

INSIGHT IMPROVISATION

MELDING MEDITATION, THEATER, AND THERAPY
FOR SELF-EXPLORATION, HEALING, AND EMPOWERMENT

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Introduction

It was an important day when I recognized that I did not teach Dance, I taught People....my primary interest might have to do with process, not results, that it might not be art I was after but another kind of human development.

— Mary Whitehouse (1999, p. 59)

Walk up a road in a small village in Switzerland, away from the town center, toward the surrounding mountains, and you will find a signpost. It is a pole with several clearly printed signs, pointing the way to several different paths, each with an estimate of the time it will take to walk to the next village, or the top of the next peak. Standing there, deciding which way to go, you have no idea exactly what you will encounter on the way—but you have some idea that the walk will be worthwhile, filled with the unexpected: goats, waterfalls, wildflowers.

The ideas and activities you will find in this book are like the signs on those trails. Insight Improvisation is what remains from the journeys I've taken in the realms of meditation, theater, and drama therapy. For me, each Insight Improv exercise is an invitation to the unexpected, a marker pointing toward a path into my psyche. And if I am present, if I open my eyes and ears and all the senses of my body, if I open my

imagination and listen to my feelings, the journey will be worthwhile—I may learn something new about myself, and about the process of being alive.

My intention is to share these experiences of self-discovery with others—to share these path-signs, these maps—in the hope that others will follow the trails, and find something new for themselves: a new way of seeing the world, a new way of understanding their feelings, a new way of interacting with others, a new way to notice their suffering and choose a different path.

Of course, these “new ways” are really very old. These trails through the mountains have been here for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. 2,500 years ago, the Buddha walked these paths. Many have walked since. But in every age, a new generation needs to get out and go hiking, take along some paint and wood and nails, and repair and update the signs.

So here we are.

Let's go for a walk...

What is Insight Improvisation?

Insight Improvisation is an integration of meditation with theater and drama therapy.

In practice, Insight Improvisation can take the form of a workshop, a class, an individual session, or a meeting between two peers. It provides an environment for creative growth by connecting active, expressive techniques—such as authentic movement, storytelling, improvisation, writing, solo performance, and collaboration with

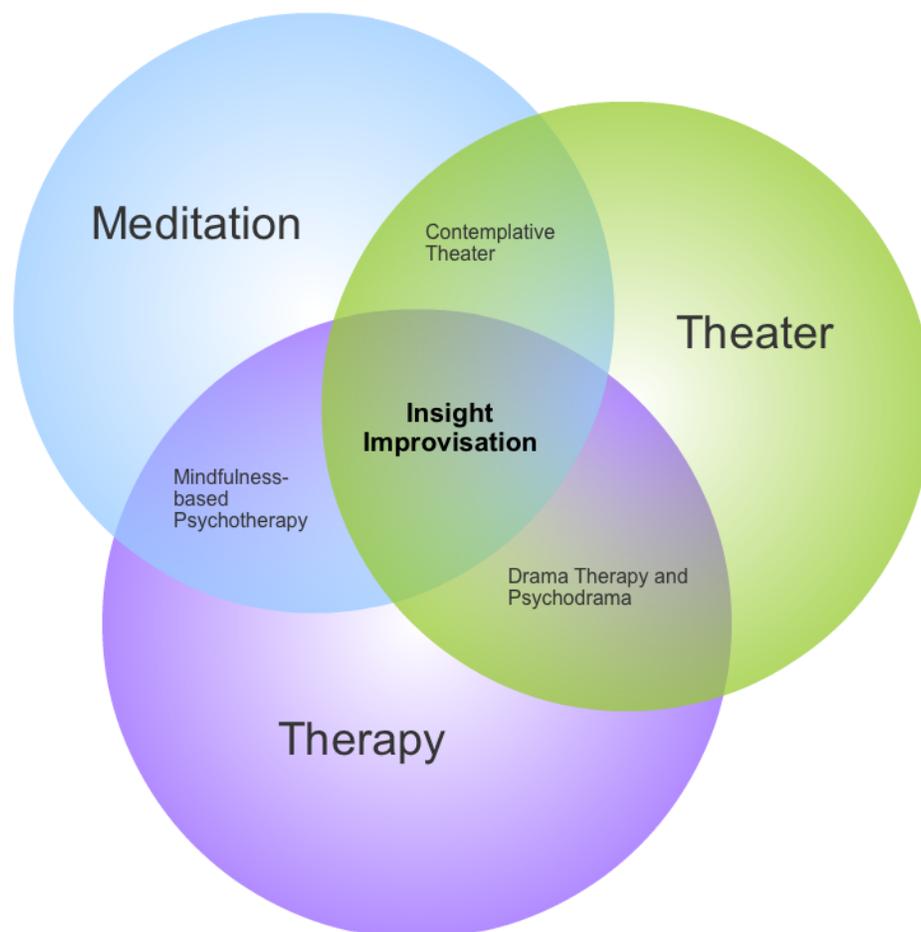
partners and groups—with the skills and concepts underlying meditation, including mindfulness, choiceless awareness, and lovingkindness.

As one practitioner put it: *“By being experienced in the body via meditation, movement and theater methods, Insight Improvisation opens up participants to an intersection of creativity, therapy, and spirituality which can illuminate and enrich their lives.”*

As an art form, Insight Improvisation differs from most forms of scripted or improvised theater (Blatner, 2007) in that it replaces the focus on “performance”—that is, presenting an artistic work for an audience—with a focus on the actor’s mind-body experience. The art that results from an Insight Improvisation activity is a byproduct of the performer’s process of being mindful, moment by moment, of his or her own body, senses, thoughts and feelings, as well as his or her relationship to others onstage or in the audience. Insight Improvisation helps one access intuition, drawing upon the inspiration of each moment, and creating freedom from the pressure of “performing.” In fact, often in this work the improviser will work with his or her eyes closed to better tap into subtle sensations and inner imagery. What gets communicated to an audience or witness is authentic, self-expressed, and unexpected.

As a form of therapy, Insight Improvisation combines meditative and theatrical practices for the purposes of personal healing, learning, growth, and transformation—one could call it “contemplative drama therapy.” Over the last few decades it has become evident that experiential techniques are among the most powerful in addressing the effects of trauma (van der Kolk as cited in Hudgins, 2000, p. 230), and in helping patients shift challenging patterns of thought and behavior. Among the most favored experiential

approaches are mindfulness—as seen in John Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (1990), and in Marsha Linehan’s Dialectical Behavior Therapy (1993)—and creative arts therapy—ranging from Jacob Moreno’s psychodrama (Moreno, 2000) to the proliferation of expressive arts methods used today. Insight Improvisation is one of a number of new approaches that combine creative arts therapy with mindfulness/meditation (Rappaport, 2013), tapping into the power of creativity and self-expression, while inviting practitioners to look deeply within themselves. This marriage of contrasting approaches creates a unique vehicle for self-exploration and self-discovery.



Whom This Book is For

Insight Improvisation is for anyone who would like to deepen his or her own self-awareness; better understand his or her own body, mind, emotions, and personal patterns; and find new ways of being, playing, and creating in relationship with others.

This book is both an introduction to Insight Improvisation and a practical guide for anyone who would like to practice the form, facilitate a group, or teach it to others.

Those drawn to Insight Improvisation tend to come to it from one of four paths:

Meditators. For many in the West, the path of meditation has proven to be a rich spiritual journey. But a regular practice of meditation can sometimes feel dry, disconnected. By building a bridge between meditation and day-to-day life, Insight Improvisation helps meditators bring the insights and the skills they have acquired “on the cushion” into action in the real world through body and voice as well as mind. For those who find sitting meditation a challenge or simply do not like it, Insight Improvisation provides access to some of the same benefits as meditation through myriad forms of active meditation and other, more dynamic activities. I have also seen those new to meditation be inspired to begin a regular practice of sitting after being exposed to meditative ideas through Insight Improvisation.

Theater artists. Actors (and performers/communicators in general) often encounter nerves, self-critique, and tension when appearing before an audience. Insight Improvisation can help actors and improvisers break free of habits and the need to “perform” onstage, offering a different paradigm of theater as an act of awareness—increasing one’s ability to be present, relaxed, and open in front of an audience. It also offers techniques for sourcing self-revelatory material, for writing original plays and one-

person shows. For theater instructors and directors, Insight Improvisation provides a new set of tools and approaches for working with actors and helping them perform mindfully with greater authenticity.

Therapists. For drama therapists, psychodramatists, and others incorporating improvisation or role-play into therapeutic work, Insight Improvisation offers a fresh approach. With its combination of meditative awareness and dramatic play, Insight Improvisation can help create a safe container within which personal exploration, insight, and growth can occur. It provides a systematic, organic progression of exercises—encompassing meditation, movement, improvisation, role-play, and dramatic enactment—which can be introduced to a client over the course of multiple sessions, inviting a journey of increasing self-reflection and self-expression.

For therapists of all backgrounds, Insight Improv offers new ways to add meditation and mindfulness to more traditional creative arts therapy or psychotherapy approaches. And for non-therapists, Insight Improv provides tools which can be used to engage in richly meaningful peer work, a kind of embodied co-therapy.

Learners, Leaders, and Communicators of all kinds. Of course, not everyone coming to Insight Improv is a meditator, actor, or therapist/therapy client. As one person wrote: *“I would like to see you add another category to which I might relate most directly. That would be someone who is curious about life and reflective about living. A seeker into life’s mysteries but without specifically being on a spiritual path. An adult interested in growth, perhaps at mid-life and wanting to open up. Someone working with a life coach.”* Someone in any of these categories may find that Insight Improvisation can help them grow, explore, and enrich their life. By helping one to be more present, aware, and

relaxed in day-to-day communication and interaction, Insight Improvisation can improve one's response to work environments, personal relationships, difficult or reactive emotions, and other life challenges. Insight Improvisation trains individuals to be more spontaneous and flexible, more empathic listeners, and better attuned to their own intuition and inner wisdom—ultimately preparing them for the challenges of leadership and social action in society.

How to Use This Book

This book is divided into a few big chunks, each with a different purpose in mind. Depending on your reasons for reading, you may wish to focus more on certain parts than others.

Part One is concerned with meditation and active meditation. If you are new to these ideas, I encourage you to spend some time learning about meditation and authentic movement, two important foundational practices for Insight Improvisation. Part One also introduces shared vipassana, which is both a practice in itself, and one step in the progression toward psolodrama (discussed in Part Three). There are also some creative, new approaches in Part One, which can help any meditator refresh their practice, as well as offer new ways of meditating with partners and groups.

Part Two focuses on theater and improvisation. Filled with ideas and techniques for actors, improvisers, theater instructors, directors, etc., there is a lot in Part Two to play with, from Scott Kelman's "Zen" approach to improvisation, to Jean-Claude van Itallie's storytelling techniques, to original exercises such as The Three States,

Amplification, Role Stream and Scene Stream (the latter two further steps on the path to psolodrama). The focus here is more on performance than in the other parts of the book; however, any of the techniques covered work equally well as forms of active meditation and self-exploration.

Part Three is about drama therapy, with an emphasis on psolodrama. This is where the journey through this work deepens considerably. Part Three is focused on combining meditation and theater for personal growth, and contains detailed instruction and examples illustrating how to practice psolodrama—an approach that marries meditative awareness, authentic movement, and psychodrama. The foundations of psolodrama are explored—its roots in relation to other forms of psychotherapy (including the work of Jung, Mindell, Moreno, Perls, and Gendlin). Particular emphasis is given to the role of a supportive witness in fostering another’s growth and learning.

Part Four concerns application—how to use these ideas and approaches in the real world. Whereas Parts One through Three are written from the perspective of an individual or two peers taking these exercises into the studio and exploring them, Part Four looks at other ways of applying Insight Improvisation: in individual therapy, in a workshop or class, and in other contexts.

At the back of the book you’ll find an appendix listing all Insight Improv activities and their variations, as well as a glossary of terms. The appendix and glossary are good places to turn to if you skipped to a later chapter and missed the introduction of a certain concept or approach.

I wish you a deep and fruitful journey as you find your own way through these pages. My hope is that you sample some of the meditations and exercises, ideally

incorporating a few into your own regular practices. Find a friend you think would be a good witness, meet in an empty room, and try out authentic movement, the three states, shared vipassana, role stream, or even psolodrama. Let me know what you discover!

May you—may we—may all beings—bring the qualities of mindfulness, openness, and lovingkindness into how we live our lives and interact with others, each and every day.

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Belmont, Massachusetts

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Part I: Laying the Foundation

Meditation in Action

Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower,
but is already there, in relaxation and letting-go.

— *The Venerable Lama Gendün Rinpoche*

Meditation



If you are already familiar with meditation, feel free to skim this chapter, and focus on those parts that look new to you.

Why Meditate?

I am lying on the rough wooden floor of an artist's loft in downtown Boston. The workshop instructor, a Polish man, has given very few instructions—notice sound; if you are thinking, just come back to the sound. I and the others lie in silence. I have so many thoughts. But, for a moment here and there, I notice the traffic noise coming up from the street—a racing engine, car horns. I hear pigeon coos and feathers rustling coming from a window at the back of the loft. I hear the single exhalation of breath of someone lying near me. I notice the soft late-afternoon light streaming in through the windows. There is a feeling of spaciousness in the room.

It is fitting that my first encounter with meditation was in a theater workshop. Meditation is a conscious practice of heightened awareness—and awareness is one of the primary qualities an actor must develop: awareness of self, of other actors, and of the audience.

As a therapist, the quality of my awareness is perhaps my most essential attribute: am I present, focused, listening, empathic—alive to the possibilities of this moment?

Meditation can be defined as *the act of bringing sustained, focused, present-moment awareness to an object, phenomenon, process, or idea*. It can be a powerful training tool for actors and therapists. But it is not only a training for the mind—meditation is also a life-path, a journey of development, an opportunity to connect with oneself (and with others) in the most intimate way: by simply being present.

