

The following is an excerpt from the book:

Insight Improvisation

Melding Meditation, Theater, and Therapy for Self-Exploration, Healing, and Empowerment

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To learn more, please visit <http://www.insightimprov.org>.

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Role Stream and Scene Stream

*I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond, and I am also
the grass-snake who, approaching in silence, feeds itself on the frog.*

*I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws
herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate, and I am the
pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.*

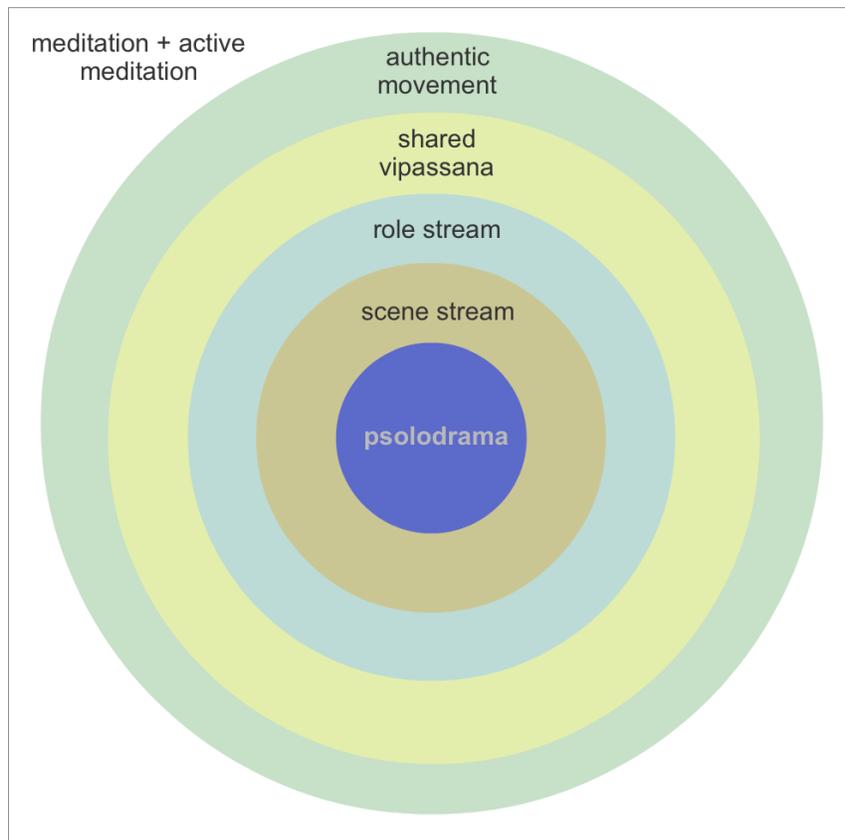
*Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up, and so the
door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.*

— excerpts from the poem

“Call Me by My True Names”

by Thich Nhat Hanh (1991, pp. 123-124)

Role stream and scene stream—the two exercises introduced in this chapter—continue the progression toward psolodrama begun in Part I of this book with meditation, authentic movement, and shared vipassana. (You can read more about psolodrama—a melding of meditation, authentic movement, and psychodrama—in Part III, which is focused on contemplative drama therapy.)



Role stream could also be called “authentic role play.” Beginning with authentic movement, and following her body and inner imagery, the improviser assumes a series of roles or characters. In scene stream, these characters can physically relate as well as dialogue with one another.

Practicing role stream and scene stream is like taking a break from one’s identity; for a few minutes, I can relax and experiment with who I want to be, or who I will never be. I can enter the role of someone or something that scares me—and by doing so feel its

power. I can be ugly, beautiful, inappropriate, socially unacceptable—all the things I don't allow myself in daily life. And in doing so I may learn something new.

Because role stream and scene stream are theatrical exercises, I've included them here in Part II of this book. At the same time, both as part of the progression toward psolodrama and as stand-alone exercises, role stream and scene stream can be used for therapeutic purposes—as a drama therapist I use them constantly in my own work with individual clients and with groups. Therefore this chapter will include elements of both theater and drama therapy in its exploration of role stream and scene stream.

Origins

The idea for role stream emerged from some of my own experiences doing psolodrama. I discovered that very often I began not only with authentic movement, but also with a period of simply embodying whatever roles were arising, letting go of the need to make sense of them. Often this would lead me through very interesting energetic, physical, and emotional states, until finally I found myself moved or opened in some way. Then the real work of the psolodrama would begin.

