

# Mindfulness-in-Action Primer

## Introducing Nowflow Mindfulness for Optimal Action

Today many people recognize the benefits of mindfulness. Mindfulness practices can reduce our stress and improve performance. When we understand more generally how mindfulness works, we can practice it more easily and also apply mindfulness in all that we do.

The practice of mindfulness can seem related to minimizing judgment, thinking, past and future, and even ego. In action, though, won't we need to make decisions by assessing situations with good judgment and forming plans for what to do next in the future? Given the variety of practices and perspectives on mindfulness, it's not always obvious how mindfulness could fully apply in action.

In this primer, we'll see a way of understanding mindfulness so that we can fully apply being mindful in all action. In this way, mindfulness can be about effectively relating to our experience, whether we are observing our breath while sitting quietly or whether we are in the midst of a busy day—or even when we are doing a very challenging activity that demands our best performance. One could integrate this general understanding into various practices such as sitting meditation, tai chi and yoga, or other methods for reducing stress and improving performance.

To assist in this introduction to general mindfulness for optimal action, we'll also playfully go through an example of action where we are wanting to retrieve a runaway pet bunny. With the help of some cartoon illustrations, we'll take a look at what we need—and what we don't need—in action, breaking it down into five steps that lead to general mindfulness-in-action.

## Awareness-intention:

### Non-prejudgmental mindfulness

One of the commonly reported benefits of mindfulness is that it helps us to be less reactive. Instead of feeling stuck in reactive patterns of stress, we can feel that we have more choices about how we respond to situations. Let's see this in a scenario where our pet bunny has gotten out of the house and is now hopping away. We could get sucked into judgments about this situation (e.g., "I shouldn't have been so careless" and "I'll be so upset if my bunny gets hurt") that actually

get in the way of us handling this current situation. Or, we could respond to this situation by seeing more clearly what is going on now and acting accordingly (e.g., “My bunny is heading towards the road” and “I’ll run fast in this direction to get between the bunny and danger”).

As this example shows, sometimes it’s quite clear whether we are reacting unhelpfully or responding more optimally. At other times, though, we might have a harder time distinguishing what is helpful and what is not helpful in our actions. Sometimes our judgments get in the way of us handling situations, yet we also want good judgment when assessing situations and forming intentions about what to do next. Let’s see if we can understand this dynamic more simply and generally so that it’s easier to apply in all action.

### Input-output

Sometimes, judgment *seems to come first*—before fuller information about what we are judging. We’re prematurely coming to more fixed conclusions that interfere with our fuller discernment of what is going on. This *prejudgment* is partially blocking out our fuller awareness because it seems to come first and also feels quite fixed. When we feel distracted by prejudgmental interference about the bunny situation, for example, it’s harder to keep noticing what the bunny is up to right now.

By contrast, when we are responding more effectively in the bunny situation, our better judgment is constantly being informed by awareness of what we are judging. We feel how such judgment comes after—and is continually informed by—our awareness so this judgment is also quite responsive. As a situation changes, our judgment can change accordingly.

In other words, there is a simple relationship at work: input comes before output. Input can include our current sensory input as well as all previous input that forms our memories and knowledge. Output can include our judgments, intentions, and decisions about what to do.

When reacting prejudgmentally about the bunny situation, we aren’t allowing the natural order of input-output to fully play its role. We’re partially closing off our decision-making from more input, such as more clearly perceiving what is actually going on right now with the bunny (which would be key as we follow and maneuver to recover our bunny). In the stress of such a reaction, we suffer more and our bunny-rescuing performance would be subpar compared to what it could have been without this prejudgmental interference.

What if we could allow the natural order of input-output to proceed with less prejudgmental interference? That would be how we could suffer less and be

more successful in our actions. This is also something we could practice. Below are some examples of how it can be helpful to practice non-prejudgmental mindfulness when we can take a break in our focus on output (e.g., judgments, decisions, intentions, and plans) and let ourselves really focus for a period on the input of awareness.

## Output “breaks” for fuller input

Mindful breaks can be a great way to begin and also to deepen our practice. These are breaks in the action of our lives where we set aside time to just be with our experience as it is now—with nothing we have to judge, no plans we need to form, and nothing we need to decide to act upon. In other words, we are creating circumstances where output isn’t important so that we can restore our fuller input of awareness.

### 10 second holiday

Even for just a few seconds right now, we can explore what happens if we give ourselves a “10 second holiday.” For just these few seconds, we can have a holiday where there is nothing we have to do, nothing in our experience we need to manage differently, and nothing even we need to try to be aware of. We may find it’s possible to give ourselves permission to have this kind of holiday because it’s just for 10 seconds. Even if for a few seconds, we can see what it’s like to let go of care about the output of judgment, decisions, intentions, and plans. One’s awareness can feel clearer and fuller just by giving oneself a break like this.

### Mindful breathing

To practice recovering the fuller input of awareness for longer periods, we would likely need some more support and instruction. A common approach in mindfulness meditation is to sit and practice observing one’s breath. There’s nothing we have to judge, improve upon, or fix about our breathing in this practice. We’re just practicing being aware of when we are breathing in and when we are breathing out. We simply sit and observe our breath as it is.