In a sense, meditation is the opposite of “acting.” Whereas an actor is typically focused on a character’s action or goal—or on pleasing the audience—and feels strongly committed to succeeding, the meditator is letting go of goals, letting go of pleasing others, and is instead cultivating the ability to witness whatever enters the field of awareness with equanimity and detachment.

In Insight Improvisation, we find that bringing the awareness of the meditator into acting allows us to relax and center ourselves while opening to rich sources of inspiration we have tended to ignore—the senses, the body, emotions, and inner imagery. From this place we are led to new discoveries and a greater ability to act and react in the present moment.

As a therapist using Insight Improvisation in my private practice, I often incorporate meditation very early in my work with a client—both as an introductory experiential exercise and as an ongoing approach. Meditation offers clients a practice they can use at home that is grounding, peaceful, and healing, one that also heightens their awareness of their own reactivity and personal patterns. Combining meditation with experiential techniques from the theater world has proven equally powerful; clients enjoy

and benefit from a few minutes of pure mindfulness before taking that awareness into more active exercises. The result is often therapeutic work that is deeper and more impactful than it might otherwise have been.

Much has been written about meditation. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce three types of awareness—each with a corresponding meditation practice—that together comprise the foundation of Insight Improvisation, and all the concepts and exercises that follow in this book.

Type of Awareness	Mindfulness	Choicelessness	Lovingkindness
Meditation Practice	<i>Samadhi</i>	<i>Vipassana</i>	<i>Metta</i>

Mindfulness: Meditating on a Single Object

Try this: in a quiet room, find a comfortable place to sit—a chair is fine, or a sitting cushion. Sit with the back straight. Allow the body to relax. It can help to close your eyes—or, if you prefer, you can gaze down toward the floor at a 45-degree angle, with a gentle focus, eyes half-open. Notice your breathing. You may notice the belly rising and falling with each breath, or you may be aware of the sensation of breath in and out of the nostrils. Pick one area to focus on. Do not try to change or control the breath, just notice it.

Here is what makes this a meditation: if you find yourself thinking, about anything—past, future, judging, planning, fantasizing, etc.—just notice you are thinking (you can say “thinking” in your mind), and then return to the breath. It is normal to think—do not judge yourself for this—but simply return your awareness to the breath.

This remembering to return to the object of the meditation (in this case, the breath)—and thereby remembering to return to the present moment—is called “mindfulness.”

As you continue, let your awareness deepen. Instead of being like a cork which floats on top of the pond, allow your awareness to be like a stone that sinks right to the bottom. With each in-breath, each out-breath, notice the details—what changes are there, is the breath deep, shallow, rough, smooth, fast, slow? Become fascinated with the breath.

If you are having difficulty focusing, try counting each breath (“one in, one out, two in, two out...”) up to ten, and then return to one. Using the counting as a measure, see if you can extend the length of time during which you remain aware of the breath. When you no longer need the counting, let it go.

Continue this meditation for 5-10 minutes.

When you are finished, make a gentle transition—stretch, yawn, move slowly, whatever you need to do to return. See what happens if you maintain this quality of mindfulness beyond the meditation. For example, try remaining aware of your breathing as you enter your next activity.

(See Appendix D for answers to frequently asked questions about meditation.)

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness in a general sense is “the quality or state of being conscious or aware of something” (“Mindfulness” 2013, para. 1). For a meditator, mindfulness can be described more specifically as “a mental state achieved by focusing one’s awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one’s feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations” (“Mindfulness” 2013, para. 2).

Mindfulness can also be described as *remembering*. I remember to return to this moment—to ask the question “what is happening right now?” When practicing forms of *samadhi*, or concentration meditation, mindfulness is the ability to repeatedly return to the object of the meditation, such as the breath (as in the *anapanasati* meditation described above). Returning to the breath is not what is challenging—it is remembering to do so, over and over, despite the pull of new thoughts and distractions.

The Importance of Mindfulness

The experience of being a human being on this planet has changed dramatically over the last few decades. The pace of life has quickened, the demands placed on individuals to be responsive communicators have increased, and the presence of technology and media in our lives has expanded to fill every moment, every silence.

But much of the human experience has not changed. There is, and will always be, human pain and hardship—illness, aging, and death; the injustices of poverty, hunger, war, abuse, prejudice, corruption and crime; the propensity toward addiction of all kinds.

There is, underlying all of this, a basic human suffering the Buddha described, which we all experience daily: all the ways we desire what is pleasant and are ultimately

disappointed when we cannot attain or perpetuate it; and all the ways in which we avoid what is unpleasant, push it away or deny it.

*As I sit on an airplane taking off, my mind fills with thoughts:
“What if something goes wrong? The engines sound strange—what was that noise? Bumpy...bumpy...is something wrong...we’re tilting...do they have control of the plane?” As I have these thoughts, my body is tense, my palms sweaty, my eyes dart from window to window.*

We cannot avoid pleasant and unpleasant sensations and thoughts—they occur in every moment. However, we can choose our response to them. I can go with habit, and react, allowing all my aversive responses to flying take over, as in the example above. Or I can make a different choice.

Grasping and aversion is the basis of suffering—the unsatisfying nature of existence the Buddha called *dukkha*—one of the three characteristics of existence, the others being *anicca (impermanence)* and *anatta (non-self)*, described below.

What the Buddha taught was an approach to recognizing this suffering, and through awareness, learn to accept it, and to let go.

Central to the Buddha’s teaching was mindfulness—*sati*—the ability to stop and notice what is happening, to bring awareness to the present moment, to notice one’s reactivity and choose not to act, not to perpetuate suffering.

When I am mindful, I return to myself. I notice any tension and release it. I breathe. I notice my feelings—notice where they are in my body—and cultivate acceptance of them, rather than push them away.

On the airplane, taking off, I sit in meditation with eyes closed, observing my body and my mind. As aversive thoughts arise, I notice them,

and do not identify with them—they are just thoughts—not reality—and I let them go. I notice my body, notice tension, breathe, and release it. I notice sweat on my palms. Fear is still there, but I am no longer feeding the fear with reactivity. I smile, breathe deeply, and relax. We've reached cruising altitude, and I sit in meditation, feeling peaceful and free.

When I am mindful in my day-to-day life, I notice my habits—perhaps I am suffering from habitual anger, or selfishness, or a tendency to speak rashly—and can choose to not react, or to make a different choice. When I am mindful, a new possibility appears.

Mindfulness of...

The breath is only one object of awareness. In fact, any of the six “sense doors” (traditionally, the five senses plus “mind objects”) can make a good focus for meditation. Here are some possibilities:

Sound Objects

Sitting in meditation, become aware of the sounds around you—the ticking clock, sounds from the street, small sounds from your own body, etc. As in the meditation on breath, if you find yourself thinking, just notice that and bring the awareness back to whatever sound is happening right now. Notice the tendency of the mind to label sounds (“oh, that’s a mockingbird”) or to make up stories (“I wonder if there is a nest nearby? What if they build one in the air conditioner?”). Instead, bring the mind back to each sound *as sound* in its pure form: noticing pitch, volume, rhythm, timbre, silence, etc.

Visual Objects

Try this in a quiet, outdoor place, such as sitting looking out over a body of water. Notice how all we see is comprised of two things—form and color—and how those two aspects can change with time. Pick one thing to look at, such as the play of light on the waves in the distance. As thoughts arise, return to awareness of color and form. Primal elements seem particularly conducive to “seeing” meditations: water, fire (e.g., a candle), air (e.g., sky and clouds), and earth (e.g., a garden, a mountain). One can also do a seeing meditation with a mandala, a work of art—or with any moment in life.

(See “City Meditation/Nature Meditation” in the chapter “Further Exploration with Meditation” for applying visual meditation in an active exercise.)

Bodily Sensations

This sensory object refers not only to touch—our perception of external objects’ form, texture, temperature, and the pressure of our contact with them—but also to our internal bodily awareness of kinesthetics—motion, weight, and body position—as well as pain, muscle tension/relaxation/vibration, internal body temperature, itchiness, and countless other sensations that are part of our felt human experience (such as the feeling of a lump in the throat when one is sad).

Try this meditation on bodily sensations: sitting in a quiet place with eyes closed, begin by scanning through the entire body, from scalp to toes, noticing any areas of tension or holding and allow them to relax and release (it can help to breathe in to areas of tension and consciously let go as you breath out with a relaxed sigh of relief). Then, expand the awareness so you can notice the body as a whole, all at once— how does it feel? Notice the energy in the body: is there movement, vibration? Is the body warm,

cool? What effect is gravity having on the body, its position and its feeling of weight in contact with the cushion or chair?

Next, allow a bodily sensation to choose you. (This may sound strange, but we want to let the body do the choosing here, not the mind. More on this kind of “choiceless” awareness below...) This may be an area of pain, aching or itchiness; a feeling in the gut; a tension in the neck or back; a pleasant sensation, an area that feels warm or cool, etc. Go with the first sensation that you notice, and begin to focus in on it. As with the breath, let your awareness be like a stone, sinking right to the bottom of the pond, as you notice the minute details of the sensation.

Do not make assumptions about this sensation—it may not remain static—in fact, it is likely to change as you observe it. It may not be confined to a particular body part. If we let go of our assumptions about the body, we may find that by following a sensation, we can become open to a whole different geography of the body, one that is felt from the inside rather than seen from the outside.

As with any meditation, if you find yourself thinking, distracted, or having stories about this bodily sensation, label it “thinking,” and mindfully refocus the awareness on the bodily sensation. If at any time this sensation becomes overwhelming—too much to handle—you can engage in “skillful distraction,” returning to an awareness of the breath, or to an awareness of the body as a whole. Then, when you are ready, you can come back to the bodily sensation, or let a new one choose you. Allow at least 10 minutes for this meditation.

(For further meditations involving the senses, see next chapter on “Active Meditation,” especially the section on “Mindful Eating”.)

Choicelessness: Opening to all Objects

One could spend a lifetime meditating on a single object, such as the breath, and by doing so learn to quiet the mind, and even enter profound states of concentration and absorption. But cultivating focus and one-pointed concentration is only one aspect of awareness. Another quality we can bring to our meditation—so useful in acting and in life—is *choicelessness*. Choiceless is cultivated in a type of meditation called *vipassana*, the kind of meditation practiced by Theravada Buddhist monks through Southeast Asia (including Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand). The western name for *vipassana* is Insight Meditation—which is where the name “Insight Improvisation” comes from. It is called Insight Meditation because the practice of *vipassana* can lead to insight into the nature of the body, the mind, and awareness itself.

Learning to meditate on the breath, and to open to the different sense doors, as we have already done, is a wonderful way to lay the ground work for *vipassana*. But now, instead of choosing the object of our meditation, we are going to let the objects choose us.

Practicing *Vipassana*

Arriving in the Meditation

Find a comfortable, quiet place to sit, back straight, head erect, and let yourself relax. Feel your bottom sink into the cushion or chair—let go into the pull of gravity. Be aware of your body, noticing any areas of tension or holding and letting them go. Become aware of the overall energy and feeling-tone of the body.

Notice your breath, without controlling it or changing it; just open to its quality right now. Throughout this meditation—if you find yourself distracted, or overwhelmed—you can return to your breath anytime and use it as a kind of anchor or touchstone.

Next, expanding your awareness, open up to the senses. It can be helpful to visit each of the six sense doors in turn for a minute or two, as a way to increase concentration while opening to different channels. Notice sounds, sights (even with your eyes closed you may notice colors, forms, and movement), smells, tastes (the taste of your empty mouth), as well as bodily sensations on the surface of and inside the body. Notice all of the senses without attaching particular names and stories to them.

Finally, become aware of mind objects—the sixth sense door. Notice thoughts, voices in the head, images in the mind. Notice them arise and pass away, without identifying with them. Mind objects, like all objects, are like trains passing by: as a meditator, my purpose is to observe the trains as they pass, not hop on board and be carried away.

Opening to Choiceless Awareness

Now let yourself open to *vipassana*: rather than consciously choosing what to pay attention to, instead notice whatever is arising in your field of awareness—whatever it is you are paying attention to (we are always paying attention to something). This may be a sound, a smell, a pain, an itch, a thought, an emotion, etc.

Your attention to the object may be fleeting—you may be drawn away after a moments by something else. Or you may find you are able to be with the object for a little while, noticing its more subtle details, and how it changes.

As you bring more sustained awareness, you may notice how everything in the field of awareness has a pattern of arising and passing away—also true of everything in life. The Buddha taught that everything in existence has this quality, which he called *anicca*—impermanence.

Notice each object arising; notice how each changes, if at all; and notice how each passes away.

Labeling

You may find at first that so many objects are arising in your field of awareness that it's a little hard to stay grounded or focused—you may feel lost. Two things can help: one is to return for a time to the breath, using it to anchor your the meditation; the other is to use labeling.

Earlier we introduced a limited form of labeling when we noticed thoughts arising, and we labeled them “thinking.” Now we can label everything that is arising: “body sensation,” “sound,” “smell,” “thought,” etc. Do not get too specific with the labeling, as that can lead to naming, which can lead to trying to figure things out or spin stories about them. However, it can sometimes be useful—as a way to help identify our patterns—to distinguish somewhat the kind of thinking going on, e.g.: “planning,” “judging,” “fantasizing.” Likewise, distinguishing particular emotions and labeling them can be useful: “sadness,” “restlessness,” “joy,” etc. Sometimes when I name a thought or emotion, I am freed from identifying with it, and can simply notice it and let it go.

Transitioning

If you are new to *vipassana*, meditate in this way for 10 minutes.

