula stops working, and we feel unhappy and unmotivated. There are people who obstruct the creative flow for other reasons, depression or mistrust caused by inherited tendencies or samskaras,



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painful childhood experiences of neglect or hurt and sorrowful experiences as young adults. Such unfortunate experiences seem to bottle them up in a bell jar, where they 'breathe their own putrid air.' To generate flow in our lives, we need to detox, to get rid of all the mental poisons. For that, we need role models whom we can emulate, and invest in periodic workshops or counselling.

The pioneering work done by eminent medical doctors like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, M Scott Peck, Brian Weiss, and Deepak Chopra reveals that counselling is truly successful when it has a spiritual basis, rather than only medical prescriptions. There is a story of an alcoholic army man, sent for psychiatric counselling, who blamed his drinking on the remote location where he was posted, adding that he drank to kill the loneliness. The doctor asked him to consider various interesting activities to take his mind off drinking – snorkelling, fishing, reading, and photography – but each time, the man kept offering excuses why he could not take up any of the hobbies. The counselling failed, and eventually he was dismissed from service.

However, what the psychiatrist failed to achieve with the alcoholic soldier, Sri Ramakrishna of Dakhineswar did for the drunkard businessman, Kalipada Ghosh. He did not ask him to quit drinking but to simply sit before the Divine Mother and offer her a drink before taking it himself. Kalipada was too far gone to care about propriety, so he carried the bottle to the Puja room, only to find to his surprise, that after offering Her a drink, he himself had developed distaste for it. To Kalipada's eternal credit, he had the desire to get out of the groove. Hence, he was transformed from a wastrel, who spent his evenings in drunken stupor, to one of the prominent workers of the great Ramakrishna movement.

Once we are convinced about the power of flow in our lives, we need to begin our flow homework. Researchers have identified the following as necessary conditions for reaching a flow state in whatever activity we choose:

**•Choose work that you love or enjoy:**

You must have clear goals for your activity. For example, you may decide to prepare for KBC or Master Chef; learn to surf the net, or web programming, create a blog, dig a vegetable garden and go organic, volunteer at SEWA, do a course in film editing. The

options are endless for those who decide to step out of their comfort or lethargy zone. Geeta found flow in the madness of Benares, with its narrow lanes, ubiquitous cows, sadhus, and the great calming influence of the river Ganga at its epicentre. A woman in her 50s, not close to her husband, she fell into a crisis of loneliness after her daughters left home to pursue careers. A dear friend persuaded Geeta to join her business in interiors as a partner. As Geeta embarked on her new journey, she discovered a flair for colours and sketching. Hours would pass in moments with the amazing Benares artisans, discussing designs that needed a modern makeover. Benares with its chaos actually became a creative sanctuary for Geeta, bringing back her joy in living.

**•Find the right balance:** Your abilities and the challenges you face, must be evenly matched. If something is too easy, you will become bored, if it is too hard, you may become frustrated. Therefore, you need to find the right balance.

**•Focus deeply on the task:** No multitasking and no interruptions. Find a time zone when you can be free from responsibilities and duties. Maybe you could consider giving up one TV show, rising early, or working late at night. Focus long on the activity, as long as possible. The more you think about something, visualising all its aspects, the more inspiration you will attract.

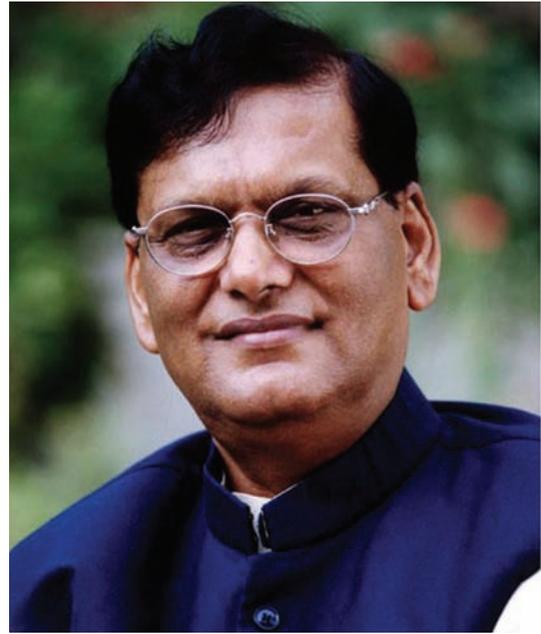
**•Keep practising:** Analyse what you did wrong, what you did right, and start over again. Lahiri Mahasaya said, 'Banat, Banat, Ban Jai' – strive daily, and one day, behold, the goal is reached. However, such striving is not forced, never based on a desperate ambition that leaves you feeling exhausted, or with your life out of balance. Flow rests on the redeeming thought that you are investing your time constructively, doing what you love.