A practice like this helps to restore more of the input of awareness (in this case, the awareness of the breath). Though we still have the output of intention, such as our subconscious intention to keep breathing, we

would be practicing letting go of our prejudgmental interference about how the breath should be. By not focusing on or worrying about the output, we may also find that our breathing naturally becomes smoother and more refined.

### Mindful movement

We could also apply this to mindful movement, such as mindful walking, tai chi, or yoga. These mindfulness practices more clearly involve action, yet they can still feel like a break from the pressures for judgments, intentions, and plans that we have in daily life. When repeating movement routines slowly and mindfully, we give ourselves a chance to more fully feel our body as it is and how it is moving now. By practicing in this way, we may also notice how our movements gradually and naturally become more fluid and efficient.

### Always helpful?

Minimizing prejudgmental interference (so that we can have fuller input of awareness) may be something that we practice first when the stakes are low because we “don’t have to do anything.” We may also tend to slow down when we are wanting to be more mindful because that, too, gives us more opportunity to let go of blocking and be more aware. Even though it can be more challenging, though, non-prejudgmental mindfulness can fully apply right in the midst of crucial action.

After all, as our bunny is hopping away, it may not be a good idea right then to take a mindful break where we deliberately pause, take a deep breath, and give space for observing our emotions without acting them out. The associations that we may have built up about the techniques and principles of mindful breaks could lead us to believe that acting quickly or less self-consciously is “reacting” and unhelpful. This could make us wonder whether mindfulness would really work in some situations.

It can be especially tricky if we’re aiming to lessen judgment. If we really try to keep lessening our judgment, we might find that we are not sure what that means in different situations. It can seem like a delicate balancing act. If we’re having an important conversation, for example, where’s the line between too much or too little judgment? We’ve all probably had the experience where conversations didn’t go well because of fixed prejudgment that blocked out other information. Perhaps we came to the conversation with only our agenda in mind and hardly listened to the other person at all. On the other hand, if we

really tried to approach the conversation with “no judgment,” we might lapse into an “I’m-not-supposed-to-care-either-way” kind of attitude that is passive instead of being responsive to the situation. By contrast, less prejudgmental interference is something that leads to better judgment in action.

### Better info, better action

This can always apply in all action: Let input inform output more effectively because better information results in better action. No matter what the situation, having less prejudgmental interference will help us to respond more optimally. With this more general understanding, it’s possible to be more free from worries about whether mindfulness could have practical downsides for us or whether we need to hold back in applying mindfulness in some situations.

In an important negotiation, for example, we could increase our chances of success if our judgments are based on all the information that is available to us. This can include information about the outcome we want, what we’ve learned already about the interest of the other party, and what is currently being said and conveyed in the negotiation. With this non-prejudgmental mindfulness, we’d be ready to make the most of whatever happens.

### Stress & blocking input

Letting input play its natural role is straightforward but not always easy. Once we’re more stressed, we tend to have more prejudgmental interference and block out the fuller input available to us. This can show itself in cases where we easily get triggered into stress and react as if a situation is similar to a stressful event that happened to us before, even if there are significant differences. In the aftermath of traumatic events, for example, someone may react to the sound of a door slamming as if there has been an explosion.

Though more evident in such serious cases, this can also happen in countless small occurrences. Once triggered into stress, we’re more closed to new and relevant information about what is actually going on now. This can create a cycle where habitual stress and prejudgmental interference continually reinforce themselves going forward. The suffering and limitations brought on by this can leave us feeling stuck.

An opposite kind of self-reinforcing cycle is also possible, though. However closed down in stress we may feel, we could notice—even if just for a few moments—that we are breathing now. Each time we allow ourselves to have even slightly more awareness of what is going on, we have helped to break the cycle of prejudgmental interference and reactive patterns of stress.

## Specific attention & general reminders

Growing numbers of people are convinced that it's reasonable to train one's mind to pay attention to what is going on now in one's experience. What is going on now in this situation (e.g., sights, sounds, smells, etc.)? What's going on now in one's body, one's emotions, and even one's mind? So far, we've seen how being more mindful of *what is* specifically going on (with less prejudgmental interference) helps us to have better judgment in action. We've also seen how this is not always easy. We could practice this for a lifetime and receive a lifetime of benefits.

It can also be helpful to go further in investigating what tends to get in the way of our fuller, clearer awareness. Are there some more general misperceptions that tend to cloud our view of what is going on? In the Buddhist tradition, for example, mindfulness practice is integrated into Buddhist ideas of impermanence and interdependence. Those are views on the nature of reality that practitioners then practice being mindful of.

Because the goal here is to understand mindfulness in a way that would fully apply in all action, let's see whether there is some general *way* things are happening that would be helpful to keep in mind, whatever the situation and whatever our action. We'll look at this by returning to the runaway bunny situation. In the action of recovering our pet bunny, there are various aspects that we're working with. There's the bunny. There's the bunny's action and our own action. There's the "I" or doer of the action. Is there something that we can keep in mind—that we can be mindful of—as we relate to these various aspects so that our action goes better?

