



Vishen: I am Vishen Lakhiani, founder of Mindvalley, the school for human transformation. You're listening to the Mindvalley podcast where we'll be bringing you the greatest teachers and thought leaders on the planet. They discuss the world's most powerful ideas in personal growth for mind, body, spirit, and work. Hi, and welcome to the Mindvalley podcast. I'm so thrilled to be bringing you someone who is perhaps one of the most intelligent men I've ever met, Steven Kotler. He's an award-winning journalist, a rock star author who works on the intersection of science, culture, and human performance.

Steven is probably the most read author, for me personally, in the last four years. His books like "Abundance," "The Rise of Superman," "Bold" which he co-authored with Peter Diamandis, and more recently, "Stealing Fire," were among my favorite books between 2011 and today. His books cover evolutionary theories, psychopharmacology, neuroscience, among many other things. Today, you'll be listening to the catalytic event that got Steven diving deep into the science of flow which led him to creating the Flow Genome Project which is changing the way companies and individuals around the world from Silicon Valley executives to high-performance athletes put themselves into peak human performance states. So let's get started with Steven Kotler.

I'm Vishen Lakhiani, and this is the Mindvalley podcast.

Mindvalley community, welcome Steven Kotler to the set. This is going to be such an interesting consciousness engineering conversation because this man is brilliant. His ideas on flow have influenced people for the last decade, and also, you may not know this, but Steven Kotler is one of the authors I most prolifically read. There was "Abundance," the book



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he co-authored with Peter Diamandis. I was big endorser of that book. We introduced that book to the Mindvalley community, and about a thousand of you bought that book.

Then there was "Bold" also co-authored with Peter Diamandis. "Bold" was another incredible book. Many of you guys have read that, but there were two more recent books written by Kotler, "Rise of Superman," and more recently, "Stealing Fire." Now, before I introduce you, Steven, I want to tell you guys about "Stealing Fire." This book, "Stealing Fire," is about a trillion dollar altered states economy where people are chasing the idea of using everything from neural training, to nootropics, to unique experiences like "Burning Man," to get into altered states to enhance their performance. It's an amazing book, and it actually inspired A-Fest Montego Bay which is on the topic of enhanced states of consciousness.

So, yes, this book actually inspired the theme for this A-Fest. Welcome, Steven.

Steven: Thanks for having me, Vishen.

Vishen: So there's so many things I want to ask you and so many things I bet you guys want to know, but I want to keep this conversation on the idea of limitless performance and flow states because you do incredible work in that area. So maybe let's start with a question, how did you get obsessed with this topic?

Steven: There are a bunch of different entrance points, but the most important point is when I was 30 years old, I got Lyme disease, and I spent the better portion of three years in bed, and I was very, very ill. I was functional and conscious and able to walk around and move and do anything for about an hour a day, and there's a time I would lie on the couch and moaned. And after three years, the doctors had pulled me off drugs. There was nothing else anybody could do for me. They didn't know if I was ever going to get any better. And I was very seriously considering ending my life, not for any other reason other than they didn't know if I was ever going to get any better, and the only thing I was going to be at that point was a burden to my friends and my family. I could no longer at work. I bankrupted myself trying to find a cure. I was a mess.

And in the middle of this kind of dark period, a friend of mine showed up my doorstep and demanded that we go surfing. And it was like hysterically ridiculous request. I couldn't walk across a room let alone go surfing. And she wouldn't leave my house, and she wouldn't leave my house, and she wouldn't leave my house, and after hours and hours and hours of this, I was like, "The hell. Let's fucking go surfing today. I can always kill myself tomorrow." Right? And she literally had to carry me to the car, and they drove me out to the Pacific Ocean. I was living in LA, and they gave me a board of the size of a Cadillac, and the bigger the board, the easier it is to surf. And they had to basically walk me out to the break, and it was a low tide, a very warm day, and the surf was so crappy nobody else was out because the waves were so small. And it had been about five years at that point since I'd actually been surfing, but I was out there maybe 30 seconds, and a wave came.