When you are ready, try a longer sit. You may notice that after some period of time sitting in meditation, the internal “noise” of your mind may begin to calm—like mud settling out of a pond that’s been disturbed—and you are able to sit with greater spaciousness and clarity.

When you are done, take your time to transition from the meditation. Notice your ability to return to these qualities of mindfulness and choicelessness as you proceed with your day.

Working with Aversion: Pain

As *vipassana* deepens as a practice, you may increasingly notice not only the objects arising in the field of awareness, but the nature of awareness itself. You may begin to notice your reaction to things—what sensations, thoughts, and feelings you like, and are attracted to, versus which you dislike and tend to ignore or push away.

One example: As I sit in meditation, I may notice a subtle pain in my stomach, one I’ve felt before. I may habitually move away from it, ignore it, or actively try to suppress the pain. I experience aversion toward the unpleasantness of the pain, which is natural; however, it is when I habitually and unconsciously act on that aversion that I suffer.

Or I may notice this habit and make a different choice: I become interested in the pain and allow my awareness to go there. I let myself really feel the pain for the very first time, to notice its intensity, its shape. Does it throb? Does it move or change as I pay attention to it? What thoughts arise, what fears, as I notice this sensation? What can I

learn by paying attention to it? Is it pain, after all, or something else? Rather than suffering, trying to distract myself, I am learning to sit with pain, with awareness.

A meditator learns that although pain is inevitable in life, suffering is optional. I always have the option to bring my awareness, to become curious about what is happening, to open to it, breathe with it, accept it, and relax. I am free to choose to let go of tension, struggle, and avoidance.

Ultimately, examining the subtleties of phenomena such as pain can lead to a deeper understanding of the third mark of existence—the concept of *anatta* or “no-self”. The Buddha taught that there is no actual “I”, “me”, or “mine”. If I take a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and take it apart—bread, peanut butter, jelly—where is the sandwich? “Sandwich” is just a term we use to label a temporary arrangement of ingredients. The same is true of a human being—if I clip off a toenail, is that “I”? If I were to be able to disassemble all the parts of the body, where is “me”? You might say “it’s your brain.” But if we take apart the brain, cell by cell, where is the self? It becomes clear that “I” is just a term we use to label this temporary arrangement of elements comprising the body.

The Buddha taught that our attachment to “I”, “me”, and “mine” is what causes us to suffer. As I examine the sensation of pain, rather than hold tightly to it as “my pain,” can I instead perceive it as a bodily sensation, approaching it with openness and curiosity, rather than aversion?

If I am dealing with a pain so great that I cannot relax and open to it—where I am overcome with tension—there are other choices I can make, with mindfulness: I can use “skillful distraction,” intentionally refocusing my awareness elsewhere in my body (or in another sense door) to alleviate the tension until I am ready to return to the original

sensation with greater ease; I can slowly, mindfully change my meditation position to help lessen the pain; or, if I am truly ill, I can seek medical attention.

Awareness of Awareness

Earlier we mentioned the cork versus the stone as metaphors for awareness. As you practice *vipassana*, you may notice that sometimes the attention moves quickly from object to object. Other times the pace is more slow or spacious, giving you the opportunity to be with and really notice the minute details of a particular body sensation, visual sense, emotion, etc.

Note that neither state is “better,” but we may tend to prefer the more spacious quality. This preference is itself a form of attachment, the recognition of which provides a new opportunity to notice grasping and aversion. Rather than be caught up in a pattern of reactivity, we can choose instead to accept what is happening, to let go.

What it Means to be Choiceless

We live in a world that is all about making choices—and they’d better be the right choices—and we’d better make them quickly! We live in a world where we must lead with the head. The body is left behind—it is an afterthought.

In this world ruled by the precision of computers, by data-driven methodologies, there is little room for ambiguity, the imprecision of emotions, the mysterious nature of bodily sensations, or the dark ocean that is the unconscious.

Practicing choicelessness is a countercultural act. In this moment I purposely step out of an orderly, logical, productive, scheduled, expected approach to life—and instead am a witness to all the strange and wonderful things arising and passing away, inside me and around me.

Choiceless is the improvisational actor who steps out onto the empty space of the stage—entering empty, letting go of her “good ideas”—and, opening her senses, takes a breath, and lets inspiration in.

To be choiceless is to be open, to be aware, to be free.

Lovingkindness

A third type of awareness, central to the ideas and approaches in Insight Improvisation, is lovingkindness, or *metta* in Pali.

Whereas mindfulness and choicelessness are practices of the mind, lovingkindness is a practice of the heart.

By meditating on lovingkindness, we are training ourselves to look at the world through a different lens, one that perceives the interconnectedness of all beings.

Practicing *Metta*

Traditionally, *metta* is practiced in three parts: sending lovingkindness to oneself, to another, and to all beings.

Also traditionally, certain *metta* phrases—see below—are used in the practice. Feel free to modify the language, or substitute your own phrases. What’s important is that you can say the words (in your own mind) with authenticity.

It is also important when practicing *metta* to be physically comfortable. Feel free to change your meditation posture at any time.

Sending Lovingkindness to Oneself

For many of us, the idea of sending love to oneself can immediately bring up resistance. (“Am I deserving of love? Shouldn’t I be focusing on others?”) Learning to love oneself, with an open and generous heart, is an essential life skill, the foundation for expressing love and caring for others.

When sending *metta* to oneself, one is both giver and receiver. The challenge of the practice is to send messages of *metta* authentically—to really mean them—as well as to receive the messages authentically, to really hear them and feel them. To do this, it can help to repeat each *metta* phrase several times, until you can really give and receive it authentically.

Take your time as you work with each phrase—if it helps, picture yourself in your mind’s eye or place your hands over your heart to better feel the warm intention of each phrase:

May I be well and happy.

May I be at ease in my body and in my mind.

May my heart be filled with lovingkindness—with love and kindness.

May I let go, and be free.

May I live in peace.

Once you are finished, take a couple of minutes to send any other messages of *metta* you would like to send to yourself today. Be creative: what is it you really need today? *May I relax, breathe, and feel deeply rested. May I dance for joy in the sun! May I be focused and happy in my work.* Or feel free to repeat any of the traditional phrases.

Note that *metta* is a form of concentration practice: we are bringing the mind back to these phrases, exercising the mind's ability to focus, to stay present. So if you find your mind wandering during the practice, treat it the same way as you would when meditating on the breath: without criticism or judgment, simply label it “thinking” and bring the mind back to the object of focus, in this case the current *metta* phrase.

Sending Lovingkindness to Another

The second phase of the *metta* practice is itself traditionally divided into three parts: sending lovingkindness to a loved one, a neutral person, and a challenging person.

If you are new to the *metta* practice, begin with someone who is easy to send lovingkindness to—a favorite relative, an admired teacher or mentor, etc. Later, when you grow more experienced with the practice, you can challenge yourself to send *metta* to individuals you have less natural warmth toward, or even to those you have aversion toward. (Sending *metta* to someone you have been angry at can be a rich and deeply

rewarding practice—often transforming the anger into greater understanding, or a desire for reconciliation or reconnection.)

Choose someone to send *metta* to and picture them in your mind's eye. As you send these messages of *metta* to them, picture that person accepting them with an open heart (you might picture that person smiling, for example). As before, you may wish to repeat each phrase in your mind several times to in order to put the authentic intention of lovingkindness into the words:

May you be well and happy.

May you be at ease in your body and in your mind.

May your heart be filled with lovingkindness—with love and kindness.

May you let go, and be free.

May you live in peace.

When done, take a moment to send any other messages of *metta* you would like to send to this person today. What do they really need?

Sending Lovingkindness to All Beings

The instruction to send *metta* to all beings, everywhere, may be daunting to some. Like all meditations, it is a training for the mind, in this case one that reorients us toward a larger purpose for being on the planet—moving us from a self-centered view to an interconnected one.

When practicing sending *metta* to all beings, it can be helpful to start small, to think locally. Picture those who share your home—family, roommates, pets, plants, etc.—and what it would mean to send them lovingkindness, an intention of caring.

Then let your awareness spread out to neighbors, to animals nearby, to residents in the surrounding town or city. Picture those in need: a single mother, the child of a troubled family, those who are elderly, or ill.

Let your awareness spread out over the land by sending *metta* to everyone in the state, the country—imagining all the people from all walks of life—those who are happy, those who are sad or depressed—those suffering from poverty, abuse, addiction, or attachment to material wealth.

Now let your awareness spread out over the oceans to other lands and picture those in developing countries, those suffering from hunger, disease, oppression—those living lives of stress, overcrowding, environmental degradation—and those who are happy, fulfilled, and at ease.

Picture all beings on the planet—the fish in the ocean, birds in the air, animals in forests and deserts—and people from every race, every culture. Imagine being able to send *metta* to each and every being.

Allow your mind to expand beyond this planet, out into the universe, sending lovingkindness to all beings, everywhere, wherever they exist.

As you repeat the following phrases in your mind, picture these individuals—see their faces. Imagine the effect a particular *metta* phrase would have on them. Picture them “well, and happy.” If they were “at ease in their body, and in their mind” would they smile, relax, feel differently about their life? If all beings hearts were filled with

lovingkindness, how would the world be different? Actively use your imagination as you send these messages of *metta*:

May all beings, everywhere, be well and happy.

May all beings be at ease in their bodies and in their minds.

May the hearts of all beings be filled with lovingkindness—with love and kindness.

May all beings, everywhere, let go, and be free.

May all beings live in peace—may there be peace, may there be peace, may there be peace.

Take a few moments to send any other messages of *metta* you'd like to send to all beings today.

Applying *Metta*: Working with Anger

Cultivating lovingkindness for ourselves, for those around us, and for all beings, is a radical shift from our habitual day-to-day orientation in this culture: to be highly self-critical, competitive with others, and to grasp tightly to our likes and dislikes.

One of my first experiences with *metta* was during my earliest months attempting to meditate on a daily basis. I had been practicing meditation on the breath, and was trying to concentrate one day when loud noises came from the ceiling directly overhead. I realized that my landlord, who owned the house and lived on the second floor above me,

was doing some kind of construction work in her apartment. I could not escape the noise without leaving, but being wintertime, I did not know where I could go to sit peacefully. I grew quite angry at her lack of consideration toward me, her tenant—why had she not warned me in advance?

My wife had made a little meditation spot for me with a statue of the Buddha sitting on a small table. I went to sit in front of the Buddha, and thought to myself, “what would the Buddha do in this situation?” I realized I was angry and thought about the *metta* practice I’d recently learned on retreat. I began to send *metta* to myself and started to calm down. Then I realized that the person I really needed to send *metta* to was my landlord. I pictured her in my mind’s eye—a middle-aged women, a visual artist, someone I did not know very well—and began the practice. As I wished her well and sent her lovingkindness, I began to grow sad. Tears filled my eyes. I realized my anger had so clenched my heart that I had stopped seeing her as a human being. Now, sending *metta*, I thought about what it must be like for her—living and working alone—and resolved that next time I saw her I would greet her nicely and speak with her.

When I did see her next, I found myself apologizing to her, for having been distant and unfriendly. I felt a great relief to connect with someone I was sharing a house with but rarely saw.

The Buddha recommended the practice of *metta* for those caught up in patterns of fear, or anger. When I concentrate on lovingkindness toward others, my self-centered view begins to dissolve—I begin to empathize and see a wider perspective.

What *Metta* is Made Of

The concept of *metta* comes from the Buddhist teaching of the four *Brahmavihāras*, or sublime states:

1. **Lovingkindness**—*the hope that all beings will be well*
2. **Compassion**—*the hope that all beings' sufferings will diminish*
3. **Empathetic joy**—*experiencing joy in the happiness and success of others*
4. **Equanimity**—*accepting success and failure with detachment, equally, and seeing all beings as equals*

Although the word “*metta*” specifically refers to the first quality, all four are considered to be part of the *metta* practice, and are reflected in the traditional *metta* phrases we used in the *metta* meditation earlier.

Putting It All Together: Structure and Timing of a Sit

The three types of meditation we have explored so far—*samadhi*, *vipassana*, and *metta*—are often best practiced together in a single session of meditation.

Arriving. After arriving in the meditation, taking a moment to notice my body and how I feel today, I often begin with words adapted from Tibetan teacher Sogyal Rinpoche. He writes (1993, pp. 59-60) of the practice of “good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end,” essentially starting and ending one’s meditation with a beneficial orientation, similar to the concept of *metta*:

By the power and the truth of this practice:

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.

May all beings be free from sorrow and the causes of sorrow.

May all never be separated from the sacred happiness which is sorrowless.

And may all live in equanimity, without too much attachment and without too much aversion—and live believing in the equality of all that lives.

Entering the heart of this practice, all is illusion, all is a dream. Resting in the rhythm of the breath, and in spacious, inclusive, choiceless awareness...

Focusing. Next I focus in on the *breath*, and stay with the breath for several minutes, deepening concentration and the quality of mindfulness through *samadhi*.

Opening. I then transition to *vipassana*, opening up to all the sense doors choicelessly, and—if helpful—labeling each sense door through which I am noticing an object moment by moment. I may stay in *vipassana* for a few minutes if I'm doing a short sit before starting a busy day, or with more time I may sit this way for 30 or 45 minutes.

Connecting. I always end my meditation practice with *metta*. On a busy day, this may take the form of a final phrase or two, sending lovingkindness to myself, my wife and children, and all beings—reminding myself of the kind of husband and father I would like to be as I arise from the meditation to help with breakfast and get the kids ready for school. On occasions that are more spacious, I may spend a significant amount of time, 15 minutes or more, doing the complete *metta* practice, using all the phrases, and

developing the ability to send *metta* in a focused, authentic way, to myself, to specific individuals—including those challenging to send *metta* to—and to all beings.

Addressing the Challenges of Meditation

Meditation is not easy! As a long-time meditator, I must often remind myself that the most difficult meditations are also the most valuable. We would all love for our meditations to always be smooth, easy, and peaceful, but if this were the case, what would we learn?