## Direct perception: Flow mindfulness

In the action of retrieving our bunny, our focus is on the bunny, so let's take a closer look at how we're relating to this bunny. Is there anything we could be mindful of so that we could relate more directly and fully to this aspect of our experience? Let's see how flow mindfulness can help us.

Flow mindfulness is being mindful of how the flow of change is an inherent part of things. This may seem quite basic, even too basic. For example, would mindfulness of "bunnyflow" really improve our bunny retrieval performance all that much? Yet, if we apply flow mindfulness to more aspects of our experience, the shift in our perception—and performance—could be substantial. As we'll see, this could even help to explain why people report that they have no thoughts while feeling in the flow of peak performance.

## Concepts in action

In action, we'll never need to relate to a "bunnyshape" bunny that is separate from the flow of how this bunny is changing and moving. Yet, perhaps without even realizing it, we might start with a concept of bunny that seems separate from what the bunny is doing. After all, we separate out these words in language: "The bunny" – "is moving." With this separate conceptual meaning, "bunny" (which might be some kind of "bunny-ness," "bunny identity," "bunny form," or "bunnyshape," for example) does not include the flow of change of the bunny moving.



1. bunny (as bunnyshape)



2. is moving.

Going through two steps (as if flow is separate from bunny) may not seem like much of an extra hassle or hindrance. Yet perhaps we've noticed that our conceptual thinking can tend to make us feel more disconnected from our experience. A concept of bunny as bunnyshape does not fully relate to the moving bunny we are wanting to recover.



bunny (as bunnyflow)

Flow mindfulness can help us to more wholly relate to our pet bunny even as we do so more directly. After all, we don't have to start with a concept of bunnyshape. It's more practical, as well as more rational, to include the flow of change as inseparable from this bunny that is being, doing, and moving now. As this cartoon shows, we can relate to the moving bunny in one step—that is, more directly—when we are mindful of how the flow of change is an inherent part of things.

We can also know that no second step is needed because we're already relating to the practical whole of this bunny with bunnyflow. One can read about in *Way of Now: Nowflow for meditation, peak performance, and daily life* how the flow of change (such as velocity) is inherently included in now and why now as nowflow encompasses the whole of what can make a practical difference both in our life experience and in physics.

Being mindful of bunnyflow would help us more directly connect—in just one step—to the practical whole of this bunny. While we would still be using the concept of bunny, we wouldn't have to feel that this concept got in the way of our clearer, fuller perception. This is how flow mindfulness can help us have more direct-whole perception. Below we'll see this in some common examples from mindfulness practice.

### Just include flow

As we begin and deepen our practice, being “lost in thought” can seem to be a recurring problem. For example, our chattering “monkey mind” may make us lose touch with the fact that we are sitting and breathing here and now in our practice. On a more subtle level, concentratedly thinking about the breath and our body can also partially disconnect us from “the raw” experience of breathing and bodily presence. Let's see how flow mindfulness—being mindful to “just include flow”—can help our conceptual thinking more fully and directly connect to aspects of our experience.

### Handflow scan

Let's practice being mindful of our hand as we slowly extend the fingers. To start, it could be helpful to repeat the words “hand” and “fingers” so that it's easier to focus on that aspect of our experience. Helpful though this can be, one can end up connecting more with the words—“hand” and “fingers”—as conceptual thinking, instead of really feeling all there is to feel in one's hand and fingers.

Let's see how we could deepen our mindfulness of our hand by being mindful of handflow. There is this being, doing, moving, and flowing hand. It's sending a lot of information about how it feels to have a hand, such as what position it's in and how it's *moving*. By



including the flow of our hand *moving*, practicing handflow mindfulness can help us more clearly and fully feel in touch with this thing we call “hand.”

### Breathflow and Bodyflow

The breath naturally lends itself to flow mindfulness, which could be a factor for why it is a common object of meditation. Even as we just sit and feel the body, the breath can naturally remind us that the flow of change is always included: we are *breathing*.

Labeling the inbreath and the outbreath, such as “breathing in” and “breathing out,” can help keep the mind more focused on the breath. As one’s mind becomes more quiet, one can also begin to feel how there’s not just “in” and “out”—there’s the subtle transitions, too. There’s also the differing rate of movements in the air and the body throughout the cycle of the breath. As practice progresses, we might sometimes even “forget about the breath” because what we are relating to more directly and wholly is all this moment-by-moment flow (that we call breathing).

Though this progression in practice may take years, we’ve seen how it is possible to understand this and let it guide our practice right away: by being mindful of breathflow, we can have more direct-whole perception of this aspect of our experience. Over and over again, we can remind ourselves that mindfulness of breath is mindfulness of the flow. Breath is breathflow.

Practicing flow mindfulness with the breath would not only help us to more clearly perceive our breathing but would also help our perception overall. Gradually, we may find that we are subconsciously applying this flow mindfulness to whatever aspect of our experience we are relating to.