And muscle memory took over. I don't know what happened, and somehow, I spun my board around, pedaled a couple times and puffed up my feet, and I popped up into a dimension I didn't even know existed. I felt like I had panoramic vision, I was having an out-of-body



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experience, and the most amazing part about this whole mystical experience is that I felt fantastic. I mean, I felt great. I felt alive. For the first time in like three years, I felt so good. I caught four more waves that day, and after the fifth wave, I was disassembled. I was totally done, and they brought me home, and they put me into bed, and I was so sick after that session that they had to bring me food for 14 days because I was too sick and weak to get out of my bed and make it 50 feet away to my kitchen. And on the 15th day, that I could walk again, I caught a ride back to the ocean, and I did it again. And again, I had this crazy altered state of consciousness. I didn't know what it was called at this point, but I had this crazy experience.

And I'm a science guy. I'm a hardcore rational materialist, and I don't have quasi-mystical experiences while surfing that heal my...like the whole thing seemed crazy to me, and over the course of 6 to 8 months, I went from 10% functional back up to about 80% functional, and this was absolutely bizarre. Like surfing was not a known cure for chronic autoimmune conditions. And on top of that, I was a science guy. I was a rational materialist. So Lyme is only fatal if it gets in your brain, and I was...I assumed that the reason I was having these crazy-quasi mystical experiences, I didn't know what they were called yet, was because the disease had gotten into my brain. And even though I was feeling a lot better, I was absolutely certain I was dying. So I lit out in a giant quest to figure out what the hell was going on with me. And when I quickly discovered these states of consciousness have names or I would call them flow states, and what I also discovered is the same state of consciousness that helped me go from really subpar back to normal very, very quickly was helping normal people go all the way up to Superman just as quickly.

Vishen: Wow. No kidding. So that story, firstly, is mind-blowing. Now, it took you 14 days to recover from the first wave.

Steven: Shortly, yeah.

Vishen: Did it get shortened?

Steven: It did. So the second time, it was probably 10 or 11 days and then eight days and then seven days and five days and three days. Then I was feeling just a lot better than I had been feeling.

Vishen: And then six months later, you had recovered from Lyme disease.

Steven: Pretty much, yeah.

Vishen: And you were able to get off the couch and live a normal life, and there's no signs of the disease right now?

Steven: There's a couple of residual effects. So the disease...it chewed the part of your brain, it's called my fusiform gyrus. So if I met you before the age of 30, I won't recognize your face. I'll have to hear you talk. I'll get the voice eventually, but I won't recognize your face. There's a couple other things like that. I don't thermoregulate as well as I used to, but other than that, I'm totally fine.



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Vishen: That's incredible. By the way, guys, we are filming this in Montego Bay, Jamaica. So you are going to hear reggae music in the background. That's just Jamaica which is where A-Fest Montego Bay is happening. It's also the soundtrack of his life.

Steven: It is. I don't like to go anywhere without a reggae band with me. I actually travel with a live reggae band.

Vishen: So you started studying flow states. What did you find?

Steven: It's an interest. I started working on flow in the late 1990s, and that was right when Dr. Andrew Newberg who was at the University of Pennsylvania at the time. He did some of the very first fMRI work on meditating monks, and some of the early work on flow was done then. And so I jumped right into the neuroscience kind of from the beginning and kind of started there. And at that point, we still...was it a mystical experience? What is it as a flow? It took a while to kind of figure out that what we call quasi-mystical experiences of the brain are pretty much the same thing as flow states. There's a tremendous amount of overlap. Certain experiences, there's differences, but generally, the knobs and levers being tweaked in the brain are the same.

There was some other stuff we learned. It was progressive because the science has been blossoming. Neuroscience is moving exponentially. So we can peer under the hood of the brain for the very first time, and we've gone from kind of still images back in the mid-2000s all the way up to now, we're getting moving images, and we're getting network images. So it's just getting richer and richer and richer. It's really an exciting time to be doing this work.

Vishen: So I heard you speak about flow states at the summit series, and you were speaking about skiers. And you've spoken about flow states in surfers, but what about people who have regular jobs? Can they access flow states?

Steven: For sure. In fact, the research shows it, by the way, that most of us spend about 5% of our work life in flow without even knowing it.

Vishen: Just 5%.

Steven: Yeah. Let's back up for a second for...let's just define flow for people in case they don't know what we're talking about. So flow, it is technically defined as an optimal state of consciousness where we feel our best, and we perform our best, and more specifically, it refers to those moments of kind of rapt attention, total absorption where you get so focused on the task at hand that everything else seems to just disappear.