It's precisely those whose lives make it most difficult to meditate, who can most benefit from the practice. Parents whose lives are filled with child-rearing and work 24/7 need to find moments to decompress, reconnect with themselves, and return to a state of peace and nonreactivity. Those whose work is stressful and demanding can benefit from the practice, if they can carve out time to do it. And those suffering from illness, including anxiety and depression, can also be helped—if they are able to meditate, given the challenges of their emotional state.

Over the years, the following practices have helped me when meditation proves challenging:

Count breaths or label what's arising (body sensation, sound, thought, etc.) as ways to return to the present moment. Also, notice an attachment to the meditation going a certain way, and, through recognizing that attachment, relax and let it go. Then return to something simple like the breath.

Use a *gatha*. The Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh (1991) teaches small phrases—*gathas*—that can be used when meditating, or anytime, to help focus the mind, in concert with the breath. One example (p.10):

Breathing in, I calm my body.

Breathing out, I smile.

Dwelling in the present moment.

I know this is a wonderful moment!

His book, *Peace is Every Step*, offers other *gathas* for dealing with strong emotions, such as anger.

Do *metta* practice. Even when concentrating and being present have proven elusive, ending with lovingkindness meditation can help return one to a state of peace, happiness, and generosity.

Read books on meditation. Listen to talks given by experienced teachers (ideally, in person, but there are also hundreds of recorded talks available online). Their advice is not only helpful but can be inspirational, motivating one to continue and deepen one's practice.

Meditate with others and gain from the power of community. The Buddha often referred to the importance of the *sangha*, or group of fellow meditators. Try visiting a meditation center and taking a class or doing a group sit. Most cities also have informal groups that get together to meditate on a regular basis. If yours does not, start one!

Go on a meditation retreat. The best conditions for sustained meditation are usually found on retreat. To be able to live and meditate in silence with a committed group of people for a week, 10 days, or longer is a powerful opportunity for growth and

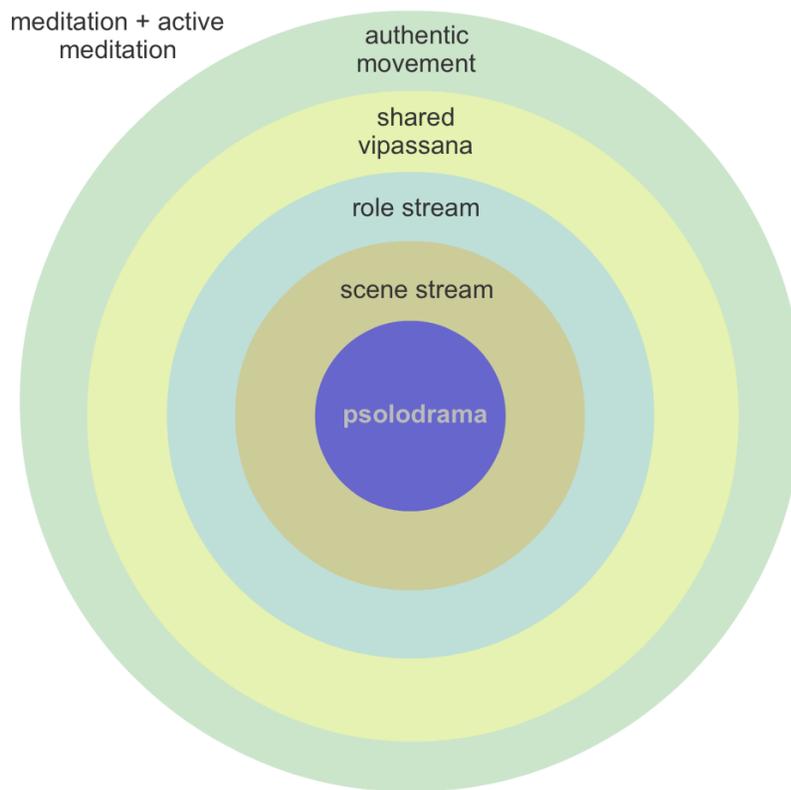
self-discovery, particularly when doing so with the guidance and support of skilled teachers. (See the end of this chapter for recommend reading, talks, and retreat centers.)

Summary and Where to Next

In this chapter we've looked at three types of awareness—mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness—and three kinds of meditation one can use to practice and develop them: *samadhi*, *vipassana*, and *metta*.

These three types of awareness are the foundation of Insight Improvisation. Each exercise we'll be exploring in the chapters that follow draws on their power, and every exercise continues the work of developing and strengthening our ability to be mindful, open, and caring.

Meditation is also the first step in a progression of activities outlined in this book as it expands from Part I (meditation and active meditation) through Part II (contemplative theater) into Part III (contemplative drama therapy) and thus progresses from meditation to the practice of psolodrama:



Before continuing your reading, if you are new to meditation, I encourage you to pause for a while and try some of the meditations in this chapter. No matter where you are or what you are doing right now, you can pause, close your eyes, and pay attention to your breath. Start with one breath. The rest will follow.

References

Mindfulness (2013) Oxford Dictionaries Online. Accessed on 1/27/13 at

<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mindfulness>.

Hanh, T. N. (1991). *Peace is every step*. New York: Bantam.

Rinpoche, S. (1993). *The Tibetan book of living and dying*. New York: Harper Collins.

Recommended Reading

Goldstein, J. & Kornfield, J. (1987). *Seeking the heart of wisdom: the path of insight meditation*. Boston: Shambhala.

A comprehensive introduction to *vipassana* meditation. Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield are founding teachers of the Insight Meditation movement in the West—each studied with many of the most prominent teachers in India and Southeast Asia.

Salzberg, S. (2010). *The force of kindness: Change your life with love and compassion*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.

An introduction to *metta* practice by another founding teacher of the Insight Meditation movement, Sharon Salzberg; includes a CD of guided meditations.

Other Resources

Dharma Seed — <http://www.dharmastream.org>

An extensive online library of recorded talks given by instructors in the Insight Meditation/Theravada Buddhist tradition, among them Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, Access to the most recent talks can be found here: <http://www.dharma.org/resources/audio>.

Goldstein, J. — “Buddhism: The Essential Points” — <http://bit.ly/joseph-essential>

A video of a dharma talk given by Joseph Goldstein in April, 2013, at the Vimalakirti Center in Geneva, Switzerland. This talk is a particularly good, succinct introduction to some of the core concepts of Buddhist philosophy.

Insight Meditation Society — <http://www.dharma.org>

The website of IMS, in Barre, Massachusetts, the original retreat center for Insight Meditation in the US. Also recommended are its sister centers Spirit Rock (in Woodacre, CA), and CIMC (in Cambridge, MA). Other centers can be found here: <http://www.buddhanet.net/medlinks.htm>.

Active Meditation

A monk, seeking enlightenment, goes to a cave high up in the mountains, and stays there for several years, practicing meditation. One day, feeling ready, he leaves his cave and walks down the mountain toward the village below. On the way into the village, a shepherd walking past on the narrow mountain path accidentally bumps into him. The monk instantaneously reacts with anger. Realizing what he has done, the monk pauses, turns around, and begins the long, slow climb back up the mountain.

Living One's Practice

Sitting meditation is one way to meditate. It can be a powerful training in learning to be with all kinds of sensations, thoughts, and emotions—to learn how not to be reactive when faced with something difficult or unpleasant. It is a wonderful way to cultivate acceptance.

But in real life we are not always sitting—we are moving, speaking, doing. Life is filled with activity and interaction. For meditators, it can be challenging to bridge the gap between sitting on the meditation cushion and bringing those insights into daily life.

It is useful, therefore, to also have forms of meditation that are active, that involve the body and the voice, both individually and in relation to others. Many eastern traditions can be seen as forms of active meditation: yoga, tai chi, and martial arts are just

a few of the myriad practices that cultivate qualities of awareness and mindfulness while in action.

Insight Improvisation itself is a system of active meditations, an attempt to bridge the gap between the meditation cushion and daily life with improvisation and creative self-expression as the path.

What follows are some basic forms of active meditation. Each is a simple practice that can also reveal surprising depths, given sufficient time for exploration. Before trying one of these practices, you may wish to begin with some sitting meditation, as a way to arrive and be present to the body and the senses. It is also good to try these practices with others; invite a friend to join you in an empty space and experiment...!

Active Meditations in this Chapter			
Individual	Walking Meditation	Movement Meditation	Mindful Eating
Partner	Mindful Massage	Metta Dialogue	

Walking Meditation

Walking as a form of meditation likely dates back to before the time of the Buddha. Different approaches have developed over the ages. Here are two:

Walking Up and Down

Choose a quiet, unobstructed place to walk, roughly 20-30 feet in length, indoors or outdoors (a secluded spot is best). If you are comfortable doing so, try this barefoot.

Begin by standing quietly, in a relaxed stance, feet below your hip sockets. Notice how the weight is distributed on your feet. To become more aware of this, you can on purpose shift your weight to your toes, then to the right side of each foot, then to your heels, then to the left side, and back to toes. Continue shifting the weight in circles like this, but make the circles smaller, until you find yourself perfectly evenly balanced on your feet. Try it in the other direction, too.

Allow your awareness to enter the bottoms of your feet. Notice the sensation of contact with the ground. Throughout this meditation, let the bottoms of your feet be your main focus. If you find yourself thinking or distracted at any point, return to noticing the sensation of touch in your toes and the soles of your feet.

Slowly shift your weight onto your left foot. Notice how the sensations in the bottoms of the feet have changed. Then, in slow motion, lift your right foot off the ground. (How does that feel? Have you stopped breathing? Notice the interplay of tension and relaxation in the body.) Then move your right foot forward in space, still noticing the sensations in both your feet. Then, slowly, bit by bit, place your right foot on the ground. Notice what has changed. Then, repeat the sequence—shift, lift, move, place—with the other foot, as slowly as you can, noticing the sensations in the feet.

Although the attention in this meditation is primarily on the bottoms of the feet, it can be helpful now and then during the meditation to broaden the awareness to include the whole body, the breath, how one feels, etc. I have often noticed the pure pleasure of

taking a single barefoot step on a wooden floor or carpet—opening up to the body, opening all the senses, and feeling a sense of release and ease within me.

Continue in this manner until you reach the end of your walking path. Pause, and then slowly turn around. Pause for a few breaths—you can close your eyes, if you like—just being aware of standing, relaxing, and noticing the sensation in the bottoms of the feet. Then begin walking anew.

Try this meditation for 10-20 minutes. On some occasions you may find that it works better to begin this kind of walking meditation by moving a bit more rapidly, and then gradually slowing down—the body will tend to find its own pace if you let it. However, if you find yourself walking rapidly for several minutes, see what happens if you intentionally slow down. Notice how the quality of awareness changes in relation to the speed of walking.

Beginner's Feet

If this meditation begins to feel dry and repetitive, remember that walking meditation (like all the activities in this book) is a form of improvisation: every moment can be looked upon as spontaneous and new. What's needed is to bring *beginner's mind*—if I notice I am bored or feeling jaded (“been there, done that”)—to ask the question “what if this were my first time doing this?”

When I bring beginner's mind (or in this case, beginner's feet!), I begin to notice things I have been ignoring—the texture of the floor, the interplay of muscles, bones, tendons and ligaments in my feet, the sounds of each footstep, how my body shifts its balance with each step, etc.

Strengthening my ability to see each moment anew, through meditation and walking meditation, helps me apply that skill to my daily life. The next time I notice my aversion to a “boring” task, I can choose to see what’s new about it, bringing my creativity and spontaneity into play and shifting my relationship to the task from one of suffering to one of engagement.

Walking Around

Thich Nhat Hanh teaches a different kind of walking meditation (1996), one that can be practiced anytime.

While walking around, or to a destination, become aware of your walking while maintaining your normal walking pace. (If you find that you naturally slow down when bringing awareness to your walking, that’s fine, too.)

Notice the relationship between your walking and your breath. Now try this: synchronize your breath to your steps, e.g. four steps for an in-breath, five for an out-breath.

Then add a *gatha*—a phrase repeated internally, in rhythm with the breath, to help focus the mind on its task. One good one to use is “Arriving home,” a reminder to ourselves that with each breath, with each step, we arrive home in this very moment—we do not need to wait until we reach our destination to feel at home.

On the in-breath, with each of the next four steps, repeat the first word of the *gatha* in your mind:

Arriving, arriving, arriving, arriving.

Then, on the out-breath, with each of the next five steps, repeat the second word:

Home, home, home, home, home.

(You can adjust the number of steps/repetitions to fit your walking speed and the length of your in and out breaths.)

Try this for five or ten minutes. Anytime you like, feel free to let go of the *gatha*, let go of counting steps, and just walk. Open to how you feel, and to what is around you. Notice a flower, a puddle, the sounds of birds, a street sign, the sky, a human face. Smile! You are alive.

Walking While Suffering

The purpose of walking meditation is to bring the mind back to the present moment while walking. This is different from what we usually do, which is either to distract ourselves with phone conversations, music, or podcasts, or to be lost in thought: planning, worrying, comparing, judging, fantasizing, etc.

There is nothing wrong with joyfully walking while listening to something, or to be happily planning the next day while taking an evening stroll. What's interesting to notice when walking is, am I happy or am I causing myself suffering? If my behavior is habitual, motivated by aversion (e.g. listening to a podcast automatically just to avoid being bored) or if for the hundredth time I'm kicking myself for something I shouldn't have said, or thinking of someone else repeatedly with resentment, can I notice my pattern and make a different choice?

When I practice walking meditation, I realize how much suffering I can cause just with my mind. By returning to the present—to the sensations in my feet, to the trees, flowers, sidewalk, insects buzzing, and people around me—I can begin to detach from

my habits and see thoughts as only thoughts, not reality. I breathe, relax, and feel a new sense of spaciousness. I can begin to let go of suffering.

