

# Thermal Flow

## Master the Climb, Unlock Flying Freedom



### Introduction: Fall in Love with the Climb

In the art of learning, masters often teach the endgame first.

A chess grandmaster will have a student master the principles of an endgame—with just a few pieces on the board—before they ever study complex openings. They know that by understanding the most fundamental state of the game, all the complex strategy that comes before it suddenly becomes clearer.

In our art, thermalling is the endgame.

It is the fundamental state upon which all great flights are built.

Before you can think about the "middle-game" of speed to fly and gliding or the "opening" of launching at the perfect time to max out the day, you must master the core skill that makes everything possible: the art of the climb.

This toolkit is built on that principle. It's founded on a different philosophy: **Fall in love with thermaling, and the rest will fall into place.**

XC paragliding is a series of puzzles within a greater puzzle.

Each thermal or area of lift is a puzzle unto its own. Dynamic and never the same. By learning how to solve these puzzles, not only will your flying improve but so will your experience by unlocking flow.

How do you know if the puzzle is solved?

The goal, a prerequisite for flow, is to max out the lift of the day. Whether it's light or strong, can you fine tune your way to the very top of the soarable lift consistently?

This is a shift in focus, from the lateral (distance) to vertical mastery. You aim to seek out the best areas of lift wherever you are flying and learn to find joy in the art of climbing.

The beauty of this is that you will never get bored because you can practice this anywhere, even while coastal soaring. Playing this altitude game will not only fine tune your skills but provide the necessary challenge needed for flow - no matter how "easy" the flight.

Early in my flying career I didn't know what XC was. With no vario, and no intention of going anywhere, I thermalled up 2000m and touched a small puffy cumulus cloud. I just loved to thermal. I loved the challenge of getting as high as possible. This profound experience has always stuck with me, and I believe learning to climb without a vario, helped build a solid foundation for big distance later on.

What follows are not just random drills, but a system of **deliberate practice** designed to deepen your sensitivity, focus your mind, and help you find flow in the heart of paragliding - the thermal. By becoming a master of the climb, you build the foundation for the experience you dream of.

## Chapter 1: The Foundation: A Mindset for Mastery

Before we touch the wing, we must prepare the mind. The following principles are the essential foundation for all meaningful progress.

### Embrace the Journey (Amor Fati)

We practice *Amor Fati*—a love of our fate. This means we trust the process, focusing our energy on the quality of our effort, not the outcome. A seed already contains the full potential of a rose, but it cannot be forced to bloom. It must first establish deep roots and grow strong stems. Only then will the flower unfold naturally, in its own time.

In the same way, we must focus on building a deep foundation of skill and mindset. We embrace every 10-minute struggle, every moment of sink, and every challenging launch as vital work on our roots. By loving the entire journey, not just the destination, we allow our most brilliant flights to unfold as a natural consequence. Trust the process. Don't force it.

### The Compounding Climb (Progress, Not Perfection)

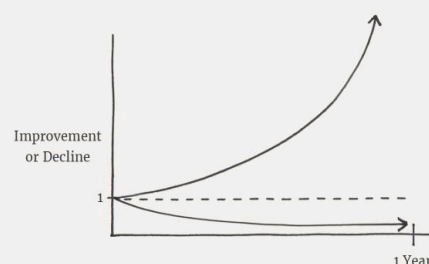
Progress is never a straight line; it is an upward spiral. You will have breakthrough days of effortless climbing followed by frustrating days where you can't seem to do anything right. This is normal. Instead of seeking huge, single-day breakthroughs, we adopt the principle of *Kaizen*—a commitment to continuous, incremental improvement.

The goal is to be just **1% better** after every flight. This might not feel like much, but the effect compounds dramatically. A small improvement in your launch technique, a slightly better turn in a thermal, a calmer reaction to turbulence—these small wins build upon each other.

This mindset frees you from the frustration of "bad days," because even on a short flight, you can find one small thing to improve. Trust this process of compounding, and your long-term progress is guaranteed for as long as you keep challenging yourself and putting in the effort.

