

Mindfulness 101: Clues to Mindfulness and the Sign of the Four

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Summary

- This month's mindfulness insight, the Sign of the Four, is grounded in a simple rubric that maps four states of mind frequently encountered during a mindfulness practice.
- *Flowing* is when the mind is immersed in an experience.
- *Knowing* is a state of mind where you are aware of your attention.
- *Going* is when the mind loses track of the intended object. This is also where all the action is and from which much beneficial change is realized.
- *Gone* is being lost in thought. With regular mindfulness practice, you may find yourself spending more time Going and less time Gone.



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Arthur Conon Doyle's most famous Sherlock Holmes novel is undoubtedly *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. It is a classic mystery adventure in which things are not what they seem. We can say the same about much of our everyday lives, where assumptions, biases, preconceptions, and distractions can interfere with seeing things clearly.

This month's mindfulness insight pays homage to Sherlock Holmes by borrowing from the title of a lesser-known novel, *The Sign of the Four*, as it is grounded in a simple rubric that maps four states of mind frequently encountered during a mindfulness practice. Knowing what to expect can be helpful for three reasons:

- 1 You can better recognize when you begin to feel lost or frustrated during the practice, thus making it easier for you to get back on track.
- 2 You can better recognize that your difficulty with the practice is par for the course, thus minimizing the likelihood of your believing that you are doing something wrong or cannot do the practice.
- 3 You might better appreciate the long-term benefits of practice.

The Sign of the Four

The diagram below sets out four states that we can experience when practicing mindfulness, each tagged with a label for remembering it and the mind activity it

represents.

Flowing	Knowing	Going	Gone
1	2	3	4

Flowing

Flowing is when the mind is immersed in an experience. It is akin to the “flow” state popularized by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi—a state of mind completely focused on a single task or activity. You may know such moments, perhaps while playing sports or a musical instrument or while engrossed in a conversation, listening to music, or working on a project. Some wisdom traditions regard a state of deep absorption or “single-pointed concentration” as a desired end state, while others treat it as interesting but not central. For our purposes and interest in a secular mindfulness practice, it is less relevant than the other three because of the low probability that it will be experienced, and while it tends to feel good, it is not really the point of the mindfulness practice.

Knowing

Knowing refers to a state of mind where you are *aware of your attention*. You literally know where your mind is. This state is readily achievable, especially at the beginning of a practice that involves, for example, intentionally placing your attention on an object, such as the breath. It doesn’t take long to appreciate that this is an elusive state, as attention is likely to wander off within a matter of seconds. Still, for some period of time and on a recurring basis throughout practice, you know where your attention is—and you know you know it. [An earlier “Mindfulness 101” column](#) setting forth Nine Principles of Attention noted in Principle 3 that “Attention can be fickle.” This brings us to the third sign, where we spend much of our time during a mindfulness practice.

Going

Going is when the mind loses track of the intended object. Notwithstanding the intention to focus on an object, the mind seems to have a mind of its own, and off it goes. Like a puppy dog asked to “stay,” attention becomes captivated by something (a sound, a smell, a memory, a thought) and literally forgets what it is doing as it gets caught up in something else. *You can expect to spend a good deal of time Going when practicing mindfulness*—an important reminder to help set expectations. Going is an inherently unstable state, tending either back to Knowing, if and when you *realize* that your mind is wandering, or on to the fourth sign. Going is also where all the action is and from which much beneficial change is realized.

Gone

Gone is being lost in thought. There is little, if any, awareness of where the mind is. It can last a few minutes or much longer. An example of *Gone* is when, amid practice, you unknowingly become caught up in a story, memory, fantasy, or worry. You might not realize it until you are interrupted, hear a reminder to “return to the breath” (if you are listening to a guided exercise), or a timer sounds the end of the practice. You lost track of what you were doing and fell into a non-conscious stream of thoughts and feelings.