As I taught others psolodrama, I “discovered” what I already knew from my own experience: trying to transition from silent authentic movement into what is essentially a one-person psychodrama can sometimes feel like a big leap. Thus role stream, and later, scene stream, were born, filling in the gaps in what has now become an easy and natural progression. Now the psoloist begins with authentic movement, then speaks aloud (in shared vipassana), discovers roles (in the role stream), and scenes (in the scene stream). At that stage, they are usually already launched into their psolodrama.

As I practiced and taught role stream and scene stream, I began to find that they were rich and profound practices in their own right. One theater company I know began to use role stream regularly as a rehearsal and performance development technique.

Role versus Character

In this chapter, and throughout this book, we will be using the terms *role* and *character*, sometimes interchangeably. However, they are not quite the same.

In drama therapy, the word role is often used to refer to a *type* of being, what Jung called an *archetype*, e.g. “the king,” “the fool,” “the wise old woman,” “the monster,” “the warrior,” etc. The same archetypes are generally found across cultures—e.g., “the beautiful princess” can be found in the myths, legends, stories, or fairy tales of many different peoples throughout the world. (See Robert Landy’s taxonomy of roles, 1993, pp. 256-260.)

A character is a specific instance of a role, e.g., King Volemand the Voluble, age 59, ruler of the fictional land of Vollania. Characters tend to have names and other biographical details. Characters can be real-life people—e.g., my mother, Gandhi, etc.—or fictional; they can also be inanimate objects, animals, plants, gods/goddesses, etc. They can also be entirely made-up creatures who never have nor will exist, e.g. “Peanut Butter Man.”

When practicing role stream, scene stream, or psolodrama, it’s helpful to remain aware of the distinction between role and character while staying open to what is arising. Both roles *and* characters are invited and encouraged in these exercises, in the same way

that both “real” and fictional characters are welcomed. By doing so we are consciously staying open to the full range of possibilities that can emerge.

Role Stream

When practiced by itself (not as part of the larger progression toward psolodrama), role stream works as follows:

Enter and move. In the presence of a witness, enter the space. Enter empty, letting go of any thoughts, preconceptions, planning mind. With eyes closed, find a comfortable position to start in—standing, sitting, lying down, or any position—and take a moment in stillness to become aware of the body. Breathe. Then open to authentic movement. Move for a minute or two, following what the body wishes to do, remaining aware of the senses and how you feel. As you move, open to sound as well—feel free to sigh, yawn, groan, hum, etc.—whatever comes naturally.

Open to a role. Notice what role or character this body position, movement, and/or sound reminds you of, and continue to embody that role or character. Roles may be suggested by sense perceptions (e.g, position of the body, facial expression, feeling of contact with the floor, hearing/feeling the voice), by the mind (e.g., inner imagery, emotion, etc.), or often by a combination of several of these elements at once.

Notice that the instruction is to “open to a role,” not to “think of a role.” Put aside planning mind and listen to the body. The role stream is not about being clever and thinking up interesting roles. It’s about listening deeply to oneself and discovering the role that is already there and wants to be expressed.

Add sound/words. Some roles may make sound. Others may speak, or sing, recognizable words. Others may babble word-like gibberish. Some roles may be silent. Often, the first sounds that one makes in a role help develop and clarify the role. As in psolodrama, when entering a role it is OK to describe the role while speaking as that role (e.g., “I’m a soldier...toughened by battle...”), but this is not necessary. What is primary is to fully embody the role.

If you notice that your tendency or habit is to be silent in each role, try adding sound and then words. This can help you get out of your head and be more present in the role. The voice is also connected to our emotions, so sounding/speaking often helps one feel how a role or character feels. Finally, speaking can help you discover and unfold the story this character finds him- or herself in.

Allow ambiguity. A role may be unclear. For example, you may find yourself making a certain sound while shaking or vibrating your body. This is completely OK, and part of the process—we do not need to understand or name every role that is arising. Sometimes, if we stay with a certain physical/vocal pattern or feeling, a clear role emerges; other times we simply move on to what’s next. What is important is to trust the organic process that is unfolding, rather than to try to force it to be something it is not.

Drop or change roles. At any time another role may arise, or you can drop the current role, returning to stillness, movement, sound, etc. From this place, a new role may arise. Follow your instinct: you may stay with one role for three seconds, and another for three minutes, or longer.

What Role Stream Is and Is Not

Each role in the role stream emerges organically from authentic movement. When a role no longer has “juice” I simply let it go and return to authentic movement until a new role emerges.

It’s as if authentic movement is the ocean. Role “A”—a wave—emerges from the ocean, builds and eventually crests, returning to the ocean. Back in authentic movement, I let everything go and just follow my body. Then a new wave—role “B”—emerges. Etc.