Movement Meditation

Inspired by walking meditation, movement meditation is a practice of becoming aware of the whole body in space and time.

Begin in stillness, eyes open, simply noticing how the body feels, and letting go of any tension or holding that you are aware of. (We tend to hold tension in the jaw, the shoulders, and the belly. Breathe into these areas and let them release on the out breath.)

When you are ready, begin to move very slowly in whatever way your body feels like moving—neither plan nor censor the movement. Sense each molecule of your movement, the tiniest sensations of skin, tendon, muscle, and bone interacting. Notice the feeling of contact with your clothing, with the floor, with yourself. Notice how you are affected by gravity, by balance, by the changing nature of tension and relaxation in the body. As you move, let your gaze be fluid—do not become fixed on one spot.

Continue to move as if in slow motion like an astronaut on a space walk or as you might move through a thick or viscous liquid. Let the movement be a deepening journey into the nature of this moment. Open up to all the senses: touch, hearing, smell, taste, sight. Notice the colors and textures in the room. If you find yourself thinking—including planning or controlling the movement (“wouldn’t it be clever if I did *this* right now...?”)—just return to stillness. Breathe, relax, and then start moving again. If it’s your first time, try this for five minutes (set a timer if possible so you don’t need to consult a clock).

One variation on movement meditation, which is fun to try with a group, is to speed up the movement gradually, while seeing if you can maintain the sense of mindfulness you have discovered. Let the movement evolve into your “Dance of the Day”—a dance that is completely alive, dynamic, and filled with present-moment awareness, all at once. Greet others in your dance, opening to moments of eye contact and physical contact. Smile and breathe! Feel free to add music and let your dance be a celebration.

Nowhere to Go

What happens when I let go of my agenda—the mind that is constantly planning what I need to do next in my day, my week, my life—and pay attention to my body, to follow the body’s intuition?

No longer slave to an intention, the body is free to be who/what it is; it can sense, feel, and express. My movement—usually quite ordered and precise when walking here and there, typing, handling objects I need in order to work, eat, etc.—now may become slow, mysterious, poetic, unexpected. As I open the sense doors, and open to how I feel, I may be surprised at how much I can notice moment by moment.

Going “no where,” I begin to discover that I am “now here.”

(For more on mindful forms of movement, see the next chapter, “Authentic Movement.” For moving mindfully with a partner, see the chapter “The Three States.”)

Mindful Eating

Along with walking and moving, one can think of many activities that we do fairly habitually in a given day that might benefit from the addition of mindful awareness.

Typically when we eat we are anything *but* present. We are either talking with someone, reading a magazine, or planning our day or evening in our head. In some households the television is on during mealtimes, or members of the family are texting or playing games on their devices. With all of these distractions, the concept of slowing down to taste the food is radical.

When we eat, we can be mindful not only of smell and taste but of all the senses, as well as the thoughts and feelings that arise. Try this the next time you are eating alone (or try this practice with a friend):

Before lifting your fork, sit with your plate of food before you, seeing and smelling what is there. Notice also how you feel, what your emotions and impulses are. We have a powerful set of habitual responses when we are hungry and there is food in front of us.

Then, slowly, take some food on the fork, and bring it near your nose to get a better smell. Notice the nuances of the smell. You may be able to notice individual ingredients of the dish. You may wish to close your eyes to focus in. Without taking a bite, touch your lips, and then tongue, to the food. What can you sense, and taste?

Then, slowly, place the food in your mouth. Without chewing yet, put your fork down and focus on what taste and texture come through with the food simply resting in your mouth.

Begin to chew, slowly, and pay close attention to what is happening—the changes in taste, as well as the variety of bodily sensations and even sounds occurring in the mouth.

Once you have chewed 40 times (a number recommended by Thich Nhat Hanh to help encourage mindfulness and proper digestion), swallow while carefully noticing the sensation of swallowing. Can you be mindful of the food as it travels down your esophagus?

Pause and allow yourself to completely relax before picking up your fork again. Notice what happens in the mouth, body, and mind between bites.

Eating a Retreat

One of my favorite places to go on meditation retreat is the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts. Not only are the conditions beneficial for meditation, and the teachers excellent, but the food is vegetarian and delicious!

The deliciousness of the food, however, presents a challenge to meditators: can I be present to the food, rather than be overcome by hunger, habit, and greed?

The struggle begins even before the lunch bell rings. Some eager retreatants linger in the hallway outside the dining hall to get a good place in line. On occasion, out of sheer hunger or boredom (in the midst of an 8-day silent retreat), I have done this. Oh, the suffering! Pretending to be looking at a bulletin board when everyone around knows we are all succumbing to our desire to be one of the first in line.

At the food service table, I load my plate and my bowl with too much food. It has been many hours since breakfast and my eyes are much bigger than my stomach. And I

know that dinner will only be a light snack of tea, crackers, and fruit. So this is it! I take more, my plate piling higher and higher.

Sitting at the table, I try to calm down. I slowly arrange my plate, napkin, and silverware, and place my hands in my lap. I close my eyes and send *metta* to all beings. Then, attempting to move slowly, I lift my fork, lower it into my salad bowl, and retrieve one piece of lettuce. I lift it toward my face. I smell it. I open my mouth and taste the Hollyhock dressing, the green leaf. I attempt to chew slowly, but it's a losing battle. I am SO hungry. And this salad is suddenly the best food on earth.

As I struggle to eat mindfully and not rush, I begin to see the humor in this. In trying to force myself to break my habits and slow down, I am creating more suffering! What if I "just eat" at a more normal pace, but mindfully, staying present to what I'm doing? Can I acknowledge my hungry, greedy, child-self, and let it eat? Can I forgive myself?

Yes. I stop and take a breath. My shoulders drop, my body relaxes. I stretch, smile, and return to eating—a happier person and more present than before. Now I can fully enjoy this meal.

May all beings, everywhere, fully enjoy their meals!

Mindful Massage

Physical contact with another adds a new dimension to active meditation. Touch has the power to bring us back to the present moment, as well as to communicate a sense of lovingkindness and caring. Both the giver and the receiver of the touch can benefit, experiencing a renewed sense of peace, relaxation, and connection.

The intention in mindful massage is different from typical massage. The Giver is not trying to relieve the other's pain or tension, although if that happens as a by-product of the exercise, that's fine. For both partners, mindful massage is a meditation.

The Basic Exercise

With a partner, choose who will be the Giver and who will be the Receiver first. The Receiver lies on the floor, on his belly (or back). It is best to be comfortable, so feel free to use cushions, blankets, etc. The Giver can begin by sitting to one side of her partner, facing him. (*Author's note: In order to maintain a balance of genders in the examples in this book, I've tried to vary their usage.*)

Both partners start with meditative awareness: with eyes closed, each takes a few moments to become aware of his/her body—by breathing and feeling how he/she feels right now—and to fully relax.

Throughout the exercise, the Receiver meditates, practicing *vipassana*, opening to all his sense doors, noticing how he reacts to what is pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, and accepting each experience with equanimity.

The Giver begins to focus on the sensations in her hands. Her hands may be resting on her knees, or folded in her lap. As she sends her awareness there, she begins to notice the subtle aspects of touch—temperature, texture, pressure, movement, etc.—in her fingers and palms. Slowly she lifts her hands and very gently brings them together in front of her, being aware of each bit of sensation. She rubs her hands together slowly, mindfully, noticing all aspects of the touch.

Then, with eyes open a little bit, the Giver lowers her hands toward her partner's back, not yet touching him, but just letting her hands hover a few millimeters above.

Once again, she brings her awareness into her hands, noticing the warmth from her partner's back, and noticing her own thoughts and feelings, as she is about to make physical contact. This is a good moment to remember to relax and breathe, and also a good moment to send *metta* to oneself and to the other.

As the Giver lowers her hands slowly, she makes contact with her partner's back. She lets her hands rest there, in stillness, noticing the contact, the warmth, and listening deeply with her hands to what is being communicated. She may notice the texture of his clothes or skin, the movement of his breath, relaxing or tensing of muscles, and other sensations. She remains still for several breaths, simply noticing.

Slowly, the Giver begins to follow the movement impulses of her hands. Relaxing, letting go, and closing her eyes if that helps, the Giver follows what her hands want to do. As in movement meditation, the Giver does not plan or control her movements with her mind. Instead, she allows her hands to move, to touch, to apply pressure, to rest in stillness, etc., however they wish.

This part of the mindful massage can last for five to ten minutes or longer. (To give each partner equal time, have a clock handy or set a timer in advance.) The Receiver practices *vipassana* throughout, noticing not only the sensation of the Giver's hands—their touch, warmth, pressure, rhythm, etc.—but also remaining open to all channels: sounds, thoughts, other bodily sensations, emotions, etc.

The Giver ends the session by retracing her steps. She takes a moment in stillness with her hands on her partner's back, just feeling what is there to be felt. Then, she lets her hands hover slightly above his back, noticing the separation, but still aware of the warmth and connection with her partner. Next she slowly brings her own two hands

together in front of her chest, gently rubbing them and noticing the quality of contact with herself. Finally, she lets her hands rest once again on her legs or in her lap, and redirects her awareness from her hands to her whole body—relaxing, breathing, and noticing how she feels.

After this moment of stillness and silence, the two partners can thank one another, share their experience for a few minutes verbally, and then reverse roles.

Nothing to Do

Mindful massage is a form of meditation in that it is training us to be fully present and aware, and by doing so to notice our habits and what triggers them, and to slow down and open to a different choice.

As with many Insight Improvisation activities, it can be helpful to keep the eyes closed during mindful massage, particularly as the Giver.

When my eyes are open, I see something and can make assumptions, leaping to doing/fixing/completing something because I see it. I may see the Receiver's shoulder and think: "that looks tense, I should squeeze it." I may worry about symmetry or completeness: "I massaged that calf, now I must do the other one." These are examples of reactivity.

When I close my eyes, however, I'm left with the bare experience of the Receiver's skin, muscle, and bone and what they are communicating through my skin, nerves, muscle, and bone. With eyes closed, I enter the present moment, in which there is only sensation. My attention is completely in my hands, palms, fingertips. I relax and breathe with the other. I may remain still for a long time, "listening" with my hands. I

am improvising, trusting that the contact itself communicates warmth and connection. I do not need to *do* anything.

As the Giver, I, too, am a receiver.

No One to Be

Something else one may notice in mindful massage is a feeling of responsibility toward the Receiver, of seeking their approval. “Do they like how I am touching them? Is it OK to touch here? Is my touch too firm, too soft?” Etc. This can be a pervasive habit and can influence us without our knowing it.

The playwright and teacher Jean-Claude van Itallie refers to this as “giving away one’s center.” For actors, it’s the tendency to be thinking about what the audience might be thinking, rather than to be centered, grounded, and focused on what’s actually happening now.

As the Giver, I need to come back to the object of the meditation, which is the sensation in my hands. If I am finding it difficult to focus, I can use one hand, or even one fingertip, and put all my awareness there. As thoughts arise, as they do in any meditation, I can label them “thinking,” and return to the object of the meditation. If I notice I am worried about what the Receiver is thinking, the worry is a thought that I can label as “thinking” or “projecting,” and return to the sensation in my hand. Bit by bit, I am training the mind to return to this moment, to remain centered and focused, even in the face of the strong pull of habit. Eventually concerns about the other drop away and I reenter the flow of the meditation.

When I let go of needing the other’s approval, in some unconscious, unspoken way this may also free the other, as they are no longer responsible for giving their

approval. They, too, can just be present to the unfolding exploration, receiving whatever arises—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—moment by moment.

(See also variations on mindful massage which appear later in this book, in the chapters “Further Exploration with Meditation” and “Working with Groups.”)

Metta Dialogue

In the same way we have added movement and touch to meditation, we can also add speech. Speaking aloud while engaged in mindful awareness can be a powerful practice, which is explored in depth in many of the exercises in this book (*see the chapter on “Shared Vipassana” as well as Part III, which focuses on psolodrama*).

Let’s start simply with a spoken version of the *metta* meditation we learned in the last chapter. Metta dialogue is a wonderful exercise for couples, for use in workshops, and can be adapted for use with children.

Basic Instructions

With a partner, sit facing one another. Some enjoy doing this exercise while in contact with their partner, for example, holding hands. If you’re unsure of what your partner is OK with, ask. And feel free to change your sitting position during the exercise; it is important to remain comfortable when doing *metta* practice.

Close your eyes, and take a minute to be aware of the body, the breath, and how you feel. (Alternatively, you can set a timer to begin with a short meditation, if you like.) Next, very slowly, begin to open your eyes just a little, so you are seeing your partner’s legs or body. Slowly scan up their body as you open your eyes in slow motion, opening

the visual sense to notice every detail of color, form, and movement. See their face, and their hair, without making eye contact yet, taking in the visual details of the person sitting before you.

When you are ready, make eye contact with one another. Notice what this is like, taking a moment to be mindful of the effect of the eye contact. How do you feel? Has your breathing changed? Notice any tendency you may have to change your facial expression or to become tense as you connect. During this exercise it can be helpful to remind yourself to breathe and relax.

When either partner is ready, they can speak aloud, sending a message of *metta* to the other person. Feel free to use a traditional *metta* phrase, or, seeing/sensing what this other person might need, create your own phrase:

May you be happy and relaxed.

The other person responds by taking this in, repeating the phrase with “I”. It can be helpful to use gestures—e.g., putting your hands over your heart—when receiving/repeating the phrase in order to feel it deeply:

May I be happy and relaxed.

Then, together, both partners send the phrase to all beings. It helps to use gestures to physically express the intention of sending the message to everyone in the universe, for example, by spreading out the arms widely:

May all beings, everywhere, be happy and relaxed.