Action and awareness will merge. Your sense of self will disappear. Time will pass strangely. It'll slow down occasionally. Sometimes, it'll speed up. And throughout all aspects of performance, both mental and physical, go through the roof. So that's what we're talking about when we're talking about flow.

Vishen: And so 5% of the time, you're saying, people are accessing these states, and these



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are states for hyper-productivity.

Steven: Yeah, and most of us don't even realize it, and the reason is...so flow is a spectrum experience, just like almost any emotion. Take anger. You can be a little irked, and you'll be homicidally murderous. It's the same emotion. So you can have a state of microflow where a couple...flow has seven core conditions, is how we define the state. And I mentioned some of them: uninterrupted concentration in the present moment, the vanishing of self, time dilation, there's time passing in experience, and a couple others, loss of bodily awareness, etc.

And so microflow is when a couple of those show up. It's what happens when...and everybody has had this experience at work. You sit down, you write that quickie email, and you look up an hour later, you've written a whole huge essay, and you forgot time passed, and you didn't even notice, and you weren't even aware you had a body during that. You come back, and you're like, "Oh, my God, I have to go to the bathroom so badly, and I had no idea." That's a micro flow state.

Macro flow with full-scale was often confused with a mystical experience up till fairly recently because it feels very mystical and otherworldly and strange things happen. Now, we know why time passes strangely and with the self vanishes, like we understand the neurobiology. And for a long time, people were like, "A state where yourself disappear." It was like Buddhist babble. Nobody knew what the hell it was. Sounds interesting, but what are you actually talking about? Now, we actually understand the mechanism underneath those experiences, which is really neat.

Vishen: Amazing. Amazing. By the way, if you guys are listening carefully, you'd have noticed the reggae music disappeared, but now you can hear a downpour. Hello, welcome, Jamaica. So that's amazing. So you mentioned seven different elements of flow. Let's go through those again. I found that fascinating.

Steven: Uninterrupted concentration, the vanishing of your sense of self.

Vishen: What do you mean by that?

Steven: So your sense of self, the kind of the consciousness, the eye behind the eyes as they say. So in flow, one of the things that happens is the prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain that's right back here, does a lot of higher cognitive functions sense of morality, sense of will, complex decision-making, long-term planning, all this stuff is done by the prefrontal cortex. Your sense of self is generated by a bunch of different structures in your prefrontal cortex. And in flow, the brain performs an efficiency exchange. What it does is it says, "I need a whole bunch of extra energy for attention," and the brain is a fixed energy budget. So it's a limited energy supply, and it's a huge energy hog, by the way.

Twenty-five percent of your body's energy at rest is used by your brain. So it's a huge energy hog, and so the first order of business for the brain, what it's always trying to do in every situation, is be more efficient. So in flow, when you need all this focused attention in the present moment, the brain starts to shut down non-critical areas to save energy. So it shuts down a lot of structures in the prefrontal cortex. When that happens, our sense of self disappears.



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So the real, the big experience and why it helps performance so much is when your sense of self disappears, your inner critic, that nagging, always on, to feed his voice in your head, your inner wood yelling, "Will you go silent?" So as a result, risk-taking goes up, creativity, because you're no longer doubting every idea you have, goes up.

You're literally getting out of your own way. So we experience it emotionally as a liberation or as freedom. Same thing happens to your sense of time. Time is calculated all over the prefrontal cortex. So as parts of it start to wink out, we can't separate past from present from future. We're plunged into a state that researchers talk about as the deep now. It's the timeless moment. So that's time dilation, vanishing of self, uninterrupted concentration in the present moment, the merger of action and awareness. So like for a surfer, they become one with the wave. For a writer, I'll become kind of one with the text.

Vishen: Now, what's going on there? What do you mean by you become one with the text?

Steven: On a low-level, it's the merger of action and awareness. So like the doer and the be-er become the same thing. There's no separation. There's no like, "I am the guy writing the book." There's no difference, "I am the book," and you become the thing. At a really extreme level, you start to get a feeling of what's called oneness with everything, cosmic unity. It's a classic mystical experience. Why that happens is that transient hyper-frontality, the deactivation of the prefrontal cortex, it goes farther into your brain, it gets into a part of your brain called the temporal lobe, the right temporal lobe. This portion of your brain separates self from other.