### Bodyflow in movement

Many people enjoy and experience benefit from mindful movement, such as tai chi and yoga. When we are first learning a series of moves, though, we may tend to be more “caught up in our heads.” As beginners, we would need to figure out where our arms and legs are supposed to go and may be thinking about the movement as a rough pattern, as if it’s a series of pictures in our mind that we are trying to match.

Because these movement traditions emphasize repeating a series of movements as a practice over years, there's a chance for more refined perception of our moving body. They also tend to emphasize smoothness and flowing transitions within the movement. This gives practitioners the opportunity to discover in practice that their body is always bodyflow. We can understand this direct-whole perception of our body and let it guide our practice. It's not just that our body is doing this move or that move: Our body is inherently a flow.

This illustrates how one can integrate an understanding of flow mindfulness into a variety of movement practices that are well-designed for this already. Flow mindfulness can help us connect more easily to the presence of our being, doing, changing, flowing body. When we relate to our physical body with this more direct-whole perception, we are also more fully connecting to ourselves. This can have benefits that extend beyond the movement practice itself.

### Bunnyflow, bodyflow, everythingflow

As we got to rescue our runaway bunny, there's a lot of things that we're relating to. There's the bunny and our body. There's the yard, the grass, the bushes, the street, the cars, etc. It's going to be helpful to us in action to perceive all of this as effectively as we can.

As we aim to perceive more clearly and fully what is going on in our experience now, we can help ourselves in this by reminding ourselves to include flow. This is how we can have more direct-whole perception of the bunny, our body, the yard, the grass, the bushes, the street, and the cars. It's how we can have more direct-whole perception of anything that can have an effect in our action.

"Just include flow" is, in a way, a simple recipe for shifting our conceptual thinking from being more partial and indirect towards being more whole and direct. Instead of feeling as if our perception is dependent on concepts, we can relate more directly and wholly to the flow—and the function—of something. Anything that can have an effect is always something that inherently includes the flow of change. Once we understand how general this is, we can keep checking in: are we including the flow of that in *that*? If not, we're not as directly and wholly relating to *that* as we could be. We could help ourselves by being more mindful of flow.

What might it be like to have more direct-whole perception as we go to recover our bunny? We might feel almost as if our conceptual thinking disappears since it's no longer getting in the way of our fuller and clearer perception. This can help us see why some people may describe such an experience as "going beyond concepts" or as having "no thoughts." Those would not be descriptions, though, that we could apply to all action because there are cases where we do need conceptual thinking.

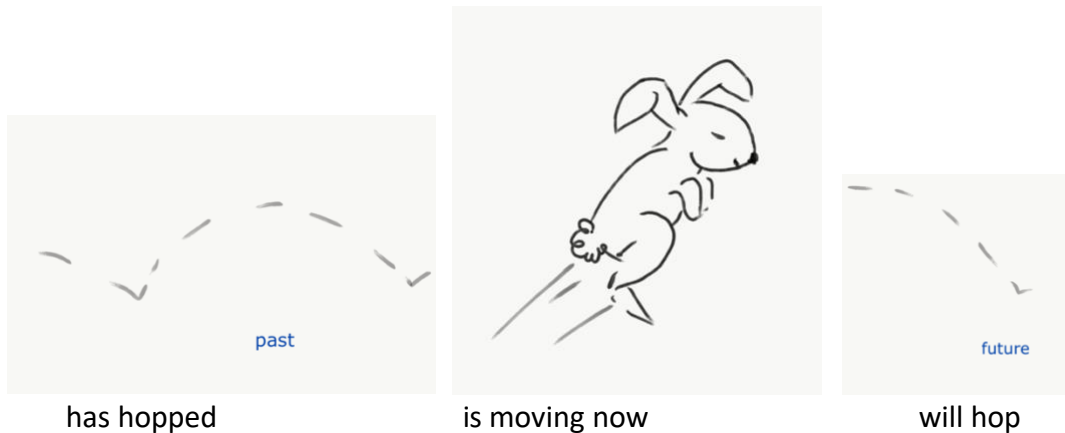
For example, while retrieving our pet bunny, we could still have the concepts of bunny, body, yard, grass, bushes, street, and cars, if helpful for responding this situation. Yet those concepts—when we include flow—do not create a partial or indirect veil over our perception. Instead of feeling dependent on conscious concepts, we would be more free to use concepts to the degree that they help us perceive more clearly. Concepts could play their role in actually helping us to relate to all these various aspects that are going on now and that inherently include the flow of change. With flow mindfulness, this more optimal use of concepts is something that we could fully apply in order to better perceive what is going on now—whatever the action.

So far, we've only looked at those aspects of our experience that are quite clearly going on now, such as bunnyflow and bodyflow. Managing our actions, though, also requires us to relate to what has happened and what will happen as well as what is happening. This can be one of the significant hurdles in fully applying mindfulness in action. We'll turn to this next with now mindfulness for direct-whole action.