**•Enjoy yourself:** Do not worry about the results; you may be pleasantly surprised. Professional investment banker, Amish Tripathi, started writing books as a hobby. His first two books, *The Immortals of Meluha*, and *The Secret of the Nagas*, have sold a record-breaking 5,50,000 copies. Amish says that various publishers rejected his first book 20 times, but Lord Shiva inspired him to move ahead. Therefore, he published it himself, and then launched a marketing blitzkrieg to bring it to public attention. Amish printed sample copies of the first chapter, and persuaded bookshops to give them away free to anyone who approached the cash counter, creating a buzz. He hired a literary agent and made a trailer film, which he uploaded on YouTube. Amish enjoyed the entire creative process, and as the wonderful results show, he became proficient at it.

**•The law of least effort:** Dr Deepak Chopra says that when we can accept people, situations, and events as they occur, when we can take responsibility for our situation and for all events seen as problems, then we are allowed to enter the zone of least effort. In the zone, we relinquish the need to defend our point of view, and give up our preconceived notions that achieving suc-

cess requires relentless hard work, grim determination, and intense ambition. In the natural world, creation comes forth with ease. A seed does not struggle to become a tree – it simply unfolds in grace. He says we should not be impatient for solutions, we should allow solutions to emerge spontaneously. Uncertainty, according to Dr Chopra, is essential and our path to freedom.

Dr Bindeshwar Pathak belonged to an affluent Brahmin family in Patna. The family fell on hard times and young Bindeshwar was asked by his father to take up a job. While working with the Gandhi Committee to improve the lot of the untouchables and working in a scavengers' colony in Bettiah, Dr Pathak witnessed two incidents that changed his life. A new bride was being forced by her in-laws to clean a toilet, and remove the faeces by hand. Despite the bride's bitter sobs, and Dr Pathak's intervention, the family prevailed. The incident shook him but the worst was yet to be seen, an 'untouchable' boy's gory killing by a bull on the streets, in full view of hundreds of people. No one came to his rescue because he was an 'untouchable.' Dr Pathak spent some days in deep contemplation, wondering whether he wanted to go back to his old job, or to take up a mission to free the untouchables from their shameful stigma, and degrading work of cleaning human faeces by hand. Deciding on the latter, he set up Sulabh International in 1970.



Dr Bindeshwar Pathak read extensively, and was miraculously inspired to develop a new toilet technology using a twin-pit, pour-flush compost toilet.

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**Talented mathematician, Rituparna, has smashed every record at the Indian Statistical Institute, and is an associate professor at the University of Chicago**

Dr Pathak read extensively, and was miraculously inspired to develop a new toilet technology using a twin-pit, pour-flush compost toilet, though he was not an engineer, nor had he any technical expertise on sanitary systems. The first two Sulabh toilets received 500 visitors on its opening day for 10 paise each. Today, Sulabh has staggering statistics – a presence in all states, around 8,000 locations, revenues of over rupees 300 crores, and some 10.5 million people using them. Dr Pathak has a record of working 22 hours a day, and has often to be forced to have his meals, as per his assistants. Though not an engineer, he has astounded the world with several technical innovations. Social entrepreneurs like Dr Pathak, who are deeply contemplative, and sensitive to human suffering, flow with a great universal plan, for the good of mankind.

### **The Law of Intention**

Flow comes to anyone who has the intent to be in it. BN Som retired from a highly successful career in the government. He had won national and international recognition for his pioneering work in social security, and systems innovations. You would expect that after retirement such a person would be sucked into the vacuum of boredom, and listlessness. However, Som took up cudgels to clean the famous Rabindra Sarovar Lake in Kolkata that was filthy and defiled. As part of the 'Concern for Calcutta' team, he launched

Run for the Sarovar marathons that attracted thousands of ordinary citizens and celebrities. A person who once had an army of assistants to do his bidding, sat for hours in front of the computer, burning the midnight oil, typing letters, drawing up plans for the Sarovar's beautification. He planned for fountains, flower gardens, and fish in the lake that would eat up the algae, for legal ways to bring slumbering government departments to accountability, and a website to attract public attention to the efforts of the 'Concern for Calcutta.' With his persistent efforts, he actually succeeded in forcing the Kolkata Municipal Corporation to support the initiatives. In serving a worthy cause, Som's own life became greatly enriched. In his 70s, he remains fully engaged in the creative flow.