So, people who have a brain damage or a stroke to this part of the brain, they can't do something like sit down on a chair because they don't know where their leg ends and the chair begins. Now, most of us don't think about the fact that we have this boundary around ourselves, and it's flexible. So blind people can feel the sidewalk through the tips of a cane. It's because we can extend our senses. We can extend the boundary of self as well. Play a lot of tennis, you will start to feel the world through the strings of your racquet. That's, the body, the sense of self being extended. So in deep flow states, sometimes, when action and awareness really start to merge and focus gets really intense, this portion of the brain shuts down. And when it does, we can no longer separate self from others. So at that moment, the brain concludes, it has to conclude, it's got no other choice, that that particular moment, you are one with everything.

And what's interesting about that...

Vishen: Wow. Wait. And does that explain mystical experiences?

Steven: Yes. So this is...I talked about Andrew Newberg a second ago. This was his work at the University of Pennsylvania, and he discovered this doing a SPECT scan, so early fMRI done a little differently with radiological chemicals, and so it was a little bit different but very precise. He worked on Franciscan nuns who experienced unio mystica which is oneness with Jesus's love or oneness with God's love, and Tibetan Buddhists who experience absolute unitary, being oneness with the universe, oneness with everything. And he discovered the same thing. Well, the same thing happens in flow, it's really common.



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Surfers used to talk about, "Dude, man, I was one with the wave," and everybody just thought they were being stoned surfers. No, it turns out they were talking about a physical, biological process. This happens, happens fairly frequently.

Vishen: That's amazing. Okay, so that's four, and there's three more on the list.

Steven: The loss of body awareness. So I mentioned that.

Vishen: Right. You basically lose sensation of your body. You forget to pee.

Steven: Yeah, exactly.

Vishen: One hour later, you're needing to go to the bathroom.

Steven: Pain sensations will go away, things along those lines.

Vishen: And that's what you were experiencing.

Steven: Yes, that was one of the reasons I could surf. And so sick, once I kicked into flow, all the pain was flushed out of my body. By the way, quick explanation of how the hell did I cure myself with Lyme disease. So when you move into flow, when kind of self disappears and time disappears, anxiety floods out of your system. And when you move into flow, all the stress hormones flood out of your system, and they're replaced by these positive, feel-good neurochemicals. So a couple things.

Any autoimmune condition is essentially a nervous system gone haywire. So by resetting my nervous system back to zero, it got me back to normal which is really...when you have a chronic autoimmune condition, one of the biggest problems is you have no idea what normal feels like after a while. You've been so sick for so long and so many different weird kind of ways, lots of different manifestations of it, you don't know what normal feels like. So just finding normal again, so you have like a baseline, "Oh, this is what reality feels like," is really useful.

The other thing is all the neurochemicals that show up in flow: dopamine, norepinephrine, anandamide, serotonin, they're all immune system boosters. So we use flow, as I mentioned this to you earlier, my wife and I, we run a dog sanctuary, do hospice care and special needs care. We work with very sick animals. We use flow as part of our healing methodology. So you could put the dog...dogs, by the way, can get into flow. Mammals can get into flow. It stops, there's a line. Ferrets cannot, by the way.

They did this research at the University of Arizona. They took ferrets, dogs, and humans and they ran them all on treadmills. And then they measured which is one of the chemicals that shows up at flow. Shows up in dogs, shows up in humans, doesn't show up in ferrets. So ferrets apparently can't get into flow, dogs can. But we'll put our dogs into flow states as part of the healing protocols, part of working with them.



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Vishen: Wow. And how do you put a dog in a flow state?

Steven: Same way you do with a human. We use...

Vishen: You give them a cell phone.

Steven: I live in the mountains, so we run them up and down cliff faces. If you search my name, Steven Kotler and the five-dog workout, outside television, we had a crew to my house. It looks ridiculous. It's the stupidest funniest looking thing you're going to see, but that's what it looks like putting a dog in a flow state.

Vishen: That's amazing. That's amazing. Okay, so that's number five. What's six and seven?