The partners take a moment to breathe, relax, and return to eye contact. Then it is the other person’s turn to send a message of *metta* to their partner. As in individual *metta*

meditation, remember that this practice is a form of improvisation—creativity and spontaneity are invited and add to the exercise. For example:

May you dance for joy in the sun!

The other responds:

May I dance for joy in the sun!

And both say:

May all beings, everywhere, dance for joy in the sun!

Etc.

The exercise continues for several minutes. If you use a timer, you can set it for seven minutes or so. Or, agree beforehand that either partner can say “one more round” at any time, signaling that each person will get to send one more *metta* message to the other before ending.

When done, take a moment once again with eyes closed to return to the body and the breath. Notice how you feel right now. Afterward, feel free to discuss with your partner your experience of the exercise.

Metta with Small Children

My four-and-a-half-year-old daughter Jasmine enjoys *metta* practice. When she was very small, I made it a little ritual to send *metta* to all beings before meals—including the wish that all beings have plenty to eat. Jasmine liked that practice and joined in for many months—I would pause and let her fill in the end of each line—but eventually I found she was doing it by rote or making fun of the practice, so I dropped it.

A few months ago, putting Jasmine to sleep, I recalled a story the Buddhist teacher Greg Kramer told of using *metta* with his boys at bedtime. After reading her a

story, I asked Jasmine, “would you like to say *metta*?” She said yes. I asked her whom she would like to send *metta* to—“you can send *metta* to 3 people, and then we’ll send it to all beings.” She asked to send *metta* to herself first, then to her mommy, and then to her brother.

As this nightly ritual has grown, Jasmine has sometimes joined in, adding messages of *metta* that I might forget to say. One night she added “...and may all beings be free from suffering, Daddy, don’t forget!”

Our ritual ends with these lines:

May all beings, everywhere, sleep well and have good dreams.

***May all beings wake up the next morning happy, refreshed, and ready for a
new day!***

And then Jasmine closes her eyes, hugs her lovey (a stuffed poodle she has named Love Dog), and we spend a minute in silence together, focusing on our breathing. Then I kiss her on the forehead, say goodnight, and slip quietly out the door.

(For more active meditation ideas, see the chapter “Further Exploration with Meditation.”)

References

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Authentic Movement

From moving witness to witness, from sensing a mover with eyes closed to seeing a mover with eyes open, each individual enters the next place of practice and study within the development of embodied consciousness. The mover chooses to become a witness.

— Janet Adler (2002, p.61)

Being Moved

Authentic movement is opening to being moved.

In traditional dance or improvised movement, the mind is usually in control—“I need to take this step now” or “Wouldn’t it be neat if I did *this*...” There is nothing wrong with this approach. However, it tends to reflect how we run the rest of our lives, with the mind firmly in command, the body following.

In authentic movement, we ask the question, “What does the *body* need right now?” We close our eyes, pause, breathe, listen, and open to natural movement impulse. We follow that impulse. The movement that results is not planned, not controlled. It at first seems to be accidental movement, random or chance. But as we follow it, as we notice how it feels to move completely freely with no agenda, the unexpected happens: we begin to feel things. Our senses open. Imagery arises. We may find ourselves entering unexpected worlds of texture, motion, rhythm, raw emotion, metaphor, character, story, dream... Authentic movement opens the door to a journey into our own depths.

The practice of authentic movement was originally developed by dance/movement therapist Mary Whitehouse in the 1950s, and further refined by Janet Adler, Joan Chodorow, and others. I first learned of it in the mid-nineties from playwright Jean-Claude van Itallie, and went on to practice with a men's authentic movement group led by Tom Webb and others. Over the years, as Insight Improvisation has developed, authentic movement has become a central practice and a foundation for the work, upon which other techniques, such as psolodrama, have been built.

Authentic movement is a practice that promotes healing and creativity. In a therapy context it is a vehicle for an embodied exploration of active imagination, with the client as the mover and the therapist the witness. It also serves artists—dancers, writers, painters, actors, and others—as a practice for sourcing their work.

This chapter is written mainly from the point of view of working with a peer, or in a movement group, and provides an introduction to the basic principles of authentic movement as well as techniques, variations, and additional approaches one can incorporate into the practice.

Ultimately, as with any discipline, authentic movement is best learned in person from a teacher experienced in the form. In particular, learning to be a good witness—nonjudgmental, present, and capable of speaking in ways that acknowledge and own projection—requires training and modeling from an experienced witness.

(Authentic movement is described in greater depth in a number of publications. Please see the end of this chapter for recommended reading and other resources. For more on the use of authentic movement and other techniques from this book in a therapy

context, see Part IV, “Insight Improvisation in the World—Working with Individuals and Groups.”)

Authentic Movement		
Basics	Techniques & Variations	Other Approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>The Mover</i> ▪ <i>The Witness</i> ▪ <i>Sharing</i> ▪ <i>The Container</i> ▪ <i>Pointers</i> ▪ <i>Ongoing Practice / The Inner Witness</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Drawing and Writing</i> ▪ <i>Active Witnessing</i> ▪ <i>Moving in Response</i> ▪ <i>Rotating Witness</i> ▪ <i>Open Circle</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Image-Story-Image</i> ▪ <i>The Lenses of Awareness</i> ▪ <i>Moving Alone and Together</i>

Basics

The simplest form of authentic movement involves two roles, mover and witness. Both are considered equally important. When one is first learning about the form, the role of the mover seems most important, but, over time, witnessing develops into a rich and fulfilling role in itself. As one develops as a witness one learns more about one’s own inner witness, and deepens one’s understanding of the role of mover.

When working one-to-one with a peer, the two may choose to begin with a verbal check-in and a warm-up, which may include meditation, yoga or stretching, and/or improvisational dance (with music or in silence). They then decide who will move first and who will witness.

Typically the mover moves for a set period of time—say, 20 minutes (this can vary depending on the participants, the available time, and the goals of the work)—while the witness sits to one side and observes. At the end of the agreed-upon time, the witness signals the ending, either by sounding a bell, or by saying something like: “Slowly, in your own time, begin to bring your movement to a close.”

Then the two meet, sit facing one another, and the mover is invited to talk about what he experienced while moving. Then if the mover wishes, the witness will speak, in support of the mover, about her experience of the mover’s movement. Usually, if there is time, the two then switch roles, so each has a chance to move and to witness.

That’s the process in a nutshell. Let’s look at the two roles in greater detail...

The Role of the Mover

The mover enters the space and, before beginning his authentic movement, finds a place and position to start. He can pick whatever feels comfortable or “right” to him in that moment—sitting, standing, lying down, crouching, being on all fours, etc.

Then he closes his eyes and takes a moment of stillness, to relax, breathe, and listen to his body—to be mindful of what sensations are present, and to become aware of his own emotional state, mood, or energy. Stillness also allows the mover to tune into the subtle movement, or potential movement, that is already present in the body

It is good to notice the movement—or lack of movement—that is already there, not to try to change it, or control it, but to just accept it. For example, the mover may notice that he is breathing in a certain way, that his chest is moving up and down. He may notice that he is chewing his tongue. Authentic movement is about listening to bodily impulses, not censoring in any way.

Through this process of opening to the body, and to the senses, the entire organism can begin to express itself. The mover can begin to follow his body, opening to what the body needs or wants, opening to moment-by-moment impulse.

Often this impulse looks nothing like “dance”. From the outside, one might at first see a mover, who starts in a standing position or on all fours, slowly relax the body and collapse to the floor. The mover is not concerned with entertaining the witness or finding interesting ways to move. Instead, the mover allows his mind to be a witness to the body—to listen to its impulses and open to them no matter where they lead. The mover’s intention is to let go, to let the body take over, to let himself “be moved.”

In practice this may mean that the mover sometimes experiences periods of stillness as well as passages of rapid, active movement, even running around the space. The mover cannot anticipate ahead of time what the body will need. (*Note: the mover is encouraged to open his eyes slightly when moving through the space in order to avoid collisions. It is important to be clear that the mover is responsible for his own safety, as well as the safety of people and objects in the space.*)

As the mover opens to the body, he may find that his body position or movement has a certain quality—a particular stance, gesture, movement pattern, rhythm, etc.—which evokes an emotion or brings to mind an image, or a memory from his life, with its associated feelings. The mover can consciously choose to follow that emotion, memory, or image and stay with that movement a little while and see what arises. Or he can choose at anytime to let it go, relax, and pay close attention to the body once again, its stillness or its movement, and follow pure bodily impulse.

In this way, authentic movement is a dance with oneself: a dance between the body—with all its cellular complexity, sensations, wounds, stored feelings and memories—and the mind, which observes the body, makes meaning, relates physical reality to stored memories and images, and participates in the experiencing and interpretation of emotions.

The observing aspect of the mind is a form of witness—an “inner witness” which can notice the body, emotions, thoughts, memories. The development of one’s inner witness over time is a measure of progress on the path of authentic movement, as it is in meditation. In addition to moving in the presence of a supportive witness, another way to develop our own inner witness is through witnessing others move.

The Role of the Witness

The role of the witness is to observe the mover, and afterwards, if invited, to reflect back what she has seen.

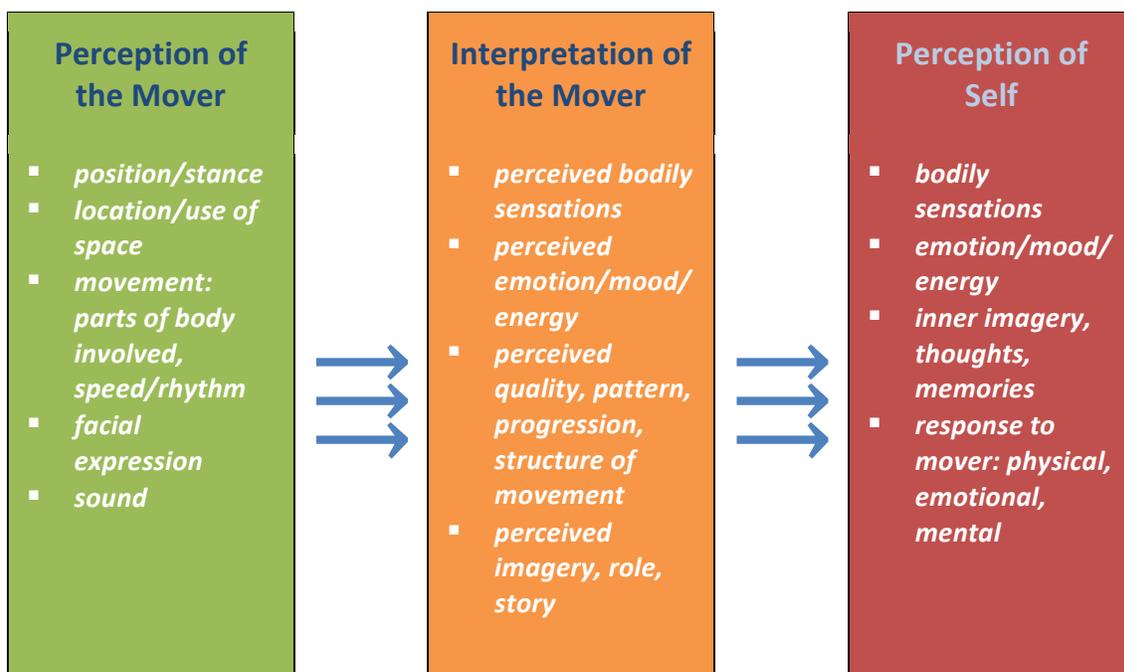
The ideal witness is fully present, in service of the mover, with an open heart and free of judgment. (This description extends to all witnessing/audiencing in Insight Improvisation, but it originates from the practice of witnessing authentic movement.) These fundamental aspects of witnessing are parallel to the three types of awareness that form the foundation of Insight Improvisation: mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness.

Mindfulness. The witness is present, continually noticing what is happening in this moment, and bringing her mind back to the object of attention, the mover. Not only does this mean bringing the focus back to the mover whenever the mind has strayed, it

also means that if the witness is drowsy or distracted, she needs to exert more energy in order to stay focused and alert.

Choicelessness. The witness is open, aware of all the sense doors, including mind objects. As she observes, she discerns what is pure sensation—e.g. the sight of the mover’s leg or face, or the sound of their hand slapping the floor—versus what thoughts or feelings those sensations are triggering in her own mind and body, including her interpretations of what the mover is doing. She also notices her own state, how her body feels, other sounds in the room, etc.

Witnessing Authentic Movement: What the Witness is Aware of



One of my teachers, the dance/movement and drama therapist Penny Lewis, often referred to “somatic countertransference”—the ability of the therapist to feel in her body a reaction or response to the client’s feelings toward her. The witness in authentic

movement may experience something similar: she may feel in her body sensations that are a reaction or response to what the mover is doing, or feeling. This physical awareness can help the witness intuit more deeply the mover's inner experience. However, it is equally important that the witness recognize she can never know for sure the inner experience of the mover—any thoughts or feelings she has about him are projections.

Lovingkindness. The witness is **caring**, bringing a nonjudgmental, supportive attitude toward the mover, allowing her heart and mind to open with authentic curiosity and interest in what the mover is experiencing.

Practicing Awareness of Oneself. It is important for the witness to notice her own attitude, and work with it during the movement, in the same way that a meditator works with their state of mind.

For example, as witness, if I find during the movement that I am tired, or bored, or restless, can I notice these thoughts and feelings, and remind myself of my intention: to bring mindfulness, openness, and lovingkindness to the way I am witnessing—to be here to support the mover and serve as a container for the movement. My attentiveness is actively helping the mover, I remind myself, and it is important I not miss any detail. I bring myself back to this moment, back to the mover's body, the physical reality of what is happening now, as well as the images and emotions it is evoking in me.