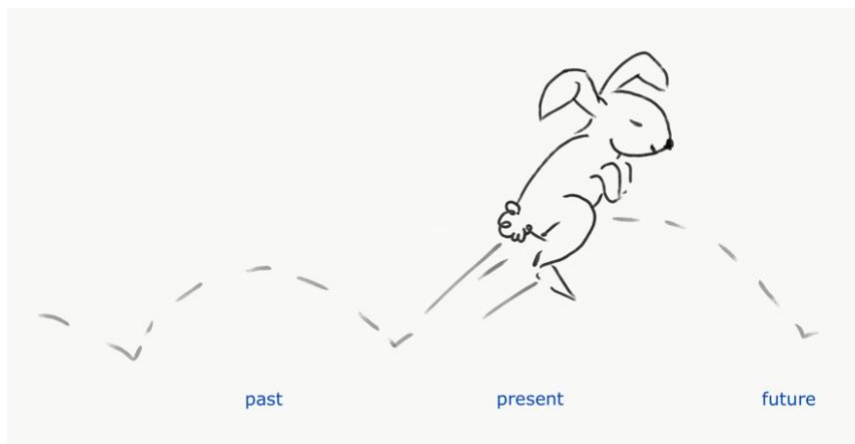
## Direct action: Now mindfulness

As we track and follow our bunny, we have a sense of how it has hopped in the past. We are also anticipating the direction it will hop in the future. In action, we need this sense of past and future. On the other hand, though, the past and the future can tend to make us feel more disconnected from the here and now. This seems to pose a conundrum.

How can we have direct-whole action if the past and the future tend to make us feel as if we're dealing with something that seems to be only partially and indirectly there? After all, the bunny is not now where it used to be in the past. The bunny is not now where it will be in the future. Yet we couldn't track the bunny's action and manage our own action without a sense of the past and the future. Below are cartoon pictures that illustrate how we might feel as if our experience of action is more indirect and partial than it really is.



In these three cartoon pictures, we're relating to the past and the future in our experience as if they are *not* now. Yet is that really so? This is how now mindfulness can help us. As we go to recover our bunny, a past-present-future storyline about the bunny is going on *now* in our mind. As we can see in the cartoon below, this whole picture of the past-present-future storyline is directly laid out altogether now in our minds.



All now: bunny has hopped, is moving, and will hop

In the book *Way of Now*, it's explained how we can rationally and consistently understand that all available past-present-future information is included in now, once we understand that now includes the flow of change. In practice, this means we have a direct-whole way of relating to past-present-future as needed for our actions because our past-present-future storylines are fully now. Now

mindfulness is reminding ourselves that this is so, as we'll see below in some explorations.

## It's all now

Now mindfulness can be challenging to practice at first because, as these explorations below show, it's not a matter of trying to be now by not thinking about what has happened or what will happen. It's about being mindful of how whatever is in our experience, including our experience of the past and the future, is fully now. While there are more advanced practices for now mindfulness once one has been practicing flow mindfulness for a while, here are some starting explorations.

### Planning now exploration

Let's see if we can notice our planning for the future as going on now. For a minute or so, let's pick something that we want to get done later today and begin planning for how we might do it, how it might go, and what might happen as a result. Even though our plan for later today is information about the future, can we observe how this plan itself is not in the future? Can we observe and feel how our planning is going on now in our mind?

### Curious about thinking exploration

Sometimes in practice, it's helpful to immediately let the thoughts go and return to what helps us feel more fully here and now, such as the flow of our breathing now. At times, though, it can also be helpful not to be too eager to get back to mindfulness of our breathing and instead linger with some curiosity when one notices that one is thinking.

Perhaps we could become curious about what happens to the thinking once we've spotted it in our experience. Does it fade or become stronger? Can we observe how our thinking—whether our thinking is about the past, the present, or the future—is changing now? When we've noticed that we were “lost in thought” about what has happened or what will happen, it's actually an opportunity to remind ourselves and begin to really feel: it's all happening now.

### Simple past-present-future exploration

We can also practice now mindfulness with very simple past-present-future storylines. Counting breaths, for example, is a simple storyline as well as being an aid for mindfulness of breath. If we're counting exhalations up to 10 (and then beginning again at 1), the count is an ongoing storyline in our mind. For example, when we are at 4, we know that's because 1, 2, 3 happened before and also that 5, 6, etc., up to 10 will happen after. The whole past-present-future storyline of the count is directly laid out altogether now in our minds, and we can explore being mindful of how this simple storyline is all now.

In mindful movement, we can also explore being mindful of the past-present-future storylines that are going on now in the background to enable us to do what we do. For example, if we are making a circular motion with our arm, we are using a past-present-future storyline to know where we have been, where we are, and where we need to go to complete the circle. By reminding ourselves that this is going on (and that it's now), we can become more accustomed to how past-present-future storylines are going on now, updating now, and directly affecting our action now.

### Here and now in action

It can be easier to feel that we are living in the here and now when we are doing an activity for its own sake without expectations of results, such as if we are just playing with our pet bunny. Sometimes an athlete or artist can experience spontaneous now mindfulness because they love doing what they are doing and feel absorbed in the action of it. Top performers also report that, when they can free themselves during a performance from the pressures of achieving a certain future outcome, they tend to perform more optimally.