Because role stream emerges from authentic movement in this way, it can be thought of as “authentic role play”—the mover/improviser is not deciding with her head what role to play next, but instead letting it emerge organically, from what the body is doing. Just as in authentic movement, she lets the thinking/planning mind go and lets the body lead. She practices choiceless awareness, letting the next role choose her. By doing

so, she allows every role to be a surprise. Following the body, she can tap into information beneath the level of the conscious mind.

Here's an excerpt of what an observer might hear during a typical role stream:

*“(Groaning) ...I’m on a rack...being stretched ...OOOHHH
...aaarrgh... I’m strong and powerful... breaking.... free!...
AAARRRGH!!... ahhh...(silence) There’s a bubble coming from my
mouth...brrrrr...I’m a fish with beautiful feathery fins...in the deepest
darkest ocean...my fins are glowing...(pause) Tree...furry bark,
old...gristly ...no leaves, moss growing on me, craggy branches...”*

An observer would see the improviser embodying each role physically, often before he sounds or speaks in that role. They would also see the improviser usually return to authentic movement between roles—sometimes briefly, sometimes longer—allowing the new role to emerge from the movement.

Beware of a few common tendencies of those new to role stream:

Being clever. Those experienced in improv—especially improv comedy—are used to thinking up roles and characters on the spot. For role stream, I must let go of my good ideas and listen to the body. If I do that, I will be truly surprised, rather than pushing to come up with something unique or funny.

When practicing role stream, it's OK to be a little picky—if an idea for a role pops into your head, try letting it go. Instead, keeping moving, sounding, opening to the senses. Let a role emerge slowly, organically. Trust the emergence.

Censoring impulses. Sometimes the role that is arising from the body is one I've experienced before, or something similar to it. Or it may feel like a cliché. I may be

tempted to skip what's coming up and instead choose something "more interesting." Or I may wish to censor what's arising because it feels too strange or too personal.

But there's a reason that role is coming up—there's a part of me that needs to play that role out—a kind of desire that Jacob Moreno referred to as "act hunger."

Repetition. If a role is coming up again, or a similar character is appearing, our tendency is to avoid it, as if we have an internal checklist and are saying "nope, did that one already." Instead, trust the impulse. Perhaps you did not fully explore that role/character the first time; there's more to discover and learn. Or perhaps—as we'll see in scene stream below—that character would like to respond to or interact with another.

Cliché. When something strikes us as cliché, we are judging our own impulse—reacting to it with aversion. But if we delve fully into that thing, explore its complexities and nuances, what originally felt like a cliché becomes a rich ground for exploration. There is a strong correspondence between roles we label as cliché and roles that are archetypal. If I continually avoid clichés, I may never get to experience the power of embodying an archetype. I may notice in my movement, for example, that I feel like a king. My mind may reject that as cliché and want to move on. But if I can stay with that image and let myself enter the role, and speak as that role, I may discover all kinds of things about "the king"—and about the kingly part of myself—that I did not know.

Fear. I may have a tendency to censor due to fear—the fear that something is too personal, too strange, too revealing, taboo, etc. It's useful to notice whether that fear is about me or about my witness. Am I projecting on to them, fearing that they will judge me, think I'm strange? If you've chosen a good witness, someone who is trustworthy, confidential, and nonjudgmental, see if you can let that fear go. A good witness wants the best for the improviser, and is most interested in the improviser having a full and rich experience of

the exercise, uncensored. (If you do not feel that your witness has your best interest at heart, it is probably time to find a new witness.) It is often those roles we tend to censor out of fear that are the *most* interesting and fruitful to embody. These are roles we may secretly or unconsciously have a hunger or curiosity to play out and explore—roles that in real life we never get to embody.

Transforming roles. There is a tendency to keep working with the same role and change it, rather than return to authentic movement and let a truly new role emerge. For example, I may begin as a baby, and then grow to a child, then a man, then find I'm getting older, then walking with a cane, then the cane becomes a gun, etc. There is nothing “wrong” with transforming roles—it's just a different exercise. To break free from this habit, consciously return to authentic movement after each role—return to the ocean and swim it in a while until a new role arises.

Keys to Role Stream

In approaching role stream, it helps a great deal to **slow down**. Do not rush the process—take your time to discover the next role or find your way into it.

Also, try to **let go**—do not feel a need to perform, entertain your witness, make something happen, or be “good.” Don't push. In the course of five minutes, you may have only one role arise, or you may have 20—it does not matter.