### The Power of Tiny Gains

$$\begin{aligned} 1\% \text{ better every day} & \quad 1.01^{365} = 37.78 \\ 1\% \text{ worse every day} & \quad 0.99^{365} = 0.03 \end{aligned}$$



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## Releasing the Anchors (Comparison, Fear & Ego)

We all begin this journey from different places. Yet, we often weigh ourselves down with invisible anchors that prevent us from flying freely. Our practice is to consciously let these go.

- **Let Go of Comparison:** The sky is a vast mirror, not a scoreboard. We can be inspired by others, but we measure our progress only against who we were yesterday. Your journey is unique. Your pace is your own. Let go of the need to keep up with anyone else.
- **Work With Fear (The Biggest Flow Blocker):** Fear is natural. Fear of turbulence, of height, of the unknown. It is the single biggest blocker to flow. Our goal is not to eliminate fear, but to change our relationship with it. We do this by building a deep sense of confidence—in our wings, in ourselves.
  - **Trust the Wing:** We build this trust through dedicated practice. Fly a glider one class below what you think you're capable of. Fly often. The more time you spend with your wing, the more it becomes a trusted partner.
  - **Trust Your Skills:** We build this trust by incrementally exposing ourselves to stronger conditions. Don't jump into the deep end. Fly in the midday thermals for just 10 minutes, then 15, then 20. This is deliberate practice in action.
  - **Trust Your Mind:** When fear arises in flight, don't fight it. Use mindfulness to notice it ("Ah, there is fear"). Notice the tension in your body. Breathe into it and consciously release that tension. Then, give yourself a small, achievable goal: "I will do just three more turns," or "I will stay up for five more minutes." This breaks the cycle of panic.
  - **Reframe It:** Height is your friend. It is safety and opportunity. That feeling in your stomach is not fear; it's your body activating, coming alive. The mindset is not "Oh no," but "Bring it on." Let Go, and Let's Go. In moments of fear I find it useful to notice tension (usually in the abs) and say to myself "let go, I've got this" as I release tension and breathe out.
- **Let Go of Ego:** The ego is the part of us that needs to prove something. It's the source of frustration on a "bad day" and arrogance on a "good day." By letting go of the need to be the best, we open ourselves up to becoming better. We practice humility, knowing it is the gateway to all true learning. We practice gratitude for the abundance of experiences we've been gifted.

## The Practice of Mindfulness (Harmonizing Self 1 & Self 2)

Mindfulness is the fundamental skill of paying attention to the present moment, on purpose. For a pilot, this is a core operational skill. To understand its power, we can borrow from the "Inner Game" concept: we all have two selves.

- **Self 1** (The Navigator) is our analytical mind—the thinker, the judge, the inner critic. It's the voice that says, "That was a bad turn! You're too low!"
- **Self 2** (The Driver) is our intuitive body and nervous system —the doer, the part that inherently knows how to feel the wing and react to the air.

Most of our frustration comes when Self 1 is constantly judging Self 2. The goal of mindfulness is to cultivate **non-judgmental awareness**—to teach Self 1 to quiet its commentary and simply *observe* the present moment. This harmonizes their relationship.

A mindful pilot notices fear without judgment, feels the lift without overthinking, and allows their skilled body (Self 2) to fly the wing. It is the practice of strengthening the mind-body connection so they work as one, allowing you to fly with your whole being.

## 100% Dedication (The fly100 Philosophy)

Paragliding is an Elemental Art that demands our full attention and commitment. It is not something to be dabbled in. The path to mastery requires daily engagement with the craft in some form. This is the heart of the [fly100 philosophy](#).