Steven: I think that was six. Absolute concentration in the present moment, merge of action and awareness, loss of self, time dilation, loss of bodily function. Oh, I'm going to forget one, of course, but the coolest one to me is it's called a sense of control, and it's this feeling of being able to control forces that are beyond your control. So skiers in flow will find themselves doing things they couldn't imagine doing normally, or writers or artists will create masterpieces, and they'd have no idea where that's coming from. And it's the least understood of all the flow's characteristics.

Vishen: That's fascinating.

Steven: I think it comes from...so when we move into flow, you get a lot of norepinephrine and dopamine, and these chemicals do a lot of different things in the brain. One of the things they do is they tune signal-to-noise ratios which is a fancy way of saying they amplify pattern recognition, our ability to link ideas together. So when you can make really fast connections between certain things, you get a little more control over it. I think that coupled with...so what we call time processing in the brain, time in the brain is often, not always, but most of the time, it's a measure of information processing.

So what we call time in the brain is actually, "How much information am I processing per second?" Well, that gets sped up in flow. And dopamine amplify information processing. So you're processing more information per second, and you're processing it more quickly. So essentially, they talk about it as a two-second advantage. You get essentially two seconds ahead of your normal thought process when you're in flow. And so think about that. Think about being two seconds ahead all the time.

When they used to talk about Wayne Gretzky, the famous hockey player, the famous thing about he used to say...

Vishen: He would skate to where the puck was going to go.

Steven: Skate to where the puck is going to be. Well, that's a two-second advantage. That's flow. That's pattern recognition, being able to see the pattern in advance of it showing up.

Vishen: So a lot of people...so what did you say was the name for that thing?



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Steven: Sense of control.

Vishen: Sense of control. Okay. So a lot of people say that when they're in flow, they seem highly intuitive. They seem more creative. Some people talk about tapping into the universe and downloading ideas. Is that a scientific explanation for what they could be experiencing?

Steven: Yeah, it's high information processing in the brain. So when in the state, we take in more information per second, so data acquisition goes up. We pay more attention to that information, so salience goes up. We find faster connections between that incoming information and other ideas, so pattern recognition goes up. And then we find faster connections between that incoming information, far-flung ideas, so lateral thinking goes up. So everything I just described, that's the creative process.

So why do people feel massive amplified creativity in flow? Because these neurochemicals that underpin the states surround the creative process and amplify all of it.

Vishen: But you're saying that's the least understood aspect of flow.

Steven: Yes, and the other thing that happens is...

Vishen: This is number seven?

Steven: No, but this is speaking to your last question. One of the other reasons you have that download feeling of, A, it's faster information processing. You're also using more of the brain, so you're getting access to parts of the brain that you don't normally form connections. Instead of just like normal pattern recognition, it's closely related ideas. Here, you're getting really far-flung things that you haven't thought about since childhood. You're suddenly getting reference and drawn into the conversation, so you're getting more, and more of that churn also shows up.

Vishen: That's amazing because now, it's starting to make sense because I'm sure you guys have seen there are certain speakers, there are certain spoken word artists, who...sorry, spoken word poets who get on stage, and on the spot, they know exactly what to say. And I've noticed there are moments when I'm on stage, and I immediately know what to say, and I'm thinking, "Where the hell did that come from?"

Steven: Yeah, flow.

Vishen: Amazing.

Steven: Usually answers the heightened information for us.

Vishen: So do you believe in intuition?

Steven: Yes, my actually...so my next book we talked about a second ago, I've just finished a novel, and Peter and I are teaming up for another book after this, and the book after that



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book is a book on intuition.

Vishen: So you're planning three books ahead.

Steven: I have the four or five, actually.

Vishen: Is that book on intuition with Peter?

Steven: No, it's just me.

Vishen: What's it called?

Steven: I have no idea yet. I don't know.

Vishen: You can't tap into your intuition?

Steven: I have no intuition about my intuition book.

Vishen: So do you believe what mystics or intuitives say about intuition? That they're tapping into some form of universal energy. Or do you believe it's really tapping into other parts of our brain? Have you given that some thought?

Steven: Yeah, I've given it a lot of thought. There are certain kind of foundational questions that are interesting to me, and one of them is, "Where does the information come from?" Because when we're in these states, we do tap into much richer information feeds than are normally accessible. And, yes, I can absolutely explain a lot of it using the neurobiology, but there are times, and everybody's had this experience, where you start getting information that you don't know exactly where it's coming from. It feels mysterious.

