

Mastering Flow, Engagement, and Transcendence for a Fulfilled Life

Introduction to Peaceful Life Radio

Don Drew: Hello, everyone. I'm Don Drew, and this is Peaceful Life Radio. I'm here today with my co-host, David Lowry. David, how are you doing?

David Lowry: Great to be here, Don. Doing great.

Don Drew: Super.

Exploring Flow and Engagement

Don Drew: In our conversation today, we are going to delve into the interconnected realms of flow, profound engagement, and transcendence. These three psychological states often experienced independently hold the potential to significantly enrich our lives when understood and cultivated together. We will explore the nuances of each state, examining how they intertwine and influence one another. By understanding these concepts, we aim to uncover practical strategies for incorporating them into daily life, ultimately leading to greater fulfillment, creativity, and a deeper connection to ourselves and the world around us.

David Lowry: We're going to do that, but I also want to remind our listeners to like, subscribe, and download our podcast. Tell your friends about it. We're here for you and we want you to spread the word that we're here to help.

Understanding Flow

David Lowry: Don I believe your question was the relationship of flow and engagement. So, we'll say that this concept is how to use profound engagement and flow opportunities to bring about happiness. Everybody's probably heard of this notion of flow, like you're doing something and you become so immersed in it that time almost stands still. That's, something we can learn to cultivate and become more expert in the way we do it. And as we do so, we are training ourselves to be more engaged and happy. That's why we're talking about it today.

Don Drew: Okay.

Examples of Flow in Action

Don Drew: So I read about flow for the first time, maybe 10, 15 years ago, and it sounded like a fascinating topic. A simple example upfront, many of us are watching the Olympics as we're recording this (Oh my goodness, yes) this podcast, and many, if not all, of the athletes will move into a state of flow in which they are highly focused on what they're doing. And it is a period of optimum performance.

David Lowry: Yeah, so almost all of us probably have done something in our life that we've become quite good at and you're in that particular mental state when you do it. You don't really make very many mistakes. In fact, you're really doing your very best work. It's something that you usually feel very strongly about. You love what you're doing, or if you don't love what you're doing, you're so engaged in it that your mind shuts out everything else that's there. It's skill based. It's challenge based.

Don Drew: Yeah, we think of this as a state or situation. It's time bound. In other words it's not a way of being all the time. (Yeah, you can't do it all the time) Yeah, right. But it does have several characteristics that are common to it.

David Lowry: Yeah. And we'll get to those in just a moment.

Profound Engagement Explained

David Lowry: I did want to say that profound engagement is another term to introduce here. Profound engagement means that you are struck by something. So, let's say that you're walking down the sidewalk and you notice some beautiful flowers. Suddenly you pause for a moment and look those things over. And you might ask your friend *what are those? What kind of flowers are those?* That's profound engagement. Your mind pauses for a moment in wonder and awe. It's like, *wow, did you see that?*

And when that moment of unexpected awe or wonder comes up we find ourselves moving to this third stage, which we call transcendence, where we see something greater than ourselves. We realize that, hey, *I'm part of something bigger than myself*, and all of that creates this wonderful sense of flourishing.

Don Drew: Yeah, it seems to me that flow, and even profound engagement, are again, somewhat time bound. We achieve those at times and in certain periods, but transcendent speaks to a larger, if you will, lifestyle kind of a change, a way of making flow and profound engagement a regular part of your existence. Would that be accurate?

David Lowry: Yeah. For instance, doing flow, let's say you're on your job. And you become so immersed in it that time almost stands still. And suddenly the day's up. You've done a lot of work and maybe you feel physically or mentally tired but it's a sense of fulfillment and the transcendent part is you find a deeper meaning in it. So, it's a goal we can put ourselves into.

Connecting Flow and Engagement

David Lowry: Don, let's look more deeply at some of these elements of flow.