Originally, the '100' stood for the ambitious goal of flying 100km. Over time, it has evolved to represent a much deeper goal: a **100% dedication** to paragliding and self mastery. This means finding a way to connect with your practice every single day:

- If you can fly, you fly.
- If you can't fly, you ground-handle.
- If you can't ground-handle, you read, watch, or study—engaging your mind with the puzzles of weather, technique, and strategy.
- And every day, you practice mindfulness—training your mind-body connection for even five minutes, so you are always cultivating your most important instrument: your own awareness.

This daily commitment is what builds the deep, intuitive connection required for flow. It keeps the dialogue with the sky alive, even when your feet are on the ground.



## **Deliberate Practice**

The difference between just "flying a lot" and "mastering the craft" is deliberate practice.

Deliberate practice is not mindless repetition; it is focused, intentional effort aimed at improving a specific skill. It involves pushing yourself to the edge of your abilities, paying close attention to feedback, and making constant, small adjustments.

The exercises in this toolkit are designed for this purpose. They are your tools for forging real, lasting skills.

## **Chapter 2: Understanding Flow (The State We Seek)**

Flow is the state of optimal experience where you feel your best and perform your best.

But it is far more profound than just being "in the zone."

Decades of research show that people who regularly experience flow are among the happiest people on earth. This is because flow doesn't just improve our performance; it improves *us*.

When we are in flow, we show up as our best selves—creative, courageous, and fully present. We grow.

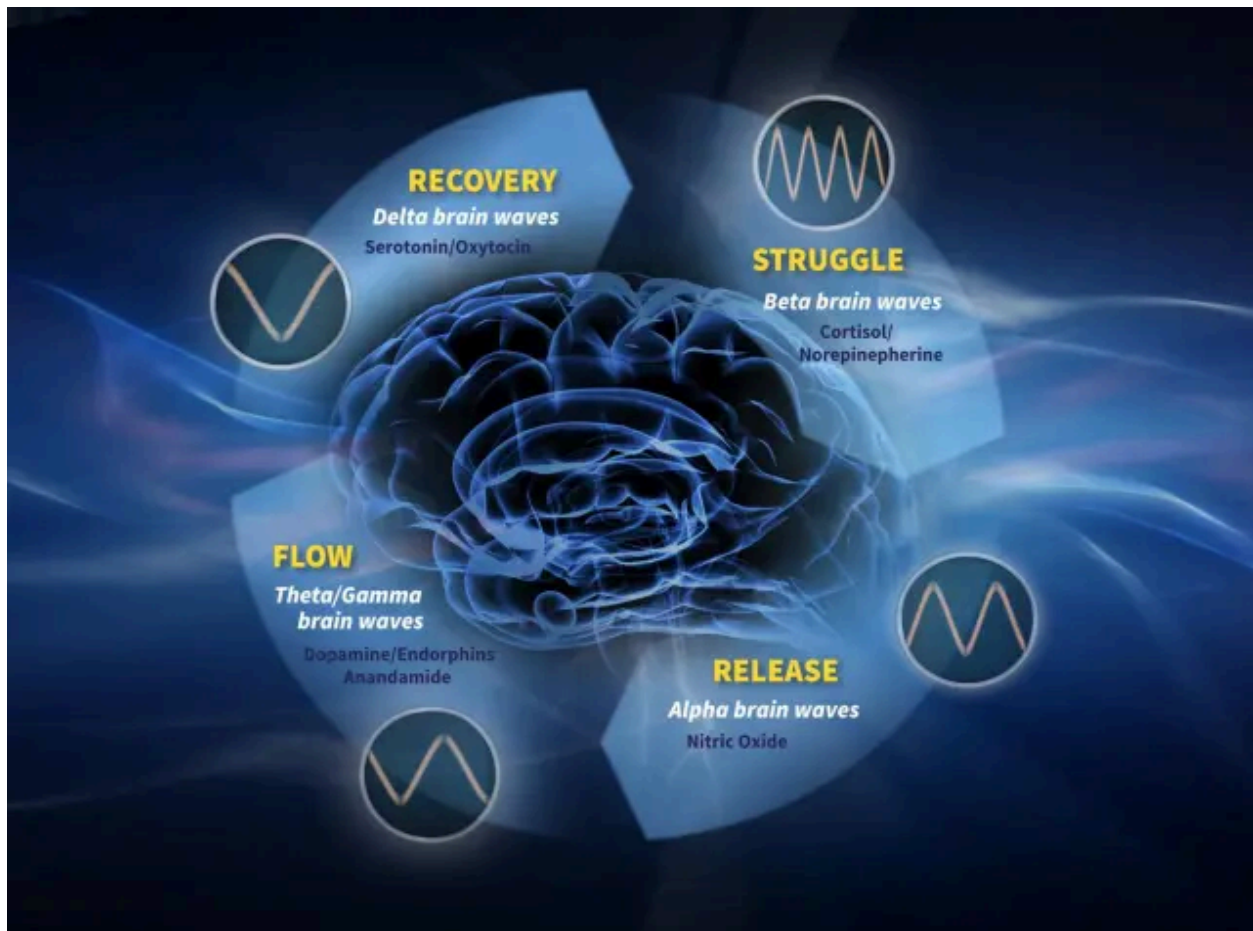
This gives our pursuit of paragliding a far deeper meaning. We're no longer just getting good to beat others or chase numbers; we are getting good to unlock more of this profoundly rewarding state.