Yet we can't always do actions just because we enjoy doing those activities for their own sake and sometimes we do feel a lot of pressure for results. When we're running to intercept our bunny before it reaches the street, we're doing that action in order to bring about a future outcome we really want: saving our pet bunny. Since that future outcome would be so important to us, we can tend to feel more separate from all that's going on now as we take action.

Or, perhaps we left the front door open and that's how our bunny got into this danger. This past cause for the current situation can also make us feel more

separate from all that's going on now as we take action. We can end up feeling haunted by past causes, as if now doesn't encompass all of what is affecting us. After all, we're in this predicament now because of an event—for example, leaving the door open—that happened in the past.

Now mindfulness is more difficult in such cases because our past-present-future storylines are about past causes and future outcomes that are important to us. The stress of this can make it more challenging to really feel how these are past-present-future storylines going on now in our mind. While it can be more challenging to apply, we've also seen how it is still possible to experience direct-whole action in the midst of stressful situations and crucial actions.

We can, at least, understand rationally and consistently that this is so: Now as nowflow includes change and all available past-present-future storylines about change. In other words, there is nothing outside of what is happening now that is influencing our action now. We're facing this current situation that's going on now and we have a storyline—that's also going on now—about how this situation came about and what might happen next. By feeling how all of this is going on altogether now, it's possible to relate to any action as direct-whole action.

To really begin to experience this, though, we'd likely need to practice both flow mindfulness and now mindfulness in more refined depth. There is a natural progression where practicing flow mindfulness helps to “untangle” our present experience of something from the storyline past and storyline future we have about it. Once perception is more direct-whole about the present, we can find that our mind is clearer and freer to feel direct-whole action. Though introduced here as two mindful steps (i.e., flow mindfulness and now mindfulness), they always work together as components of general nowflow mindfulness.

In a way, we have covered all that we need to in action with flow mindfulness and now mindfulness because nowflow is the practical whole of all that can make a difference. Yet there is an aspect of our experience that can feel so “tangled up” that we'll take a look at it as an additional step towards general nowflow mindfulness. Let's see how we can relate more directly and wholly to ourselves as the doer of action in light of flow mindfulness and now mindfulness.

## Direct doer: Nowflow-I mindfulness

Instead of “just doing” what’s needed in the bunny situation, we may feel that a fixated sense of ourselves as “the doer” makes it harder for us to effectively respond in the moment. Let’s see this first in the action of public speaking, as that is a more common challenge than chasing after a runaway pet bunny.

People can find speaking in public quite challenging. Perhaps we tried it in the past and it didn’t go well for us. The next time we need to speak in front of a group, we’ll likely be more anxious because we expect that it won’t go well again. We’re having to deliver our talk as this doer, which is (we’ve decided) not a good public speaker. This unhelpful, self-conscious, and fixed sense of the doer is going to make it harder for us to find our words in the moment. It wouldn’t be surprising if our talk again doesn’t go well, further confirming that this is “who I am.”

### Just include flow

How could we apply flow mindfulness to help us relate more optimally to ourselves as the doer of action? The practice of flow mindfulness—i.e., reminding ourselves to “just include flow”—came from understanding that flow is inseparable from the being, doing, moving thing that we’re relating to. As applied to the doer, we would remind ourselves the doer *includes the flow of doing*.

In the action of giving our talk, for example, the speaker includes the flow of speaking. Instead of a sense of a separate self as the speaker (whether an excellent or poor public speaker) who is then doing the talking, we’re staying mindful of how the doer includes the flow of doing now: The speaker includes the flow of speaking now. Being mindful of this can help us to connect more directly and fully to the doer-I that is really doing—and that is really having an effect on—our action now.

### It’s all now

Now mindfulness can further help us to relate more directly and wholly to ourselves as the doer of action. The practice of now mindfulness—i.e., reminding ourselves that “it’s all now”—came from understanding that whatever influences our action is now, including the past-present-future storylines going on now in our mind.

Let’s see how this could help us be more free as we relate to ourselves as the doer of action. Before applying now mindfulness, we may be relating to the doer as quite fixed and even seemingly spread out in time: “I wasn’t good at it in the past, I’m not good at it now, and I won’t be good at it in the future.” After all, our



sense of ourselves as the speaker can seem to involve the past episodes that were difficult, as well as the upcoming public speaking engagements that we may be dreading.

With now mindfulness, we can understand—and begin to feel—how our past-present-future storyline about ourselves as the speaker is actually going on now in our mind. It's not really the previous embarrassing episode of public speaking that is still affecting us as we nervously move to the microphone. It's the memory going on in our mind now of that past event. We are memory-ing, planning, and storylining and that is part of our action now. As we give our talk, there doesn't need to be a sense of doer-I that is separate from the flow of storylining now: our memory-ing about what has happened, perceiving what is happening, planning for what will happen.