Don Drew: Flow is primarily about the experience of doing something itself. The focus is on the activity and enjoyment derived from it. As you were talking about flow, I was thinking about how I, as a professor will teach various courses and when I get speaking about something I know a

lot about, I'm very interested in, and I want to impart that understanding to my students, I'm really focused on the process. I find oftentimes those classes they go quickly. And I am very animated, and I'm very much into the topic, and I find that under those kinds of conditions, flow is occurring in my teaching. It's very palpable.

David Lowry: I had a friend who told me she had a job answering phones for the airlines. (laughter)

Don Drew: Yeah, that could potentially be a tough job.

David Lowry: And I said, *Oh my goodness I cannot imagine doing that job.* And she says, *I love it.* And she says, okay so the customer comes on and they're so angry. They've been bumped from their flight or something has happened. And she says, okay, *I'm going to be dealing with an angry person, but I am going to move them from angry person to satisfied person or possibly even happy person.* And she's so good at her job, and knows how to work with people who are in this frenetic state, that she sees an outcome ahead. She's really good at it and says, *I enjoy it very much and I feel so good at the end of the day for what I've done.* And I'm thinking, *Oh my goodness, aren't you glad there are people like that who get into a flow and know they can handle these very difficult people.* (yes). That's the customer service person I want.

Don Drew: Yes, it is. Absolutely. And one of the other things that people discuss when they're talking about these kind of a flow state is a type of time distortion. In other words, time seems to fall away the whole day. If she's really enjoying what she's doing, talking to these angry customers and moving them from being angry to being satisfied or happy, or when I'm teaching in my class, those classes go quickly. And in my experience, this idea of time distortion becomes really important.

And then there's also this idea of optimal performance. Usually with flow, we're working on something we both know well and love, and we are trying to get better at it. We are trying to improve. And that's one of the reasons

why we're so focused on it. We're committed to whatever it is that we are committed to.

I was watching Table Tennis players and the concentration and speed at which they were moving to counter each other's play was amazing. And I thought to myself in the moment they have to be in flow. They have to be. Now that gets disrupted probably every time one of them loses for a second, but then they get right back into it. They had these amazing volleys with the ping pong ball going everywhere and I couldn't help but notice seeing flow in action.

David Lowry: Exactly. And flow is something that we can cultivate in our friendships, our relationships, with our family and friends as well too. For instance, taking our children to let's say Disneyland, we can find that the day goes quickly because we love watching our children or grandchildren have a wonderful time and see the world totally differently than they do. And we can say, *Oh, my goodness. Look, I can't believe the day is done.*

Don Drew: So, let's talk a little bit about profound engagement. Okay. We've described that as a state of deep, meaningful connection with a person, object, or an idea. It involves a heightened sense of awareness, curiosity, and wonder. What are some of the characteristics that go with profound engagement?

David Lowry: So, profound engagement could happen at any time in our life. It's the ability to be stimulated by your imagination and sense of wonder. For instance, if we were to look at an object, you might find that it's really captivating. You allow your mind to get into the action of what you're looking at. You're thinking more like, *I wonder how they made this, or what makes this so much better than another?*

We usually find that we're willing to engage when there's an emotional connection with it. So, for instance, I can look all day at sailboats. That might sound boring to a lot of people, but I love sailboats. If I go to a boat show, I could hang around all day and look at the sails, the rigging, the type of boats, the keels on the boats, the cabins on the boats. My mind goes in

all different directions allowing myself to become engaged with the things I see.

I think this is where many of us fall short. We don't really engage ourselves like we could. We're in a hurry. When we're doing something, we jump to the next thing or we're thinking about the next thing we're going to do instead of paying attention to where we are right here, right now. We don't allow the little things that are happening around us to stir and engage us. All of us could develop this, if we would just give it a chance.

Don Drew: I've heard that this type of profound engagement has a similar kind of time distortion but one of my favorites is the idea that while there's a deep connection with between us and whatever it is we're observing or doing, it can also involve moments of mental distraction as the mind explores implications and connections.

I love making connections between things. And if I was going to describe a personal example of profound engagement, it is when I'm thinking about something that I think is important and I'm able to build a connection to something else that I think is important. And I see those as working together.