Going vs. Gone and the Training of Attention

There is a fine line between *Going* and *Gone*. An important difference is that *Going* carries a much greater potential of realizing, sooner rather than later, that the mind has wandered off—of waking up out of distraction. In contrast, when you are *Gone*, this is much less likely. It may happen eventually because of some external stimulation or because the distracted thought stream has come to an end.

When you do a mindfulness practice such as Focused Attention, the primary objective is not to demonstrate perfectly steady attention (Sign 2: *Knowing*) or to have few, if any, thoughts at all (Sign 1: *Flowing*). Rather, when we view the practice as a training in attention or the cultivation of greater awareness, the aspiration is to become increasingly skilled at noticing when the mind wanders (Sign 3: *Going*). With practice, the ability to detect mind wandering improves. Importantly, (1) you notice mind wandering sooner, so you reduce instances of *Gone* and the associated pitfalls it entails; (2) you have an easier time bringing attention back, so it feels less like a tug of war with your mind; and (3) you develop a steadier attention.

While there is much to mine in the above, one takeaway is that the practice of mindfulness inevitably entails all these states, especially 2, 3, and 4. Perhaps it has not been lost on you that this is also the case for much of your life, on and off the cushion. What matters is not to run from any of them but to appreciate their inevitability and how regular practice can alter their prevalence.

The Sign of the Four as a Roadmap for Your Practice

If you have practiced mindfulness, you likely recognize most, if not all, of the above four signs from your own direct experience. The chart below offers a simplified (after all, we are all different) assessment of how often we might spend in each state during a period of sitting:

Flowing	Knowing	Going	Gone
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1	2	3	4
0%-5%	5%-15%	20%-40%	50%+

That's right: Much of the time, you will be either Going or Gone. So don't fret it when this happens. With regular practice, however, you may well experience a meaningful—and consequential—shift along the lines of the chart below:

Flowing	Knowing	Going	Gone
1	2	3	4
0%-5%	10%-30%	20%-60%	30%+

In time, you'll come to spend a little more time keeping track of Knowing where your mind is. You might be surprised to see that you spend more time Going, but that's because you'll be spending less time Gone. The real-world benefit of this shift is succinctly conveyed by attorney Paul Steven Singerman in his 2016 *Florida Bar News* article "[The Return on Investment from My Study and Practice of Mindfulness.](#)"

Self-Leadership: Getting Back on Track

Understanding the Sign of the Four and being able to identify where you are in the middle of a mindfulness practice can be immensely helpful. The state of Knowing is a type of home base. The moment you *realize* you are Going, or that you have been Gone, you are instantly transported back to knowing where you are. In this way, a period of practice is a continual series of wandering off and returning—the prodigal mind.

Equipped with this insight, you can do several things amid such moments of realization. First and most commonly, you can refocus on the object of attention. In the event you notice a great deal of mind wandering, you may find it helpful to shift to an object that is a little more stimulating. For example, you might shift from the breath to counting the breath, or counting the beat in simple music, or adding a soothing ambient sound or aroma. While none of this is necessary for a mindfulness practice, it can be a skillful way to vary the object so that it is neither too subtle nor too distracting. The breath is a good placeholder. Many other objects can fit the bill, and finding this sweet spot goes a long way.

At the same time, nothing needs to change. The mere fact that you are aware of where you are amid the Sign of the Four means that you are mindfully aware. And that's what the practice is all about: experiencing those moments and doing so with increasing frequency. Watch [this video](#) to delve a little deeper into the Sign of the Four and mindfulness practice.

The Game's Afoot

At the outset of this article, I commented that assumptions, biases, preconceptions, and distractions can interfere with seeing things clearly. This is especially likely when we are Gone. Because we are lost in thought, we are unlikely to even notice, let alone investigate, them (e.g., our assumptions) for their truth and, when called for, eliminate them.

Holmes speaks to the value of spending less time in Gone when he utters one of his most quoted lines, found in *The Sign of the Four*:

When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

Authors



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