### Less bound, more free

With nowflow-I mindfulness, we may feel a lightness about ourselves. Instead of feeling as if we have to carry the burden of a separate and rather fixated doer-I through whatever we're doing, we can feel fully immersed and carried along by the flow of doing now. After all, the direct-whole doer includes the flow of doing, which includes the flow of past-present-future storylining going on now. By being mindful of this, we're free to notice more of what is actually happening now and affecting our public speaking now.

This is how we would respond more optimally to the situation and give a better talk. By contrast, much of our prejudgmental interference can come from feeling bound by a fixed, separate doer-I. When our sense of doer feels quite "tangled" up with—and bound by—what has happened and what will happen, we can feel rather stuck, instead of realizing the freedom of responsiveness that is available to us as nowflow-I in each nowflow moment. We would be able to discover and realize our fuller potential as a public speaker by recovering a sense of direct-whole doer.

### Nowflow-I in peak performance

This can also help to explain some seemingly mysterious reports about the flow state of peak performance. Let's say that we really performed an amazing feat while saving our pet bunny. As we performed this feat, we would likely have felt in the flow of doing what we needed to do moment by moment. After all, it's the flow of one's body and mind now that is doing the action. The more we feel that, the more our sense of *non-flow-I* and *non-now-I* naturally drops off, since that kind of indirect and partial sense of doer is not actually practical in action.

We might even be surprised by how little sense of a separate doer is needed in action: as if the doing was happening "without a doer." That would well describe

what a sense of direct-whole doer can feel like. As we've seen, the direct-whole doer can feel so full with all the flow of doing together now that a typical sense of a separate, fixed doer may fall away.

This can also be one of the discoveries that can happen through meditation. In a traditional Chinese Chan (Zen) parable, there is an analogy of an ox herder who sets out to tame a wild ox. At first the ox herder has to catch and train the wild ox with a rope and whip. This part of the parable can be easier to make sense of. In meditation, we may tend to feel that we as the ox herder (the doer) are training and taming a wild animal (the mind) to be more docile and quiet.

Towards the end of the parable, though, something quite strange happens: the whip, ropes, ox herder, and ox all merge and, in a way, disappear. What could that mean? This could be interpreted as illustrating that the doer, the mind, and mindful attention are not separate. For example, even "the meditator" (or "the observer" or "the witnesser") is not fixed and separate from the flow of meditating now. When feeling this, it can feel as though seemingly separate aspects of one's experience—including one's sense of a separate "doer-I"—have merged or disappeared.

Though it can feel as if the doer-I has disappeared, we have seen that this "disappearance" of the seemingly separate doer-I can come from applying flow mindfulness and now mindfulness to the doer. In other words, it comes from relating more directly and wholly to the doer, rather than trying to minimize it. As is described more in the examples below, having a sense of direct-whole doer doesn't require that we fundamentally make ourselves any different. Instead, nowflow-I mindfulness helps us relate more clearly and fully to the way we already always are.

### Less illusion of separation from nowflow

In the practice of mindfulness, these are some seemingly paradoxical approaches, which are often discussed. On the one hand, dedication and deliberate effort can be needed to progress. On the other hand, effortlessness and letting go of trying also can be needed to progress. Even in a single sitting meditation session, we may alternate between trying too hard to be mindful at times and, at other times, going to the other extreme of hardly reminding ourselves to be mindful at all. This

can also happen over a lifetime of practice. Practitioners tend to encounter limitations if striving “to get somewhere else” through practice, while an ideal of “no place to go” whatsoever can be limiting, too.

As we’ve already seen with the parable of the ox herder, there are stories in the Buddhist tradition that illustrate this paradox of practice. In the *Diamond Sutra*, someone wanders everywhere looking for a valuable gem only to discover that it was sewn all along into his cloak. On the one hand, the arduous journey wasn’t really needed. On the other hand, though, the person might never have discovered the gem without going on the journey.

### Nowflow: journey to where we are

Let’s see how nowflow-I mindfulness is both a journey to where we are and also a helpful journey to take. On the one hand, the doer is never separate from the flow of doing. The doer is never separate from what is going on altogether now. Mindfulness of this lets us be mindful of how we are already and always in the now and in the flow of nowflow-I. In this way, nowflow-I is not a destination that we’re trying to get to because we already always are there.

On the other hand, though, our usual sense of the doer can seem so *not* in the now and *not* in the flow of nowflow. As we relate to ourselves, it’s easy for a sense of the doer-I to feel as if it’s more fixated and even chained to various events that have happened in the past or that will happen in the future. To lessen such illusion, we’d need to keep reminding ourselves that, whatever our experience or action, it’s nowflow-I that’s the direct-whole doer.

This would be somewhat analogous to having arrived and being parked at the destination in one’s car, yet the windows keep fogging up. We’ve arrived, yet we keep losing sight that we’ve already arrived. We’d be limited in our progress if we keep trying to drive off to someplace else. We’d also be limited in our progress if we neglect defogging the windows so that we can really see where we already are.