### **Identify your goal**

Therefore, the primary focus has to be on identifying a goal, and the process of reaching the goal through practical efforts. Fame and money are secondary to the process. You may remain an unsung hero for karmic reasons and your efforts may gain recognition in another lifetime. However, the benefits from working hard to realise a dream are self-worth and self-esteem, acquiring skills that are embedded in your subconscious, which allow you to take off smoothly in your next-life innings. Look at the genius Mozart – who started creating music from the age of four. It could never be the result of a freak DNA – it is obviously the fruition of lifetimes of learning.

In her moving account, *Dying to be Me: My Journey from Cancer, to Near Death, to True Healing*, Anita Moorjani discovered that time is not linear, there is actually no past, no present and no future – in the drama of life, everything is happening at once, happening simultaneously. She says we should have a relaxed feeling that we actually have several lifetimes to achieve our aspirations. The mantra for remaining in the flow is thus a positive affirmation that success will come, if not today, then definitely tomorrow, so let me work unhurriedly, without anxiety. After all, I have lifetimes at my disposal.

Csikszentmihalyi's work focussed a lot on learning to remove obstacles in the way of flow. The most obvious and most inhibiting emotions are hurt and pain. When Dr. Ananda's wife ran away after a few months of marriage, taking the money and the jewellery, he was in a state of deep trauma. Unwilling to be on anti-depressants, he moved to London with his mother, to get away from bitter memories. In London, he opened the dusty music books of his younger days and spent absorbing hours each day, singing Rabindra Sangeet. One day, he was asked to sing at one of the Durga Pujas in London. With his handsome appearance and talented singing, he was an immediate hit, and requests came for performances at other functions. It triggered an idea that he could organise an annual event in London

during the Pujas with well-known musicians flown in from Kolkata. His annual music festival thus became a creative highpoint, and music for him became a gift of the gods, easing the old pain and trauma.

Flow is also hampered by self-centredness or selfishness. Many people, for instance, complain of lack of motivation at the workplace – the work is dull, the boss is arrogant and uninspiring, and so on. It needs an honest look. As long as we accept a salary and benefits from the organisation, we owe it to the organisation to take an interest in the allotted work. Otherwise, in all honesty, we should quit. When life is approached with a determination to make it personally meaningful, even the most mundane job and the most stressful circumstances can produce flow.

Once, during a journey, I met a senior officer of the railways. He was aware of the corruption and apathy at the workplace, but refused to become another uninspired employee. He initiated a tree-planting project in the large railway colony where he lived, and took up water harvesting. He told me that he had planted nearly 3000 trees and each morning and evening, as he walked among the trees, he felt they were calling out to him, as though they were his children. In the state of deep harmony and peace with nature, he was released from earthly worries, anxieties, and the humdrum of existence. The encounter made a deep impression on me – there are people who know how to detach themselves from unfavourable situations by creating alternative channels that make them happy.

For many people, lethargy steps in, and flow becomes a deferred goal, something that they will do tomorrow. The tomorrow never comes. Market research says that people experience flow about 13 per cent of the time that they spend watching television, 34 per cent of the time they do hobbies, and 44 percent of the time they are involved in sports and games. Yet the same people spend at least four times of their free hours watching TV compared to the hours spent on some hobby or sports. Why would we spend four times of our free time doing something that has less than half the chance of making us feel good?

The answer is that we are not ready to introspect, and unwilling to channel our flow. The process of intro-

spection is helped greatly by the ancient yogic technique of pranayama. The technique figures prominently in Vipassana as Anapana meditation and in the Buddhist tradition as Insight Meditation. “In some traditions,” says Sri M (author of *Wisdom of the Rishis*), “The only technique they teach aspirants is pranayama, because they believe that it alone will induce a state of natural concentration.”