The flight itself becomes the ultimate reward. The fruits of flow become the byproduct, the cherry on top - not the cake.

This state of being doesn't stay on the hill; it follows us home, improving all areas of our lives. Flow is where we unlock our own potential, where the impossible becomes achievable. There are many gateways to flow—music, art, sport. For us, the elemental art of paragliding is our chosen path. This is the way.

Flow is not random; it can be cultivated. It arises when certain conditions are met.

## The Four Stages of the Flow Cycle

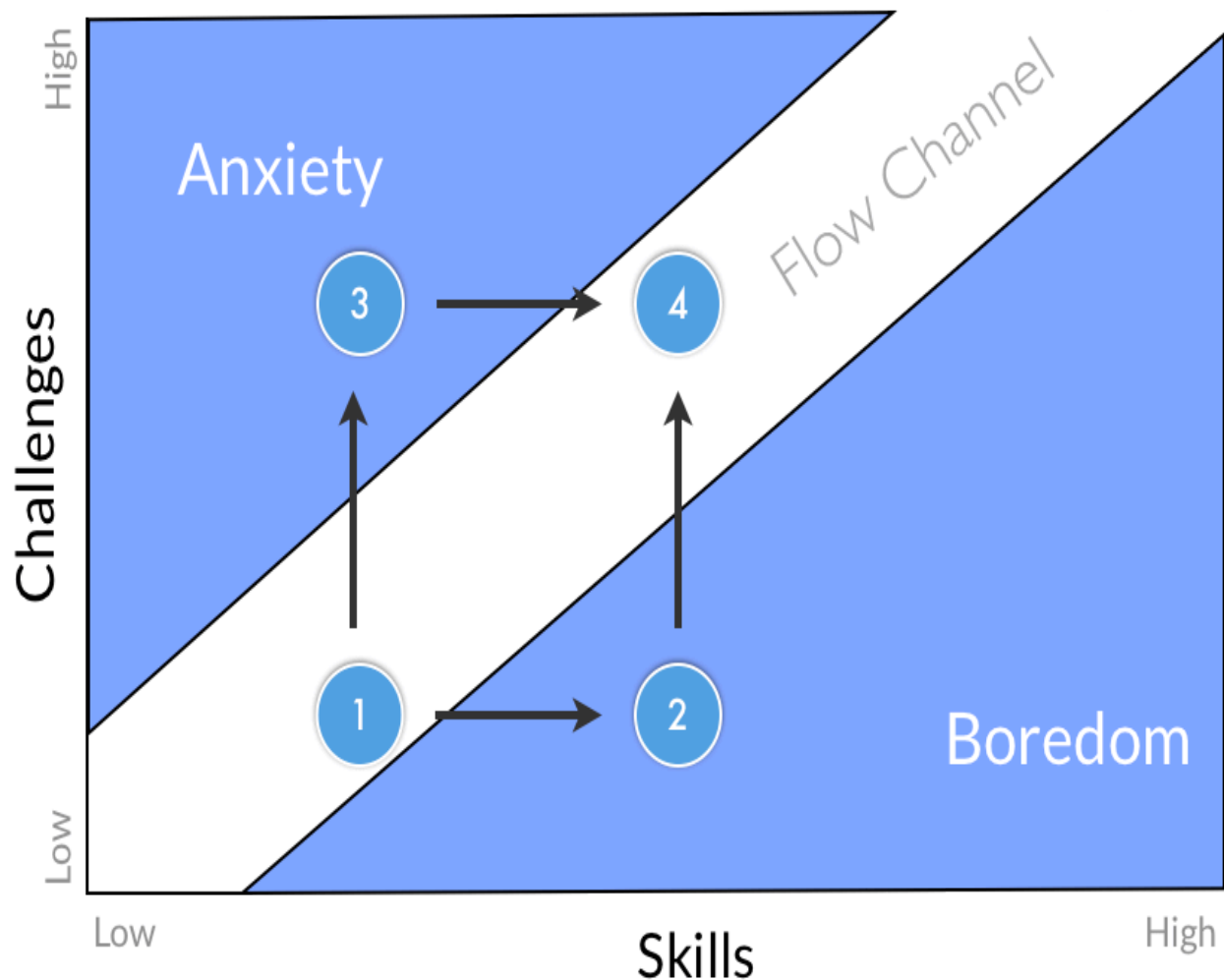


1. **Struggle:** You push yourself to the edge of your abilities. This is where you are learning, concentrating hard, and it often feels like a struggle.
2. **Release:** You intentionally let go. You take a deep breath, relax your focus, and trust the work you've done.
3. **Flow:** The state of effortless performance emerges. Your brain shifts into a different state of processing where your skills feel automatic and perfectly attuned to the situation. Your sense of self, time, and space all disappear. You become one with your wing and the air.
4. **Recovery:** After a deep flow state, you need to consolidate the learning. This is a period of rest and reflection.

## The Key Flow Triggers for Paragliding

The following exercises are designed to help you deliberately activate the three most important triggers for flow:

- **Clear Goals:** Knowing exactly what you are trying to achieve in a given moment (e.g., "center this thermal," "max out this climb").
- **Immediate Feedback:** Your ability to perceive the constant stream of information from your wing, your harness, and the air, and to adjust your actions in real-time.
- **Challenge/Skills Balance:** Engaging in a task that is challenging enough to hold your full attention, but not so difficult that it becomes overwhelming. To stretch, not snap.





## Chapter 3: The Inner Game: A Practical Mindfulness Drill

This is where philosophy meets practice. The following drills are not just mechanical exercises; they are opportunities to embody the mindset you're cultivating. The goal is not to achieve perfection, but to train your awareness and refine your process.

Approach each drill with **humility**, knowing you won't master it on the first try. Practice **non-judgmental awareness** by simply observing your performance without criticism. **Let go of comparison** by focusing entirely on your own sensory experience. Above all, **trust the process**: focus on the quality of your effort in the drill itself, and let the results unfold naturally through the principle of *Kaizen*.

Here is a drill designed to cultivate your awareness and get you in the zone, just like an athlete preparing for a big play.

### Exercise 1: The Mindful Reset

**Objective:** To connect your mind and body before, during, and after flight, creating a calm, focused internal state that is the essential starting point for flow.

**Grounding:** Before you clip in, stand still on launch. Put your helmet and gloves down. Close your eyes and take three slow, deep breaths.