Now, I have no idea where it's coming from. Do I think you're downloading the...? This is an ongoing argument. Jung says there's a collective unconscious, Teilhard de Chardin calls it the noosphere. There's a long kind of history of different lineage, traditions, and different psychological positions that feel this way. I just think it's a mystery, and it's a great question, and I'm devoting a huge chunk of my life to trying to answer it.

Vishen: I cannot wait for that book.

Steven: I reserve judgment.

Vishen: I cannot wait for that book. Okay, what's the seventh element of flow?

Steven: I'm absolutely blank. I'm totally blank. I did too many speeches today. You've had me talking for pretty long.

Vishen: I know. This guy has been amazing. This guy has been absolutely amazing. He gave a one-hour talk today at A-Fest, and he did a 19-minute conversation with the audience, and now he's doing an interview. Am I looking at the wrong camera? I am so out of flow. I've got



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to say that. Okay. You know what? You guys heard what I have to say. Just let that be. So the seventh item, okay. Now we have to read the book.

Steven: Now I have to look it up.

Vishen: What's the book where you go deeper?

Steven: "The Rise of Superman."

Vishen: "The Rise of Superman."

Steven: "The Rise of Superman."

Vishen: Awesome. That's an incredible book.

Steven: In chapter 2, by the way. I can tell you where in the book it is, I just can't get there right now.

Vishen: "The Rise of Superman." Okay, so there's something else I want to ask you. Synchronicity. I've heard people say that when they are in flow, they notice synchronicity. If they are trying to grow their business, they are trying to write a book, they find the right answer, they find the right connection, and it just seems to come through a coincidence or synchronicity. Do you believe in that, and what's going on there?

Steven: Another one of these great questions that I can't...so yes. Well, here's what I will tell you. In my own personal experience and a lot of other people's experience, and it's actually a great survey to be...some good research to be done because I don't think people have looked at it. You do start to see more and more synchronicity. Now, that said, you have a lot of more dopamine and norepinephrine in your system. So you are seeing more pattern.

Vishen: There's more in recognition.

Steven: Could be pattern recognition that we just don't normally get. Now, that said, what I found is the synchronicities you start noticing, like when you're really in a roll and is multi-day kind of thing, they start to get a little weird. They start...and I always feel like the universe is winking at you a little bit. It's the cosmic giggle because usually, there's strange synchronicities. And again, could absolutely be pattern recognition. There's a great logical explanation, but if there is something about it where there's a little bit of a mystery, and I don't think it's totally understood. I do. I think we need to reach for some kind of cosmic new-age weird answer.

No, I think probably what the answer is that whatever this is, we haven't just learned how to measure it yet, or we don't know what it is. I'm absolutely certain there's a biological answer, but is it just pattern recognition? I think it's a little more than that. By the way, it could be something mystical or wild or whatever. You know what I mean? Just because I'm a rational materialist doesn't mean I'm right. Right?



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Vishen: Right. So let's go on to the next question. Now, we get what flow is, and I think this is so beautiful because you've given us a roadmap for recognizing when we're in these states. And I think just recognizing these states will probably help us induce them more often.

Steven: For sure. Absolutely. Just that.

Vishen: But how do we induce flow? How do we selectively get ourselves into flow?

Steven: You were just screwed, actually. I mean, they might have some chance, but you... no. So what we've learned, and this is...I'm proud of this because this is a lot of the work that my organization, the Flow Genome Project has been involved in. What we now know is that flow states of triggers, preconditions that lead to more flow, and there are 20 of them in total. Kind of the main thing to know is that flow follows focus. It only shows up when all our attention is in the right here right now. So that's what these triggers do. They drive attention in the present moment.

If I were to say it more formally, more technically, I would say, "Hey, these 20 triggers," and they're probably way more than just 20 that we've discovered so far, the things that evolution shaped our brain to pay the most attention to. And they're all fairly obvious. So for example, for individual flow, risk is a flow trigger. So we see this with the action-adventure sports athletes, flow follows focus, consequences catches our attention. Now, here is how it applies to everybody else because most of us don't want to take physical risks to drive flow.