I might ask myself: why is it I'm tuning out in this moment? Is there something in the way the mover is moving that is making me uncomfortable, creating an experience of aversion or avoidance in me? Is there some feeling, some emotion, that I am avoiding? By working with my own mind as the witness, I learn not only to be a

better witness and serve the mover, but also how to alleviate my own suffering in the process.

Empathy is central to being a good witness. If I can put myself in the mover's place, imagine how he feels, I can begin to imaginatively enter the process and fully engage with it. Then when it is time to share, I can speak from a place of feeling and connection, rather than purely objective description.

Sharing

Once the mover has finished and come to stillness, he goes and sits with the witness, and the two may share their experience.

In traditional authentic movement, the mover speaks first. This is because the mover's experience is considered primary; the witness's sharing is in service of the mover. Often some confusion or misinterpretation or mystery that the witness may have had during the movement is clarified or corrected when the mover speaks first.

When the mover shares, he can say anything about his experience of moving. Usually his intention is to express his internal experience of the movement, as a way to reflect on and deepen the impact and meaning of the work. The mover may begin with some overall comments—e.g., how he now feels having moved—or may choose to focus in on some particularly powerful sequence or image from the movement, or what happened when he shifted from moving to being moved. Sometimes it is useful for the mover to trace through his movement in order, sharing his internal impressions—e.g., sensations, emotions, imagery, memory—of each “pool” (Adler, 2002, p.82), or sequence of movement.

When the mover invites the witness to speak, she speaks with great care and attentiveness, as her intention is to serve the mover with everything she shares. Her sharing is as accurate a mirror as possible of what she saw (and/or heard). She can use not only her words but also her body to mirror the movement.

In addition, the witness can add to the description of physical movement her more subjective sense of the patterns, emotions, and images she perceived in the movement. When she does so, she makes clear in her use of language that those interpretations are her own—using phrases such as “I perceive” or “it feels to me as if”.

Certain other practices have developed around sharing. It can help, for example, for mover and witness to speak in the present tense. This may sound strange at first, but it helps both to reenter the immediacy of the movement, and the corresponding sensations and images. Another language quirk, most often used in group authentic movement, is for the witness to say “the mover” or “a mover” rather than “you.” This helps witness and mover focus more on the movement rather than the person, diminishing any tendency toward projection. (In group authentic movement to say “a mover” rather than “you” or a name allows the emphasis to be on the movement and the act of co-creation of the group, rather than on what one individual did.)

Taken together, these forms of speaking create a certain style of sharing—instead of “Next, you placed your hands together in front of your chest, praying” the language transforms into “Next, the mover places his hands together in front of his chest, in what I perceive as an image of prayer.”

Both mover and witness can move as they share, to recreate moments of movement that each is recalling. For the witness, this a great opportunity to discover how the mover may have felt, and is a step toward “active witnessing” (see below).

Both can share their experience of the movement from a number of different perspectives—different “lenses” of awareness through which one can look. In addition to an awareness of body position, movement, sensation, emotion, imagery, and memory, these lenses can also include a sense of the archetypal or mythical, the symbolic, story, and dream. (See below for more on the lenses of awareness.)

As the sharing process unfolds, it can become a dialogue in which the two are together reconstructing a narrative of the movement that occurred, exploring the physical, emotional, and imaginative journey of the mover. The sharing process can take as long as the movement itself—e.g. 20 minutes of sharing time for a 20 minute movement—and allows the mover to not only reflect on and relive the movement that occurred, but also to have the mirroring, support, insights, and affirmation of the witness. Skillful witnessing can transform a mover’s sense of his own movement, adding multiple dimensions to the experience and a sense of closure—as well as anticipation for further journeys to come.

Creating a Safe Container

The quality of one’s experience doing authentic movement is greatly dependent on the soundness of the container for the work. When meeting with another to move, agree up front on conditions, ground rules, and practices that contribute to that safety.

Choose a space to move that is quiet, pleasant to roll around in, and where you will not be interrupted. A dedicated movement studio is best, but, if necessary, authentic

movement can be practiced in any private room with a little clean floor space. Some also love to move outdoors—just make sure to find a secluded spot.

Confidentiality is the most basic ground rule and is worth discussing and confirming with your partner: what happens in the room stays in the room. Also, maintain clear boundaries around time. Turn off all electronic devices.

Create rituals such as a check in, a warm up, etc.—repeated elements that add to the sense of comfort and connection, helping both partners let go of the stress of the day and enter movement and witnessing in a more clear and unburdened state. Ask one another: what do you need to say (or do) to be fully present?

Be a great witness. Finally, the quality of witnessing has the most profound effect on the strength of the container. Are you fully present, awake, undistracted? What do you need to give your mover your undivided attention? Would it help to stand, or to take notes? Ultimately, the witness's attention *is* the container for the movement.

Pointers

A few other things to keep in mind when first learning authentic movement:

Avoid overthinking. As the mover, it is important not to feel stuck in authentic movement. One thing newcomers to the form often have difficulty with is the word “authentic.” Is what I’m doing right now *truly* authentic? Overthinking this can quickly lead to judging/critiquing one’s own movement and turn the exercise into 20 minutes of suffering. The answer is to let go, to drop the requirement to be authentic—in fact, to drop all requirements, and to let yourself do whatever you like. Follow the joy of your own impulses. See where they lead you. Let yourself be as inauthentic as you like; follow every clever thought that pops into your head. You will soon begin to notice where the

body is leading, and learn to follow it, letting the mind be more of a witness than a director. Such a switch happens when you go from moving to being moved.

Don't get attached. Another area where new movers can get stuck is when working with a particular movement pattern or with an image or memory arising in the movement. You can drop any impulse or pattern at any time, letting something new in (a piece of wisdom that is equally applicable to living one's life!). Similarly, whereas it's fine to follow the images that are arising and fully embody them, it is important to not get attached to them. If the impulse is gone, it's gone—notice if the curiosity of the mind is perpetuating something that is not driven by the body. If so, let it go. For example, as I move, I may notice that a certain motion of my arms reminds me of ringing a bell by pulling on a large rope. I may continue to pull, exploring that image and feeling. However, if a new impulse occurs, say, a desire to roll over and relax, it is important to let go of the bell-pulling and embrace whatever is next. (If, instead, out of an intellectual curiosity to explore the bell-pulling, I ignore other impulses, I am no longer really listening to the body, and no longer fully present.)

The witness is not an audience. Notice where “shoulds” creep in. If I am moving very little, perhaps just sitting and wiggling a finger, a voice in my head may say “This must be very boring for my witness. I should move more. I should get up.” Notice the thought as a thought, and do not act on it. Come back to the body and find out what it really wants. It may really want to get up—or it may really want to keep sitting there. It is not your job to entertain the witness.

Agree on use of sound/speech. You and your partner (or group) can agree in advance on the use of sound, and/or speech. When working one-to-one, there is no

particular reason to restrict the mover's use of the voice—if the impulse comes to make sound, go for it. But in a group setting, the voice can be a form of contact, touching—or distracting—everyone in the room. (See below for more on guidelines for use of voice and physical contact in groups.)

Agree on note-taking. There are pros and cons to the witness taking notes during the movement. Especially for someone new to witnessing, it is important to have the experience of simply being present to the mover, with no distractions. In this way, witnessing is truly a meditation, with the mover as the object. Taking notes not only can be distracting, but it can send an inexperienced witness into her head—lessening her ability to form an empathic, heart connection with the mover, as well as to be present to her own body, emotions, and state of mind during the movement.

That said, note-taking has some benefits: it can help a witness, especially a sleepy or distracted one, be more present, as she notes each observation. In some ways, it can help the witness get *out* of her head: by writing everything down, she is not worried about remembering later what she wants to share with the witness. And in the sharing process, having notes can help the witness recall in greater detail what happened during the movement.

My suggestion is to begin without note-taking, but then experiment and see what you prefer. Also make sure beforehand that the mover is OK with you taking notes. And if you find you're looking at the page a lot, and missing moments, let the note-taking go.

Ongoing Practice and the Inner Witness

Like meditation, authentic movement can be a practice that deepens significantly over time. In my own experience, moving with a group of men regularly in the Boston

area, I have seen many changes in how I approach authentic movement, both as a mover and as a witness. These changes coincide with the development of my own capacity to be a supportive witness to myself, as I move—to develop a nonjudgmental inner witness.

When I was first introduced to authentic movement, I felt both self-conscious and self-critical. Was I moving well? In an interesting way? What did my witness think? As I became more comfortable with the group over a span of sessions, I found myself dropping my constant comparing and self-judging, and began to relax and accept my movement and myself more.

As I grew more at ease with myself—as my inner witness grew more compassionate and accepting—I was able to drop into the simplicity of body awareness. My movement became more relaxed, and I found myself slowing down. I began to spend many minutes in near-stillness, noticing my breath and the subtle movements, sensations, and impulses of the body. I realized that with my background as a performer, I had been more concerned with engaging the witness than with staying true to what my body really wanted to do. Discovering this very present stillness, accompanied by qualities of acute sensory awareness, as well as complete muscular release, took my authentic movement to a new level.

I also became more bold about sound, following the impulse to use my voice, to work with vibration. If there were a piano in the room, I might go to it and press keys, freeing my body to improvise.

I noticed inner imagery and followed it, entering realms of memory and fantasy led by my body. I felt truly in the flow of the movement, tapping into a source of creativity and inspiration that seemed to have no end.

The inner witness can develop in a number of ways. Foremost is the opportunity to *be* witnessed by an experienced witness who models the qualities touched on earlier. The inner witness can also develop through meditation, or through training (for example, learning to be a therapist or a coach). As one's inner witness grows over time, changes can occur in each of the three areas of awareness discussed earlier:

Mindfulness: The mover develops a greater capacity to remain focused, and return to the present moment.

Choicelessness: The mover opens to being led by the body and the senses, and is increasingly aware of the interplay between his mind and the movement. More and more, the mover is able to find inspiration in anything, even the subtlest bodily sensations. He has an increasing capacity to open to images, memories, and other associations arising from his movement.

Lovingkindness: The mover is more generous with himself, more forgiving. He notices his flaws and challenges and is able to smile at them, saying “how human...” He is also more open to the range of emotions that may arise in the movement, allowing their full expression.

Put together, one way to sum up the changes as one's inner witness grows is a feeling of getting out of one's own way, freeing up the body-mind to just “be,” less identified with and therefore less encumbered by neurotic thought—a calm, confident container for whatever needs to arise. These qualities of the inner witness correlate strongly with the meta-skills needed for being a good therapist, workshop facilitator, psychodrama director, parent, and leader.

Classic Techniques and Variations on Authentic Movement

In addition to the basic practice described above, there are many ways for pairs and groups to work with authentic movement. Here are a few variations that are widely used:

Drawing and Writing

One's verbal response in the sharing process is only one way of responding to one's own or another's movement. Another way is to draw, or write, before meeting to discuss what happened.

Writing may take one of several different forms: a description of the movement, either chronological or focusing on the moments which stood out the most, in any order; a poem or other creative writing which describes or builds on the images or stories evoked by the movement; or spontaneous writing, an exercise (described by author and meditator Natalie Goldberg in her book *Wild Mind*, 1990) in which one begins to write and continues to keep the hand moving for a set period of time, no matter what comes out on the page—without censoring or judging the quality of the writing.

Similarly, drawing after moving can range from a faithful representation of a moment or moments of the movement, to an inner image that occurred for the mover or witness, to a more abstract expression or scribble representing how the person drawing feels in this moment. It's nice to have a basket of crayons or colored markers available to add color as a dimension.

Writing/drawing can be for a set period of time—say, 10 minutes. A different approach is to agree in advance that writing/drawing will be optional, based on what the

mover desires, and that the length of time will be determined by how long the mover needs.

When finished, the two meet and share. They can begin by sharing their writing/drawing, if they wish (they do not have to). Sharing a drawing or poem first can add new levels or dimensions to the sharing process. Sometimes a very simple drawing—say, a tiny dot inside a large circle—can capture a metaphor that brings the meaning of the movement into focus. Sometimes a poem can capture the spirit of the movement, or its emotional qualities, in a way that speaking more descriptively or casually cannot do. The writing or drawing often becomes a springboard for a deeper conversation about the movement, and how it might relate to the mover's life.

There is something meditative about the process of drawing or writing, that helps serve as a transition between the often silent and solitary experience of moving or witnessing and the quite different social experience of connecting in the sharing process through eye contact and speech. It can be particularly helpful for those who tend toward introversion to be able to relate their thoughts on the page first, before sharing them with a partner.

It is not necessary to share one's writing or drawing. This is an important ground rule, allowing the writing and drawing to be truly free and uncensored. If the witness, for example, feels she must share her writing/drawing, it may stop her from being spontaneous, as she may wonder if her depiction will be accurate or will contradict the experience of the mover.

If authentic movement is a regular practice, one can maintain a journal of one's writings, or keep a folder of them to look back on. Sometimes a poem or drawing by the

witness can be so evocative or touching that the mover might request to keep it—this can be a small gift from the witness to the mover, and a further expression of *metta*.

Active Witnessing

Once well versed in witnessing as described above, one can explore other modes of witnessing. The witness can stand (a great thing to do if one is feeling sleepy) and can even move, while observing the mover. The witness might allow her body to take on his position, his movement, not only mirroring him on the outside but more importantly exploring how he might be feeling on the inside. The witness may also move in response to the mover or may choose to imitate only what the mover's hands are doing. The purpose of active witnessing is to deepen one's empathy and connection with what the mover is doing. An additional benefit of active witnessing is that it can be easier to recall the sequence and details of the movement during the sharing process.

The active witness needs to move carefully and not disturb the mover in any way. Contact and sounding are obvious no-nos.