- **30 Seconds - The Wind:** Bring your full attention to the feeling of the wind on your skin, your face, your hands. Notice its temperature, its strength, and its direction. Feel its energy fill you.
- **30 Seconds - The Ground:** Shift your attention to the feeling of your feet on the ground. Feel your weight, your connection to the earth, the texture of the launch site beneath your shoes.
- **30 Seconds - The Self:** Bring your attention inward. Without judgment, simply notice your emotional state. Are you anxious? Excited? Calm? Just observe it.

**Takeoff:** Just before takeoff, standing on takeoff - get in the zone:

- Take a deep breath and run through your pre-flight checks.
- Take a deep breath and focus on the feeling of the ground through your feet.
- Take a deep breath and visualise each step of the perfect takeoff.
- Breathe deeply as you feel the wind on your face looking down takeoff while you wait for the perfect cycle.
- Say - I've got this. Let's Go! Let go of fear and allow your body to perform.

**In Flight: The 3-Breath Reset** This is your go-to tool for when you feel overwhelmed, your mind is racing, or fear begins to take hold. It breaks the cycle of anxiety and brings you back to the present moment.

1. **Breath 1 (Body):** Exhale fully. As you breathe in, feel your weight sink into the harness. Feel your physical connection to the wing through your brakes.
2. **Breath 2 (Sight):** Exhale. As you breathe in, calmly and slowly scan the entire sky—from your left wingtip, to the horizon, to your right wingtip. Break the tunnel vision.
3. **Breath 3 (Mind):** Breathe in, as you exhale silently say to yourself, "Let go, I've got this." Let go of what just happened and what you think might happen next. Re-center your mind on the present task. Melt into the air and your equipment. Repeat as needed.

**Flow Link:** This is a direct "Struggle → Release" trigger. It intentionally releases the mental chatter, anxieties, and distractions ("the struggle"), and brings you into the calm, focused present moment, preparing your mind for deep engagement.

## **Chapter 4: The Toolkit: Deliberate Practice Drills**

### **Exercise 2: The Ground Game - The Wing Dialogue**

**Objective:** To build an intuitive, physical connection with your wing, making its movements an extension of your own body.

**The Drills:** In a steady, manageable breeze, kite your wing and get it stable overhead. Now, try one of these variations:

1. **Eyes-Closed Kiting:** Close your eyes for 5-10 second intervals. Instead of looking at the wing, focus only on the feeling of pressure in the brakes and the pull in your harness. Can you keep the wing overhead using feeling alone? Try this both facing forward and backward. Can you extend the time your eyes are closed to a minute...more?
2. **Lie-Down Kiting:** Facing your wing, lie down on your back while keeping the wing above you. This forces you to make constant, small, and coordinated inputs without being able to move your feet. Once you have mastered this, close your eyes for 5-10 second intervals. Focus on the feeling of pressure in the brakes and the pull in your harness. Can you use feeling alone? Can you extend the time your eyes are closed to a minute...more?

**Flow Link:** This drill trains the **Challenge/Skills Balance**. The clear goal is to keep the wing flying, and the immediate feedback is the wing's response. You are building muscle memory so the 'Outer Game' becomes automatic, freeing your conscious mind in the air.

**Mindset Focus:** Patience. Your wing will fall. When it does, your practice is to calmly bring it back up and begin again, without frustration. Be mindful of your breathing, your mental state, the position of your body, feet, hands, and the pressure through your brakes and harness. *Amor Fati*.

### **Exercise 3: The Air Game - The Body as Vario**

**Objective:** To dramatically increase your sensitivity and shift your reliance from your instruments to your body's own sensory feedback.

**The Drill:** Once you are established in a familiar, reasonably wide thermal, intentionally switch off your vario's sound. Your task is to center the core using only feeling. You can start with small intervals like 90 seconds, and build up to flying entire flights without the sound.

This is a practice in gradual mastery, not a test of immediate perfection. We start with small intervals to find that sweet spot between challenge and skill—to stretch, not snap. The aim is to build your confidence and sensitivity layer by layer. Think of it as *Kaizen* in action: each successful interval is your '1% better' for the day, compounding over time into true, intuitive skill.