As much as possible, **be true to what is arising**—let the body lead. Don't add anything (your “good ideas”) or turn a role into something more recognizable, acceptable, dramatic, or funny. Let go of logic, stop making sense. A role can be subtle, mysterious, half-baked. It's OK to feel surprised and/or lost during a role stream.

Once a role emerges, work with it—**cook the role**. Move as the role, sound or speak as it. Find out what it has to say. Get into it. And then feel free to drop it at any time.

Role Stream as Meditation

Like shared vipassana, role stream works in a similar way to *vipassana* meditation—the meditator notices what is arising without being attached to it, and then lets it go. In practicing role stream we exercise our capacity for choiceless awareness, allowing the next role to choose us, rather than us choosing it (or attempting to steer or control what is unfolding).

When practicing role stream, choiceless awareness begins in authentic movement by opening to the six sense doors. Once a role emerges, I am still open to all the sense doors, but am now doing so *as that role*. If I'm a bear, what is the bear smelling right now, or hearing? How does that affect me? In the role stream, the role I'm in is the lens through which I perceive everything else: sensations, emotions, story, meaning, etc.

Ways of Using Role Stream

As a warm-up or transition. As discussed earlier, role stream is one of the main preparatory stages leading to psolodrama. (*See the Part III chapter entitled "The Entryway to Psolodrama."*) Even without doing psolodrama, role stream is an excellent warm-up for theater or drama therapy activities of all kinds.

As an exercise. Role stream can also be used as a standalone exercise, either working alone (without a witness), one-to-one, or as a pair activity in a workshop setting.

It helps to prepare by moving authentically first, and to follow the activity with a short debrief—a chance for the improviser and witness to share. See below for more on the function of the witness in role stream and scene stream.

As a performance structure. A class or workshop setting can be a great place to experiment with role stream as a performance structure—with the admonishment that the practitioner *not* perform, but instead let go of their good ideas, open to the senses and inner impulses, and see what emerges.

Striving to entertain or be clever when doing role stream in front of a group can destroy the spontaneity and creativity of the exercise. One way to avoid this is to keep one's eyes closed throughout. This allows the performer to stay focused on her authentic impulse, and lets her forget about the audience a little bit as she tunes into her body, inner imagery, emotions, etc.

For the audience, witnessing a performer do the role stream authentically, with eyes closed, is a little like watching a very active sleepwalker embody a creative series of dreams, which we are given the privilege of peering into.

In a duet or trio. In a workshop setting, after the group has practiced role stream with a partner, and a few solo role streams have been witnessed by the group, I like to invite two or sometimes three people into the space to do role stream at the same time. The basic rules are the same, but with the added guidelines of 1) focusing on listening; 2) creating space for the other, e.g., by not speaking/sounding constantly; and 3) opening to interaction through physical contact, eye contact, and dialogue. Opening the eyes now and then in a duet/trio is encouraged to help foster interaction.

The challenge, as with several of the multi-person structures in Insight Improvisation, is to be able to listen to one's own authentic impulse and not to give away one's center to the other. The improviser has the ability to break out of a scene at an any time, closing her eyes and returning to moving authentically, and emerging as a completely different role or character—perhaps unrelated to the previous role or scene.

Role stream duets and trios, when approached with an attitude of no agenda—not trying to entertain, just being present—have unexpected and creative results. And they are fun.

Scene Stream

The idea that a step was missing between role stream and psolodrama was suggested to me by my friend and colleague, the theater artist Aaron “Brando” Brandes.

Scene stream is essentially role stream with one new rule: interaction between roles is possible—and encouraged. All roles are still played by the individual improviser.

Role Stream:	role A → role B → role C → role D, etc.
Scene Stream:	role A → role B → role A → role B → role C → role D → role B → role A → role D → role B, etc.

To facilitate interaction, one can bring back a previous role. For example, if my first role were a man lying on a beach, and my second role were a lion, the lion might see the man and approach him with curiosity. I could next return to the role of the man, who might react to the appearance of the lion. When I return to the lion, he might attack the

man and eat him. Or not—it's also possible the two might have an interesting conversation (all roles have the ability to speak—even lions).

Each role is fully embodied, right from the start. Scene stream is just like role stream in this way: begin by moving authentically, and let each role emerge from the body, not the head. When changing roles, also change your body position (as well as your voice, facial expression, body language, etc.). Sometimes this is as quick and simple as facing the opposite direction; sometimes it entails getting up and moving to a whole new spot. Do what feels natural for the scene you're in.