Breath is the cord that ties the soul to the body. However, have you noticed how your breathing slows down significantly, when you are watching your favourite match or listening to your favourite song, transported to another world? In those moments, are you dead because your breathing has virtually stopped? Actually, you are more alive than you ever felt in your normal states. Hence, the yogis figured, if man could control his breath patterns, he would be able to control his mind patterns, to achieve flow. Such pranayama is not the hatha yoga pranayama where the breath is controlled forcibly.

It is a yogic technique like Hong Sau or So Hum, where you watch the flow of breath like a neutral witness, and chant a mantra syllable with each incoming and outgoing breath. In the process, the breath slows down automatically and prana, the vital energy, is withdrawn from the five senses. Then, uninstructed by externals, you achieve a state of silent absorption, Dhyana, which re-charges and re-energises you, connecting you to the flow.

After the accidental death of her son, Karl, a celebrated jockey, Nan Umrigar gave up on God, religion, and the belief that if you were good, kind and truthful, nothing would go wrong. She lived listlessly in a void, until she started receiving messages from Karl through a process known as Automatic Writing. Karl seemed determined to connect his mother back to the flow of life. Sounds came in to Nan from the silence, conquering the great divide, and proving to her that there is a



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**Post retirement, BN Som (extreme right) took up cudgels to clean the famous Rabindra Sarovar Lake in Kolkata that was filthy and defiled, and so kept himself active and engaged**

dimension far beyond the physical world we live in.

Nan's ground-breaking book, *Sounds of Silence*, captures her joy at coming in touch with Karl once again, and her introduction to Meher Baba, her son's guide in the afterlife. The book quickly became a word-of-mouth bestseller and a tremendous source of inspiration for thousands.

Fear, worry, and guilt are other negative emotions that come in the way of flow. Any negative emotion needs to be counter-balanced with a step-by-step purification of the mind through meditation, introspection, and spiritual counselling. Once you have the bigger picture in mind, you will be motivated to engage in the sadhana or practice that connects you to the flow state.

Venerated Buddhist teacher Ani Tenzin Palmo (author of *Reflections on a Mountain Lake*) says, "The mind becomes greedy not just for external pleasures but also greedy for mental comforts, which are much more difficult to renounce. However, if we can manage to do that, we naturally enter a state of openness, simplicity, and clarity, and it leads to the birth of understanding. When we recognise unwanted things coming into the mind, we simply, naturally, let them go. We encourage and rejoice in wholesome things. In that way, step-by-step, we purify the mind." Tenzin adds that the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are

right here and now, right in front of us, right with us. If we open ourselves to their inspiration, they will support us because they are working to benefit all sentient beings. Once we plug into that energy, we no longer feel alone. There is evidence that people who plug into the energy of contemplation even surmount physical disabilities to achieve flow.

One of India's most famous contemporary artists, Satish Gujral, has been deaf for 62 years. However, he became a world famous painter, sculptor, muralist, graphic designer, writer, and architect. The International Forum of Architects selected his design of the Belgium Embassy in New Delhi, as one of the thousand best buildings in the world built in the 20th century. Some years ago, Gujral had a breakthrough surgery that restored his hearing. However, he found the noise unbearable, a disturbance to his creative thinking. Therefore, he actually reversed the surgery and went back to being deaf, to his old world of the silence that speaks, and which gives glorious nurturing inspiration.

In summary, flow comes and makes life joyful when we learn to co-create with the universe; we emulate role models, and give up any unwholesome action that mars the creative flow – when we keep faith that we are not alone, and realise that "God loves us as much as he loves Jesus," as Paramahansa Yogananda said. Therefore, why should we not flow with the stream of pure love, pure energy, and pure wisdom that is oozing from the universe, urging us to keep going until we realise our true potential?

Before concluding the article, I was given a charming example of flow. It was 8.30 pm and I had left office to find that my car would not start, even after being pushed. My driver panicked, wondering who was going to help us at that hour and how we were going to leave the car behind in an open, unguarded street. However, I was fully in the flow, and I knew we were going to be supported. I asked him to check if any mechanics were still around in the adjacent market. Soon, he was back with two, who had stayed back late. In a span of minutes, a new car battery had been fitted, though I did not have enough money to pay for it. The car was purring and we were on our way home. I love the power of flow, don't you?



Nandini Sarkar is Co-founder, C-Quel, a management services company. A lover of the spiritual Masters she is a follower in the Kriya Yoga tradition.

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