- **Close your eyes** for brief, 2-3 second intervals (only if you are at a safe altitude and clear of other pilots).
- **Ask yourself:** Which hip is being pushed up? Which wing feels more pressurized? Where do I *feel* the lift? Your body knows the answer before the vario beeps.

**Flow Link:** This drill trains your ability to perceive **Immediate Feedback**. You are recalibrating your primary instrument: your own body. This deepens your connection to the air and accelerates your decision-making.

**Mindset Focus:** Humility. Trusting your body over the machine can feel unnerving. Practice the humility of accepting you might be wrong, and view every surge and dip as a pure piece of information.

#### Exercise 4: The Air Game - The Art of the Turn

**Objective:** To build a deeper sensitivity to thermic lift and to refine your wing control in the turn.

**The Drill:** Before your flight, choose a primary turn direction for the day (e.g., "Today, I will default to right-hand turns"). When you enter a thermal, your practice is to modulate your turn based on the feeling of the lift (Important: if you are flying with other pilots you must always enter turn in the same direction they are - unless you enter first then you choose the direction).

- **Be mindful** of the pressure through your brakes. As you feel the lift get stronger, tighten your turn. As the lift weakens, allow the turn to widen and flatten. Experiment with adjustments to both the inside and outside brake and always be mindful of the pressure.
- **Maintain your direction** with weightshift. Even when you widen the turn by releasing brake pressure, keep your weight shifted in the direction of the turn to maintain a coordinated climb, while searching for the core.
- **Experiment with straightening up into wind.** Feel and anticipate where the thermal "peaks" and time your turn to match that.
- If you are falling out too early, make note of that feeling. Wait a moment longer next time. As long as needed for the feeling that the thermal is "(s)peaking". This may be challenging at first. Resist the urge to follow counting rules. Thermals are dynamic. Focus on the feeling, trust the process, and in time it'll become second nature - like walking.
- The goal is to "dance" with the thermal—constantly adjusting your turn to stay in the strongest part of the lift, using the minimum control inputs necessary.

**Flow Link:** This drill masterfully manipulates **Clear Goals** and **Immediate Feedback**. Your goal is to stay in the core, and the feedback is the constant change in pressure through your wing and harness. This builds a deep, subconscious connection between feeling and action.

**Mindset Focus:** Adaptability and Sensitivity. Let go of the idea of a "perfect circle." Instead, focus on creating a perfect *response* to the air you are in, moment by moment. Forget trying to guess where the thermal is coming from. Lose yourself in it. Feel it. Become it. And stay humble, no two thermals are ever the same - we can never truly master thermaling, always strive to improve and fine tune - even on the "easy" days. *Kaizen*.

## Conclusion

Mastery is not a destination; it's a continuous, neverending journey.

By cultivating a mindset of "progress over perfection" and embracing "failure" as necessary data points, you begin to transform your entire relationship with not only the sky but with yourself. You stop fighting the air and start dancing with it. You fall in love with the process and learn to fall in love with paragliding's heart - the climb.

The more you are able to let go the more often you will find yourself in flow. And the more aware you become of this powerful spirit of flow underlying paragliding, or any other elemental art, and dedicating yourself to cultivating it with humility and gratitude, the more profound the experience and the more enriching life becomes.

But knowledge is nothing without action. Action is the antidote to fear.

Put in the time, but take your time.

Flying is the reward, never forget that.

## What's Next?

You've just taken the first step toward mastering the climb and unlocking deeper flying freedom. But this is just the beginning. **The journey continues** in my free newsletter, **The Way of Flow**, where I share fresh insights... designed for pilots chasing not just distance, but mastery.

👉 Join the flow tribe here: [Fly100](#)

For inspiration, behind-the-scenes insights, and lessons from the sky:

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**Got a question, breakthrough, or insight after trying these drills?**

Drop me a DM on Instagram or hit reply to any of my emails.

**Fly high. Stay humble. Master the climb.**

— Grant