So it turns out it doesn't matter: emotional risks, creative risks, intellectual risks, psychological risk, social risks. Social risks are phenomenal over flow. So the brain processes physical danger and physical fear in the exact same structures it processes social danger and social fear, which sounds totally weird. Like why is that? And it's the reason, by the way, that fear of public speaking is the number one fear in the world, and which is a weird thing. From an evolutionary perspective, you'd assume it's like fear of getting eaten by a grizzly bear or something. That would make more sense, but if you go back more than 200, 300 years ago, if you screwed up socially and you got banished, it was the worst. You couldn't live outside at the time, it was a capital crime, on top of which were social creatures. So isolation is really difficult for us.

So we process it in the same way. So what does this mean organizationally, for example? I always say that really good high-flow organizations are organizations that have adopted that Silicon Valley fail forward, fail faster motto. And of course, that is an idea that it's about product development in rapid iteration and getting things to market very quickly, and that's true. But the other thing it's about is creating space so employees can fail. If you're too scared to take chances at work, you're too scared to fail; then there's not enough risk. So that motto kind of...it's a way of kind of creating a corporate risk-taking environment, but risk is something that's worth practicing also for flow. That's just one example of a bunch of flow triggers, but there's one, we can go from there.

Vishen: That's amazing. Okay. So how could we engineer flow through social risk?

Steven: Public speaking for starters, sing-alongs, karaoke. I mean, we do it with karaoke's. I



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mean, one of the reasons karaoke is such a high is because it's social risk.

Vishen: Karaoke. I have no fear with public speaking, but karaoke, man, I...

Steven: Oh, I won't go near it. Are you kidding?

Vishen: That's a nightmare.

Steven: I'm the top...

Vishen: But let's say we go into a karaoke lounge. So let's say we go into a karaoke lounge. Someone gives me...

Steven: We won't. It won't happen.

Vishen: And we probably won't, but let's say we do and someone gives you a mic. Are you saying we should just take that plunge and start singing and that helps generate flow?

Steven: Yeah, it will. It will.

Vishen: The risk for what? Do I then toss away the mic and go and write my next book?

Steven: It depends if you want to or not. I mean, maybe you're just using the flow for a better karaoke performance, but yeah. I mean, you're wired like me. You're incredibly practical. You're like, "Okay, I've got this flow state. I'm not going to waste it on karaoke. Bring on the work."

Vishen: Right.

Steven: Spoken like a true workaholic.

Vishen: So we can try to do karaoke, get into the flow state because the risk brings it out, and then we can go onto our computers. So this means that...now I'm thinking, "Should I install a karaoke machine in the lobby of my office and just have everyone attempt to sing before getting...?"

Steven: Well, by the way, you see it...I mean, stupid employee offsides, trust falls. Do you remember trust falls?

Vishen: Yes.

Steven: What do you think trust falls are about?

Vishen: Now they start to make sense.

Steven: All right. That's what you're doing. The other thing is...so the main neurochemical we get from taking risks is dopamine. Dopamine is also a social bonding drug. So it's one of the



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drugs that underpins romantic love, sort of a team-building. You do trust falls on team-building exercises, A, because it'll drive people in the flow, but B, once you get the whole team into flow together, you've got all these powerful social bonding neurochemicals that are tightening the team and tightening group coherence, driving trust.

Vishen: So here's a question. All right. So we're talking about improving productivity. Now, Google did a study on company culture, and they found that one of the prerequisites for great company culture is a feeling of safety, but you're talking about fears, generating fears. So how do you reconcile both those ideas? Do you create safety or do you scare the heck out of people?

Steven: So it's a great question and what...so then, this is a really good point. Not always true but mostly true, you want to feel safe and secure for flow because...so another of flow's triggers, and this is often called the golden rule of flow, it's the most famous of flow's triggers. It's known as the challenge skills balance. So the idea here is we pay the most attention to the task at hand. When the challenge of the task slightly exceeds our skill set, you want to stretch, but not snap. So emotionally, that means flow exists not on but near the midpoint between anxiety and boredom. Boredom, not enough stimulation, or not paying attention. Anxiety, whoa, way too much stimulation.

So anxiety is mostly norepinephrine in the brain. So what the reason...you need to make people feel...when they're talking about feeling safe and secure, they're saying pay them enough so that their basic safety and security needs are met. Like what we see is that income and happiness are totally together up till, in America, it's \$70,000. In globally, it's 20k. The number globally is 20k, but in America, it's 70k, 75k. And then they start to diverge. So you have to...that basic, that first 75, that's about basic safety and securities by keeping anxiety levels low enough that you can get into that sweet spot between challenge and skills.