Keys to Scene Stream

As with role stream, it helps to **slow down**, **let go**, **be true to what's arising**, and **cook each role**. Here are a few additional thoughts for scene stream:

At first, playing multiple roles and switching back and forth between them—while keeping one's eyes closed—can seem strange...or seem like an effort. If you are used to role stream, there may be a little “hump” to get over in order to go back to a previous role and let two roles dialogue. The key here is to **take a risk**. At first it may seem odd, but once you are caught up in the scene, you will let go of your self-consciousness.

Like a good improv actor, **commit to the scene** and see where it leads—don't be afraid to follow these two characters into the unknown or to be surprised by where their interaction leads.

It helps to **differentiate the roles** in the scene physically and vocally, to fully enter each character, feel it and be it before responding. Take your time for the transition between roles.

Finally, once you have gotten over the hump and made a few scenes happen, relax and **let interactions emerge organically**—don't push. Sometimes this means going back into authentic movement until a new role emerges; sometimes it means staying with a single role as long as you like.

Remember that you are not performing: this process is an exploration that is for you alone—**your witness will get what he gets**. Do not feel compelled to clarify who these characters are or what is going on. Performance mind is a powerful habit—we may think we're being completely authentic, but in fact, inside, we are secretly attached to pleasing our audience. Let it go! Instead, focus on staying true to what's emerging.

Theater versus Therapy and the Role of the Witness

Sometimes, both in role stream and scene stream, the characters and interactions may feel random, purely fantastical, strange, funny, bearing no particular relationship to one's own life.

Or, sometimes, a role or scene can emerge that feels personally meaningful, possibly involving real-life characters, characters that resemble aspects of real life; fantasy or dream-like characters who express emotions or messages that pertain to real life; or characters or interactions that are metaphors for real life. (By real life we're referring to one's own actual feelings, challenges, issues, relationships, life themes, etc.)

Afterward, in the sharing process, the improviser can speak to what came up for him when playing out these roles and/or scenes, including their relevance for him personally. In the scene with the man and the lion described earlier, for example, I could choose to share with my witness afterward that that scene felt like a metaphor for my life—that I am being eaten alive by family obligations, the need to earn money, lack of time, etc.

In this way, scene stream, as well as role stream, can be used as forms of drama therapy—methods for unearthing personal themes and exploring them. This intention is further developed in psolodrama, in which one consciously identifies and explores personal themes, challenges, conflicts, issues, relationships, etc., arising spontaneously in the drama.

Or, role stream and scene stream can be viewed as purely theatrical exercises, with no need to interpret or personalize the content. Used theatrically, role stream and scene stream can be great ways to spark new ideas for characters and scenes, helping performers and theater groups source new material.

The person (or group) witnessing a role stream or scene stream can help facilitate the improviser's reflection on the exercise as well as shape their own response to fit the context and intention:

Theatrical Context (e.g. peer or director/coach)	Therapeutic Context (e.g. peer or therapist)
Ask the improviser...	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was your experience—anything you'd like to share? • Are there particular roles/scenes you'd like to remember? • *What worked well? What could have been better? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was your experience—anything you'd like to share? • What roles/scenes relate to your own life—either directly or metaphorically?
Share with the improviser...	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights: what surprised me was / what stood out / memorable moments... • What I liked about how you did it... • *What needs work in terms of your technique/approach... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mirroring: What I saw/heard was... • Sharing (typically, for a peer): What resonated personally for me was... • **Interpreting (typically, for a therapist): Associations I made to things you've shared about your life...

* For a learning/training situation.

** Before offering interpretation to a peer or a fellow participant in a workshop setting, check in with them to find out whether they are open to it.

Closing Thoughts

Recently doing scene stream I found myself exploring three characters: a small crippled girl on the stairs of the sky train in Bangkok, quietly singing a song in Thai; an older white man (what Thais call a “fahlung”), bitter and searching for love, passing her on the stairs; and the mother of the girl sitting on the sidewalk below, with her begging bowl. Playing these roles—hearing their inner monologues and then having them interact—was extremely moving for me, unlocking hidden feelings and helping me work through themes I didn't know (consciously) were inside of me. All of the ingredients of the scene were familiar to me, having visited Bangkok many times, but the scene felt new

and somehow wondrous—each character was initially caught up in their own suffering, but through the interaction something transcendent occurred.

In his poem *Call Me by My True Names*, Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of the interconnection of all beings (1991, pp. 123-124). When we practice role stream and scene stream, we are also practicing what Thich Nhat Hanh calls inter-being, walking in the shoes of others from all walks of life, even those we have aversion to, the shadow roles we tend to avoid—in fact, those are often the most interesting and valuable to play. By learning to reverse roles with the “other,” we can learn to expand our own range and our own compassionate, empathic heart.

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