David Lowry: Yes, exactly. A light comes on in your mind and you say, *I'd never thought about it, but I think this is related to that, or if we did more of this, we would have more of that in our lives.* And this is especially important when we're working for happiness.

Don Drew: So, we've been talking about flow and about profound engagement. Obviously, there is some overlap here, right? Essentially, flow is about the doing, while profound engagement is more about contemplation and appreciation. How does that lead to transcendence?

Transcendence: Beyond Ordinary Limits

David Lowry: Transcendence is the idea of going beyond your ordinary limits or experiences, into a intuitive, spiritual, or mystical dimension for some people. And when we use those terms we don't want to put you off in any way. We're not trying to get you to go into la la land or anything like that. But it's the idea that you feel a sense of something greater than yourself. It's like *when I see this, I realized my life is important, but there's something even greater going on out there*. So, some people maybe feel it in the sense of patriotism for their country. Or they see themselves fitting into the universe. When we have transcendence, there's usually a feeling of what I'm doing goes beyond the thing I'm doing and it has profound implications beyond me.

Don Drew: Hmm. When we're immersed in an activity, individuals often report a sense of losing themselves as we've talked about, or merging with the activity. And this can create a feeling of being connected with something larger than oneself, which ultimately might be considered transcendental. Okay, how would these fit together?

David Lowry: Don, I like to use the example of a painter, if you don't mind. We're talking about somebody who makes a masterpiece art, let's say. And so they lose themselves in the creation of all of that, the brushstrokes, the technique, the things that interest them, the periods of time and context and so forth. So, we would call that flow, right?

But when you and I go to an art museum, maybe centuries after that thing has been created, and we get meaning from it, now we're talking about profound experience, right? Or profound involvement with something. We look at it and you go, wow, I just love that. Kandinsky's the Russian painter, been gone for a long time, but every time I look at his work, I go, *that is absolutely fabulous. And why am I reacting the way I'm reacting to? What is it about this man's art that attracts me so much?* I look at a Gustav Klimt and I go *how did a person Come up with this idea like that?* That is a profound involvement. But then you think how this person is capturing the essence of human experience and love and being together. You realize

that's something more profound than you can explain. And somehow he's put it into paint and done it.

Don Drew: David you've been talking about fine art and I've been talking about ping pong, right? But I'm playing with this idea of flow. I said, what I witnessed was flow, but what I found was when I was watching these guys, (yeah) I was absolutely fascinated. I mean I was feeling a sense of engagement with what they were doing. And this also has a certain potential for transcendence.

Watching the dedication, the detail, and the focus of these two guys that were playing. And I felt this shift of perspective or a sense of connection to something beyond myself. And watching that, not that I had anything to do with it, but it went from being ping pong to watching two people who have trained incredibly hard and doing a wonderful job of competing in what was obviously a very difficult sport.

Practical Tips for Cultivating Flow

David Lowry: Well, Don, why don't we talk about how we can develop some of these experiences in our everyday life? Because our whole point of this program is to encourage people to develop more happiness, human flourishing, and we hope that if you followed us thus far, that you're making some connections in your life about things you can do that would bring flow, maybe some things that would allow you to more profoundly engage in life and with others and enter transcendence.

Don Drew: We use this word cultivate a lot. And I actually think it's an excellent word for a lot of the kind of work we do in peace. Cultivate means to grow, right? And it means it takes effort. You have to water and feed and something in order to cultivate it and grow it. And so really what we're talking about is growing flow or finding ways to find flow in our everyday life. And I think one of the main keys is to find activities that align with our interests and our skills, and then try and create an environment that supports our own deep focus and engagement.

David Lowry: Don, I think you and Christy, Don's wife, are great examples of that. For instance for years, Don and Christy both were college professors. But they've moved more into what I would call the human potential movement, for lack of a better term. They have a business where they've done lots of consulting and amazing things. Flow is a constant willingness to expand, grow, stretch, challenge. Knowing that you have to have some mindfulness as you do it. And yet. It's enjoyable for you. Am I hitting on something?