So you got to take care of basic needs, and you got to make people feel that way, got to feel safe. So it's another thing, for example, toxic workplaces. If there's lots of gossip, if there's lots of people aren't feeling safe, really horrible for flow. Really horrible for flow. But once you establish that kind of baseline safety, then you want to freestyle and take risks on top of it.

Vishen: So you establish a baseline safety, and then you push people to go just a little bit above to create that challenge, so work is not too easy, and that zone is the flow zone.

Steven: It's the flow channel, is the technical term.

Vishen: The flow channel.

Steven: Yeah.

Vishen: Great, the flow channel. Now, tell us about the work you're doing at the Flow Genome Project. That sounds fascinating.

Steven: So we're a research and a training organization. On the research side, we're one of the largest open source research projects into ultimate human performance. So for example,



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we just launched this week a flow and creativity survey. It's a kind of machine learning big data approach to flow and creativity. It's probably one of the deepest dives anybody's done into flow and creativity, and what we're really trying to figure out is, one, we're trying to get a more accurate...we know creativity spikes massively in flow, and there's different numbers, 400% to 700% is where they pull in.

But what we don't know is specifically which. Those are general measures of creativity. So we're looking at, "Is it idea generation? Is it creative problems? What specifically in creativity gets amplified? And can we put some numbers around that? And which of flow's triggers are most associated with creativity?" Because creativity is so critical in the workplace right now, 21st-century skills.

Vishen: Which of the kind? Which of the triggers?

Steven: Well, we just kicked it off. Come back to me in three months; I could give an answer.

Vishen: I love how you have such a data-driven approach to this whole thing. So a couple of questions. Your book, "The Rise of Superman," is about flow. And then "Stealing Fire" is about altered states. How are flow and altered states similar and different?

Steven: Okay. So altered states is a huge spectrum. It starts over here. You've got dreaming on one side, you've got schizophrenia on the other, and everywhere in between. So in the middle swaths of this territory is what's known as the ecstatic spectrum. So ekstasis is the root of the word ecstasy. It's a Greek term, and it means to step beyond one's self. So in the middle, there are flow states: states of awe, psychedelic states, meditative states, trance states, mystical states. These are all the ecstatic states of consciousness.

Turns out under the hood, neurobiologically, they're all very, very similar. Essentially the same knobs and levers are being tweaked in the brain. Now, there are differences. Psychedelics are going to produce way more serotonin than a typical flow state kind of thing, but they're very, very, very similar. So flow is just one of this kind of panoply of ecstatic experiences, that all kind of...you get the same kind of loss of self, loss of time, information richness. They show up constantly. So flow, to me...and if we got the farthest because flow science states back the oldest. We've been looking at flow since the 1870s. So we got a better handle on it, but now, we're really starting to get much better information about kind of the whole altered state spectrum.

So I say "Rise" is about one altered state of consciousness.

Vishen: I see. I see how it connects.

Steven: "Stealing Fire" is the full kind of ecstatic spectrum.

Vishen: This is such, such, such an exciting discovery. I mean, it's such an exciting body of work.

And that was Steven Kotler, everyone. If you enjoyed that conversation, I totally recommend



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Steven's books. "Abundance," which he co-authored with Peter Diamandis, is an incredible book that talks about the future of humanity and all the amazing things emerging in the world. "Bold" is another really great book that's about how to leverage these exponential technologies to really expand your vision and your goals for yourself and do epic things in the world.

"Rise of Superman" is about how to move yourself into a high-performance being. And "Stealing Fire" is about a trillion dollar altered states industry. It's about how everyone from Marines to neuroscientists are experimenting with everything from neurofeedback to psychedelics to put themselves into states of mind where they can access higher levels of performance. So check out those books. I think you're absolutely going to love them. If you want to see a full interview with Steven Kotler plus access trainings, like really powerful beautiful trainings which I've had with many other leading-edge authors whom are personal mentors of mine, consider becoming a Mindvalley, tribe member. You get access to hundreds of hours of content and access to Mindvalley's events around the world. So the conversation doesn't just end here.

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