

Flow, Fasting and Falaah (part 1 of 2)

Description: How to achieve profound happiness and satisfaction or 'flow'. Part 1: What are the ingredients that lead to 'flow'.

By Abdurraheem Green (islamsgreen.org)

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I am covered in sweat and my heart rate has gone through the roof. I could walk, and my body is telling me to sit down, or at least walk, but I crank the peddles, powering my mountain bike up the stony piece of single track. I can't get enough air into my lungs to feed my burning legs, but I keep going.



No one is forcing me up this mountain. It's not some cruel punishment meted out by a tyrant for misdemeanours. I choose to do this. Why? Is it because of the descent that follows the painful climb? Partly, but then that has its own madness, hurtling down a hill over rocks and roots at speeds where a crash might well result in serious injury or worse, but the smile it leaves on my face when I reach the bottom remains in my heart long after it has left my face. So again: Why? After I ride my mountain bike, having made it up grueling climbs and technical descents I feel a profound sense of happiness that can only come from having accomplished something worthwhile. That paradox is that in order to feel that I needed to suffer. In fact the harder that task, the more the suffering, the more profound and longer lasting the sense of accomplishment. It is because of this that some women manage to have large numbers of children despite the enormous pain and hardship it entails, not only in carrying and delivering that child, but in bringing it up, because of the profound sense of achievement that undeniably is connected with that activity.

This sense of profound happiness and satisfaction is what has come to be known as *optimal experience*, and what is commonly referred to as a "state of flow". It is most intense when a person is so completely absorbed in an activity, when body and mind are one and everything is just "happening." It is most commonly experienced during sports, but in fact it can be achieved during a huge range of physical as well as mental activities, but they all share some common traits. This state of optimal experience or "flow" is only reached under certain conditions which have been identified.

Firstly the activity must not be too difficult or too easy. If it is too hard, a person would become demotivated and if it is too easy they would become bored. Ideally it should be on the very edge of one's abilities, pushing the limits and out of the comfort zone. The reason for this is that although the task itself maybe be hard, or even unpleasant, the end result is that the individual would achieve the knowledge that they have improved themselves. It is this feeling of having improved that is the key, because it is connected to person's feeling of self worth. This is

enhanced when one contributes even in some small way to the betterment of humanity.

Secondly the activity should be defined, in the sense of a specific goal and provide immediate feedback.

Thirdly, another important dimension is that the activity must be autotelic. This means the activity is done for itself, as opposed to doing it for some external factor. Some people have autotelic personalities. These are people who are internally driven, and as such may exhibit a sense of purpose and curiosity. This determination is an exclusive difference from being externally driven, where things such as comfort, money, power, or fame are the motivating force, as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, writes in his book *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*

"An autotelic person needs few material possessions and little entertainment, comfort, power, or fame because so much of what he or she does is already rewarding. Because such persons experience [flow](#) in work, in family life, when interacting with people, when eating, even when alone with nothing to do, they are less dependent on the external rewards that keep others motivated to go on with a life composed of routines. They are more autonomous and independent because they cannot be as easily manipulated with threats or rewards from the outside. At the same time, they are more involved with everything around them because they are fully immersed in the current of life."

These are the people who have embraced the inner struggle on the path to true happiness.

Again and again in survey after survey people are asked what do they think is the most important key to happiness and the response is always the same: Money. If not money it is some external thing connected to it. People imagine that relaxing, watching a movie, listening to music, drinking alcohol or taking drugs or having sex are the activities that make one happy; it certainly is true that whilst one is involved in them they do result in enhanced states. In fact research shows that when people are actually asked to rate those experiences while and after they are involved in them they actually rate them low in the happiness stakes. The things that people actually rate the highest in the happiness stakes are the "flow" experiences. Perhaps happiness is not even the right word to describe this state, since it is more profound and lasting. The point being is that most of us think that happiness lies in the material things, and we exert huge amounts of time and effort in trying to acquire a bigger house, faster car, more fashionable clothes, sexier partner, but the joy we get from these things fades away very quickly. It's called hedonistic entropy. Soon enough we become familiar and bored with those things and we aspire to something newer, faster, sexier, bigger, better, which if and when we get it we are soon bored of that. It's the dream of the pursuit of this happiness through externalities that drives the consumer society. It's a dream that is of course a lie. Things don't make people happy. Happiness is an inner condition. It is achieved by exerting effort, by struggling to gain mastery and control of oneself, and by then applying oneself to achieving what is worthwhile.

One could hardly find two different ideas of happiness. One is about self indulgence,

and the other is about self discipline and controlling one's whims and desires, yet it is becoming increasingly clear and the evidence is stacking up as to which one actually makes humans happy.

It is a paradox. In order to feel true happiness one needs to struggle; the nobler the struggle, the greater and more long lasting and profound the sense of happiness. It is clear to see then in the context of this why religious people live happier lives. All organised religions, by virtue of being organised, lend themselves towards optimal experiences and development of autotelic personalities. Why is the dimension of being organised so important? This is simply connected with self discipline and the ordering of consciousness. It is through regular prayer, devotions, fasting, charity etc., that a person learns self control and discipline. They are not only doing these things when they feel like it, they do it irrespective of the feelings they might have. These are simple lessons in self mastery.

The narrative that we all too often hear is how we are all victims of our genes and upbringing and circumstance. It is as if we were helpless puppets in the hands of fate. We often hear the complaint that "my parents made me like this", or "the trauma she suffered made her like that", and as well "that's just the way I am." Of course significant emotional events do impact our behaviour, but we are not helpless victims. We can change.

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