Don Drew: I think you are. We're talking a lot about flow and profound engagement and that leading to transcendence. But let me just say that transcendence means to move from one place to another. What we're suggesting here is that if you can cultivate flow and profound engagement in your life then you can basically transcend from the place where you are today, where you're not necessarily experiencing a lot of this kind of feeling, into a state where it is more common in your life, a more regular part of who you are.

David Lowry: You really nailed it because I think one of the deep disappointments of life is feeling like maybe life is passing me by, or I'm not enjoying my life as much as I should, or everybody else seems to have a better life than me. And yet this notion of developing flow and profound engagement is well within the hands of everybody. Everybody can learn how to create these flow situations, and it will be unique for each one of us depending upon what our skills and talents are. And that can be a quite exciting thing to discover.

Don Drew: You don't have to start big. Think that's really important. You don't have to start big. One of the things that you can do with flow is to, for instance, to get focused on those chores that really you enjoy doing, but if you're not careful, it can be a chore. You can turn mundane tasks and making them mindful, trying to focus on doing the best you can at whatever that is. And then learning to savor moments with friends, situations, with areas of work. Find those things that have a lot of meaning to you.

David Lowry: Yes, exactly. Just a funny observation to show you that things don't have to be really complicated. My sister in law, well, we all took a big trip together earlier in the summer. And we were doing laundry, and I noticed that my sister in law folds clothes in ways that would make a YouTuber really proud! I mean, she has spent time learning how to fold jeans, underwear, and socks and it looks like you would package and ship it around the world. I was fascinated. Not only does she do her chores, but she likes to add a little something more to it because she really gets excited knowing that she can pack her suitcase and have like 25 percent of it left over just because she packed her clothes a certain way. Now, that may sound absolutely insane to somebody else, but if you think about it, we all probably have things that we could put a little time, energy, and effort on and get way more enjoyment out of it instead of it being such a drudgery.

Don Drew: True confessions. About a year ago, Christy and I decided that we were going to start using cloth napkins instead of paper at dinner. We wanted to class up dinner a little bit. So we wash those and they always come out of the dryer a little bit wrinkled. and so forth. I have taken great pride in smoothing them out, folding them, corners are perfect and so forth. And I'll go through a pile of those napkins and fold them okay. I'm in a state of flow when I'm doing that. Each one is done exactly right. Just like the other one. I put them in a nice even stack and I feel ridiculous saying this, but I really feel good about it. And I think that what I am doing is I am in a common everyday state of flow.

Okay.

Cultivating Profound Engagement

Don Drew: Let's talk a little bit more about how we can cultivate profound engagement in our lives.

David Lowry: To have profound engagement, you have to cultivate a sense of wonder and awe. It's really learning to look at the world through fresh eyes.

Don Drew: What are some of the ways that you can cultivate I think what you're talking about here is curiosity.

David Lowry: Yes. The thing we could do is ask the question, *what am I missing here?* Let's say you're in a store and you want to cultivate a bit of awe and wonder. Look around and say, *what am I missing here?*

Maybe you'll notice that there are people doing certain things trying to get you to be more interested in the product or get you to buy it and you never thought about that before. Maybe you sense a smell, an aroma, and you realize, *hey, this store is using aromatherapy*. Where is this aromatherapy coming from?

Don Drew: Last year we were in a store that was playing music that was particularly 1970s, 1980s music. We asked the owner about it because most of the stores we went in, as we went down this shopping area, were playing modern music and so forth. And we asked her about it. She said *most of my customers are in their fifties and sixties, so I'm playing music for them*. And I thought, *wow, that's really smart*.

David Lowry: Really smart. Ask questions and seek out novel stimuli. Be willing to try something a little bit different. So if you always wear blue, why don't you see if there's another color that might make you just as happy? Maybe you've gotten into a rut and it's time for you to try something a little different. You've always combed your hair a certain way. Maybe try a different product or something like that.