### Nowflow: finding our way

Sometimes as we find our way with our mindfulness practice, it can seem as if we must choose between various approaches and pick one or the other because they are somehow incompatible. This can add complications and potential for confusion. Below are some examples of how nowflow understanding can help us see more to the underlying

compatibility among various approaches. We'll use the "car-with-foggy-windows-already-parked-at-nowflow" analogy as a way to briefly illustrate this possibility.

Let's say, for example, that we've had experiences of effortless and wholeness during peak performances and we'd like to have more ready access to this experience of the flow state. Deliberately, consciously, and effortfully paying attention to just the flow of our breathing may seem far removed from what we are wanting to experience. Let's see, though, how such practice could lead to what we've had glimpses of when in the flow of peak performance.

In terms of the car analogy, flow-state experiences can happen when the fogged-up windows on the car spontaneously become a lot clearer so that we feel more fully in the now and in the flow of nowflow. That would feel quite different than when the windows are mostly fogged up and we're consciously and deliberately working on clearing up just one small piece of a window, such as practicing flow mindfulness of breathing. Even so, let's see how there is underlying connection—and compatibility—between these experiences.

By setting aside, say, 15 minutes a day to defog just a bit by being mindful of breathflow, we would be helping ourselves to more readily and reliably feel how at least that part of our experience is always already part of nowflow. This is a start towards more reliably having all the windows stay defogged. While practice may be more effortfully conscious and specific in the beginning, nowflow is something that we can gradually become more generally and also more subconsciously mindful of: how all of experience in action is always "effortlessly" in the flow of the practical whole of nowflow.

As another example, let's say that we were first introduced to meditation as a mental-fitness training where we've gotten much benefit from paying deliberate, conscious attention to our experience. By practicing with this approach, we may develop a sense of ourselves as an observer who is seemingly "above the fray" of the situations, sensations, emotions, and thoughts. Though this can help us have perspective and be less reactive, it can also make us feel as if we are more distanced from our own experience. At some point, our practice could feel that it has plateaued, instead of continuing to help us feel more free and fully alive.

In terms of the car analogy, it's as if we've been diligently clearing up the front windshield by mindfully observing the here and now of situations, sensations, emotions, and thoughts. Quite inadvertently, we may have left some of the other windows fogged up because we're acting as if the observer (doing the observing now) is somehow not fully included in nowflow-I.

This wouldn't have to mean that we need an entirely new approach in order to progress. It would be necessary, though, to keep going with the defogging for all "the windows" of our experience. We could do this, for example, by being mindful of how the observer is not detached from nowflow but includes the flow of observing going on now.

These are just a few examples that indicate how we don't necessarily have to take sides when we come across seemingly opposite approaches, views, or experiences. Because nowflow mindfulness can fully apply in all action, we can also fully apply nowflow mindfulness to whatever method we are using to improve our action. This gives us an overall, general perspective through which we can reconcile even seemingly opposite approaches in terms of what is more simple and general.

## General Nowflow Mindfulness

Today the importance of mindfulness is increasingly recognized. People are finding it helpful in many areas of action, such as sports, business, and education. It can be challenging, though, to find one's way in the practice. There are various perspectives on what mindfulness is, not to mention all the different things we can practice being mindful of.

In this primer, we looked at one example of mindfulness in action: retrieving our runaway bunny. We've seen how, by being more mindful of what's going on, it's possible to respond more effectively and optimally in action. In that bunny-recovering situation, there's a lot of specific things we can be mindful of, as there are many aspects of what is going on that can influence our action. With so much to be mindful of in action, how can we go about more clearly and fully relating to what is going on?

As we've seen, we can be more generally mindful about the way things are and the way things are happening in action—any action. One of the most general understandings we can have is an understanding of nowflow: now includes the flow of change and all available past-present-future information about change. This gives us a way to relate more directly and wholly to what's involved in all action. We can be mindful of nowflow.

We've seen how concepts (such as bunny, yard, street, grass, and cars), storylines of past-present-future, and our sense of self are involved in our action. We've also seen how nowflow applies to these aspects of action, allowing us to relate to them in a more direct-whole way. By applying mindfulness of nowflow in this action of bunny retrieval, we've seen how we can increase the effectiveness of our action and the likelihood of a successful happy ending: our bunny back home, safe and sound.

This was a brief overview of mindfulness-in-action for the optimal retrieval of our runaway pet bunny. Nowflow doesn't depend, though, on this particular situation or that special circumstance. Nowflow mindfulness is general mindfulness for all action: mindfulness-in-action. Because nowflow fully applies to all aspects of any action, there's practically no end to how we could further benefit by more fully applying nowflow mindfulness in action.

This is why it can be helpful to focus on some key areas within general nowflow mindfulness. As this primer has outlined, we can practice flow mindfulness, now mindfulness, and nowflow-I mindfulness and see how that improves our responsiveness for optimal action. This can provide some sense of how far-reaching mindfulness of nowflow can be.

Wonchull Park  
Mackenzie Hawkins  
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- Read more in [books on nowflow](#), such as *Nowflow Breath, Movement & Mind* and *Way of Now* (available on Amazon and as a free PDF)
- Discover through tai chi and [nowflow practice in classes](#)