Don Drew: Yeah. And practicing mindfulness is another great thing to do. You can't really recognize new stimuli and you can't ask questions effectively unless you are present in the moment. That's what generates the questions to begin with. So, being present is really important.

And then, sometimes David we're really quick to judge something, say it's good or it's bad without a whole lot of understanding. And perhaps one of the best things we can do in terms of mindfulness is to suspend judgment. (Oh, that's really true.) We can make those decisions later, whether we like

something or don't like it. I've certainly had new stimuli that I found objectionable and I did not want to be exposed to it again. And yet at the same time, I don't know that it was bad that I went through that process.

Integrating Flow, Engagement, and Transcendence

Don Drew: So, David, how can we use flow and profound engagement as a springboard for transcendence?

David Lowry: If you are willing to become more deeply absorbed and immersive in the things you do, you can experience a state of transcendence more easily. It's the idea of immersing yourself more deeply into things.

For instance, you drink your coffee and just Think about it. *Where did these beans come from?* And you realize it came from outside the United States most likely. *Where? What part of the world? Who picked these beans? How were they roasted?* You can ask all of these questions and the next thing you know, A humble coffee bean can open up a whole new world of experiences in economics, countries, environments, people, all sorts of things for you.

A second thing I would point is slow down. Don't be so willing to jump from the first thing to the next thing. When you're walking from your car, enjoy the parking lot. When you leave the parking lot, enjoy walking into the store. And when you're in the store, enjoy the part of the store you're in. And when you're at the counter, notice who's serving you, and engage with them. In other words, just slow down and expand it out more.

Don Drew: Yeah, really what we're talking about here is looking for ways to merge our sense of self and awareness with the activity or experience we are experiencing at that time.

What about profound engagement in transcendence?

David Lowry: Look for those tiny moments in your life where you suck in your breath and go, *did you see that?* For instance, if I see a small child

and I go, *Oh, look at that* . Become aware of those moments. Expand those moments out a bit more.

Enjoy seeing young children and remember what it was like when you had those young children. Or if you see a flower and you think, *that's really beautiful*, don't just say, *oh, isn't that pretty?* Take a moment and say, *Let me look at this for a moment*. In other words, be willing to engage with what you see, explore the depths of it, and allow yourself to be fascinated and awed by what you see.

Don, you were talking about watching the Olympics. You allowed yourself to be fascinated and awed by the talent you were seeing. And even though it may have been a country that you wouldn't be rooting for you had to admit, *man, this is impressive!*

Don Drew: Yeah. I mean I played ping pong before myself. I'm not very good at it, but it's not necessarily the specific thing you're doing, it's the conditions of your mind. It's where you are placing yourself in relation to that. If it's flow, then you personally are engaged with whatever it is. If it's profound engagement, then it's a heightened sense of awareness. So, it helps us understand and explore how different experiences and perspectives can connect and create a larger hold in our lives, and that ultimately leads to transcendence.

Conclusion: A Journey Towards Fulfillment

David Lowry: Before we go, I just want to say that if you do the things Don and I are talking about working to put more flow into the things that you're already good at, but learn how to stretch yourself and challenge yourself more. And then, if you will learn how to slow down and expand those moments of awe and observation and allow yourself to be amazed by the beauty of the world around you, or the people around you, when you meet somebody suddenly you find a deepened appreciation for the people around you. You even find a deepened appreciation for yourself. And we all need a little more self love in our life. But sometimes we haven't taken the

time to be awed with ourselves. I guess what I'm saying is that *this is a worthy thing to develop in our life.*

Don Drew: Flow provides a foundation for focused engagement, while profound engagement deepens our connection to the world around us. And when nurtured together, these states can serve as a catalyst for transcendent experiences offering a sense of unity meaning and wonder. By intentionally incorporating these principles into our lives, we unlock the potential for extraordinary growth, creativity, and a richer human experience. By understanding and cultivating the interconnected states of flow, profound engagement, and transcendence, we can embark on a transformative journey towards greater fulfillment and purpose, and ultimately peace.