In group authentic movement, the active witness is seen as a distinct role. Rather than sitting on the sidelines to observe, the active witness can silently enter the space, using eyes-open movement to mirror, explore, and empathize with what the mover is doing. As with the sitting witness, the active witness is in service of the mover, and makes sure to avoid disturbing the mover she is focusing on (or any other mover in the space). To do this, the active witness does not make sound or physical contact, and tries to be as invisible as possible. After the movement, the active witness shares just as a normal witness does and only after the mover has spoken.

Active witnessing is a powerful role to add to the open circle format (see below)—often a group will open up the form to allow for one or more active witnesses, in addition to a minimum number of sitting witnesses (usually two) to help maintain the sense of a safe container for the whole group.

Moving in Response

In this structure, the witness responds to the mover, not verbally, but instead through her own authentic movement. Then the original mover can respond to that movement by moving once again. The sequence ends with verbal sharing. Timing can be decided in advance; e.g., the first mover moves for 7 minutes, the second for 5, and the first mover once again for 3 minutes, in response to his partner. Afterwards, the two share their experience verbally, and then reverse roles and begin the whole sequence again.

When moving in response to another mover, the movement is still authentic movement. The responding mover enters the space with the intention to open to being moved—understanding that whatever movement emerges is in some way a response to the movement she just observed. She does not need to “try” to respond, or to work to recall aspects of what the first mover did. She may naturally find herself mirroring or taking on movements inspired by particular moments or images from the first mover’s movement. This echoing emerges organically, not from a thinking or planning place. Or, there may be no echoes at all—a response can be in contrast, or be an energetic/emotional reply. For example, one may find oneself responding to a rapid movement by being particularly slow or still.

This form can also be practiced in trios, in which the three rotate through the roles of initial mover and responder. There can be two responders moving at the same time, or the third person can be assigned to be a dedicated witness.

Rotating Witness

Safety Note: when leading any authentic movement exercise in which more than one person will be moving at a time, caution participants that they must open their eyes slightly when moving rapidly, making big gestures, or moving through the space, to avoid colliding with other people or with walls or objects. “You are responsible for your own safety and the safety of others.”

A simple form of group authentic movement—e.g. when working with three or four people—is to rotate through the role of witness. The first witness has a bell, which he rings when it is time to transition. The person designated to be the second witness slowly brings her movement to a close, opens her eyes, and moves to the side of the room, and sits down to witness. Once the first witness sees that this has happened, he can enter the space, close his eyes, and begin to move.

Once all three or four have witnessed, each shares equally as a mover and as a witness during the sharing process. The typical convention, in this form and in the open circle (below), is that a witness will not refer to a mover’s movement until that mover has had a chance to describe it.

Open Circle

When working with a group of four or more, an open circle format can be used, in which each participant can be either witness or mover, and can change roles during the movement. Typically, this activity begins with the participants agreeing on a length of

time to move, how many witnesses minimum there can be at any time, and what agreement there is around the use of sound. The participants then meet in a circle in the middle for a brief huddle to be present to one another, perhaps making eye contact in silence. Then the group steps backward, spreading out to the edges of the space, making eye contact with one another and raising their arms in a posture known as “sprouting”—signifying the container of witnessing and interpersonal connection within which the movement will be held.

Someone rings a bell, and the movement begins. Those who wish to move can step forward into the space, close their eyes, and begin. The rest are witnesses, and sit along the outer edges of the space. Usually there is a minimum of two witnesses at any given time. Anytime she wants, a witness can enter the space and become a mover, except if doing so would leave an insufficient number of witnesses. In such a case, the witness who desires to move can say “call for a witness” — to which a mover can respond “witness found.” That mover then makes her way to an edge of the space, opens her eyes, and becomes a witness, at which point the witness who made the request can enter and become a mover.

Movers can become witnesses anytime they like—it can be helpful after transitioning to make eye contact with one or more witnesses around the circle (this helps the mover change from an inner, personal focus, to being present with the entire group).

Use of sound and/or words is an issue that any authentic movement group must address. Some groups prefer to move in silence, others allow sound but no recognizable words (that is, gibberish or a nonsense syllable such as “Gaaaaa” would be OK). If meeting over a weekend, a group might choose to start with an open circle in silence, but

later do open circles that incorporate sound. All movers must be aware that by making sound they contact everyone else in the space—others cannot really block it out. On the other hand, the use of sound, sound that emerges organically from the body as it moves, can be a cathartic, freeing, and emotionally expressive aspect of authentic movement.

Physical contact is also an issue that can come up for any group in which participants are moving together. All movers must be sensitive to how their touch or contact is being received by the other—if the other moves away upon being touched, or is not responding, it may mean that the other mover would prefer not to have contact. It is also important for each mover to gauge his intention in making contact—is it something that emerged organically from the movement, by happenstance, or did the mover seek out the contact out of a personal need or desire? This is one area where it is important to make the sometimes subtle distinction between truly authentic movement—being moved by the body—versus having a “good idea” or following one’s desires.

At the end of the open circle movement, a witness rings a bell to signal the transition. Movers in the space slowly bring their movement to a close, and return to the edges of the space. All the members then sprout, raising their arms and making eye contact with one another, reaffirming the strength of the container and honoring the open space.

At this point, there are a couple of options for how to proceed. The group leader can suggest that everyone take some time—usually, 10 minutes—to draw or write. Or, the group can go right into a sharing circle.

Typically, movers share first—witnesses may only share about a mover they observed after that mover has spoken. If a mover has chosen not to speak, the witness can

ask permission if it's OK to share about that mover's movement. As when working one-to-one, movers and witnesses share their own experience, witnesses making clear in how they speak that their experience is subjective.

It is also helpful to be aware of the use of language when sharing in a group context. The mover may not be ready to have her movement singled out and described with a group listening, or to have her movement framed by another's language. It is preferable when offering witnessing not to refer to the mover by name, but instead to say "a mover"—e.g., "I see a mover crawling very slowly toward the windows, and suddenly finding another mover's leg blocking the way."

A group of movers meeting for a weekend workshop or retreat can experiment with a variety of different forms, as described earlier. One good way to begin is using the open circle format, moving in silence. As the weekend progresses, the group can begin to add in sound, and the amount of physical contact will often naturally increase as participants grow more comfortable with one another.

Other Approaches to Authentic Movement

Image-Story-Image

This Insight Improvisation exercise is a fun way to introduce authentic movement in a group setting by combining it with storytelling. It also is a helpful bridge between moving silently and the activities we'll be introducing later in this book that incorporate speaking and enactment into one's movement.

Moving. The first part of the exercise is a 15-minute group authentic movement, with the facilitator as the sole witness, divided into three five-minute phases.

Phase I—Opening to the Body and Movement. Invite participants to enter the space and find a position to start in, close their eyes, and take a moment of mindful attention to breathe and become aware of the senses, before beginning to follow their body and how it would like to move. (*Add a safety reminder to open eyes slightly when moving rapidly or through the space to avoid collisions: “You are responsible for your own safety and the safety of others.”*) If participants are new to authentic movement, provide guidance about opening up to movement impulse, allowing the body to lead rather than the mind. Allow the group to move in silence for five minutes.

Phase II—Awareness of Inner Imagery. At the beginning of phase two, add an instruction: “As you continue to move, begin to notice any image or picture arising in your movement. What does this body position or movement remind you of? Feel free to explore this image through your movement. At any time, you can let the image go, and just come back to following your body. Then another image or picture may arise.”

Phase III—Awareness of Memories. After another five minutes, introduce phase three: “As you continue your movement, begin to notice what memories may arise as you move, particularly memories from childhood. Notice what childhood memory this body position or movement reminds you of. You can explore this memory through your movement. Feel free to let the memory go at any time and return to simply following the body. Once you do so, another memory may arise. We’ll move for five more minutes.”

After fifteen minutes, say: “Slowly, in your own time, begin to bring your movement to a close..... Then take a moment in stillness, with your eyes still closed, to relax, breathe, and notice how you feel. Let the last memory or image go, and just come back to how your body feels, right now. Take a deep breath, relax, stretch, yawn—whatever you need to do to transition. When you are ready, you can open your eyes.”

Sharing in pairs/trios. Afterwards, have participants meet in groups of two or three to share their experience of the movement. Invite them to begin by sharing one image (from phase two), one memory (from phase three), and then end by sharing the image again. Demonstrate how you would like them to share:

“When sharing the image, physically recreate the image as well as describe the image in a word or phrase, aloud. For example, if my image were pulling on a rope attached to a bell in a tower, I might go like this”—mime pulling on a rope, repeatedly, with your whole body engaged—“and say ‘Pulling... Pulling...’”—speaking with the effort of pulling. “When you share your childhood memory, tell the story as if it’s happening right now. Act it out. Use present tense. For example:

‘I’m in the schoolyard. Big field of grass before me. Soccer goals in the distance. We’re playing a game. King of the hill. Mark is on top of the dirt hill. I run up. Try to push him off. He won’t budge. He pushes back. I fall. Land on the ground. I’m dirty. Dirty.’

When you’d done sharing your story, return to your image, once again physicalizing it and speaking the word or phrase: ‘Pulling. Pulling.’ Before you break out of the final image, take a moment to pause and breathe in the pose, then relax.”

“Begin by sharing this image-story-image with your partner(s). Note that the image and the story do not need to be consciously related to one another—although your partners may discover some relationship between the two. In any remaining time, you can receive their feedback as well as share more about your experience of the authentic movement as a whole. Feel free to share other feelings, images, or memories that came up during the movement. I will ring a bell when it’s the next person’s turn to share.” Give five to ten minutes for each person to share in the small groups.

Sharing as a group. Once everyone has shared in small groups, invite the whole group to come together in a circle, and provide time for any who wish to share their image-story-image with the whole group:

“This is a chance to share with all of us the essence of what happened during your movement—by sharing one image and one story, using the ‘sandwich’ structure of image-story-image. A little coaching up front:

Go back inside. “See if you can recall the original experience you had during your authentic movement of that image and that memory. Feel free to close your eyes, and take your time to get into each physical position you were in.”

Not a performance—an exploration. “Know that this version will not be the same as before, especially doing it in front of a larger group. So, see what happens in the present and let yourself follow that impulse. Let go of the idea that this is a performance. Your job is to simply relive and explore that image and that memory as fully as possible, letting that experience affect you physically, vocally, and emotionally. We, as witnesses, will get what we get—you do not need to entertain or impress us.”

Discover what’s unexpected. “This exercise is about not knowing, not controlling, while learning in the moment, so please allow the unexpected to happen. For example, the way you do the image the second time may be affected by the childhood memory. It may be subtly different, or very different.

Use pausing and breathing to transition. “Finally, begin and end with a ‘vertical moment,’ a chance to pause, breathe, and go inside. Take your time. Do not break out of the final image immediately; instead, hold the final pose for a few beats before relaxing and opening your eyes.”

The Lenses of Awareness

Earlier we mentioned the many channels through which the witness is aware—including their perception of the mover through sight and sound, their interpretation of the movement, and their perception of themselves during the movement.

Alton Wasson, a longtime teacher of contemplative dance, describes (2007) the different kinds of awareness or perspectives the witness can bring as a “chest of drawers”—each drawer containing a different way of viewing what is happening right now: the physical, the emotional, the spiritual, the animal, the archetypal, the artistic, etc..

The mover’s inner witness has the same chest of drawers or set of lenses through which she can view what is unfolding in her movement. These lenses begin with the six sense doors—the five senses plus mind objects—but also can include myriad other ways of seeing, experiencing, and interpreting her movement.

In this exercise, witness and mover are invited to focus on one specific channel of information—one specific lens—both during the movement as well as in the sharing process.

For example, if the category chosen were “Physical Movement,” each would focus exclusively on bodily movement. For the mover this means noticing every detail of how her body is positioned and travels through space; for the witness this means confining his observations purely to movement which can be seen objectively, without interpretation—e.g., “I see your head move down as your hands become fists,” rather than “I see you curl up in anger” or “I see you as a cave-man about to fight” (the first is a physical description, the second describes emotion, and the third a role).

If the category were “Sensation,” each would focus on opening to the five senses: sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. For the mover, this might include not only noticing the movement of a limb but also the *feeling* of that movement—the slow stretching of muscle underneath the arm, the soft texture of shirt sleeve against skin, the cool of the floor against the back of the hand, etc. It can also include sounds, smells, etc., occurring in the space, or coming from outside (e.g., the distant sound of church bells). For the witness, there are two aspects to sensation—his own raw sensation (what am I, the witness, seeing, hearing, etc.), as well as his projection, guess, or empathy with what the mover may be sensing, e.g., “As you arch your back into a stretch, I imagine you feel a delicious ache and then relief in your shoulders and neck.”

There are different ways to approach the “Lenses” exercise. Mover and witness can agree beforehand on a single, shared focus, or alternatively, each can choose something different—with or without first telling the other (the secret is revealed in the sharing process). When practicing in a group, the facilitator can suggest a progression of lenses that the entire group uses in a series of shorter-than-normal rounds of movement and witnessing (e.g., allocating five minutes of movement and five of witnessing, focused only on awareness of sound; then five/five on emotion; etc.). Or, different lenses could be written on pieces of paper and picked at random from a hat by each pair or each person—see chart below for ideas.

<i>Lenses Of Awareness</i>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is not an exhaustive list—feel free to add your own categories! • For witness, lenses can be dual: “my ___ & what I perceive of the mover’s ___.” • <i>Idea: Cut this table up and put categories in a hat to pull from at random.</i> 			
<i>metaphor & image</i>	<i>archetype & role</i>	<i>use of space</i>	<i>shape</i>
<i>emotion</i>	<i>plot & story</i>	<i>speed & rhythm</i>	<i>time</i>
<i>thought</i>	<i>pain & pleasure</i>	<i>sound</i>	<i>breath</i>
<i>spontaneity & creativity</i>	<i>relationship to environment</i>	<i>animal nature</i>	<i>energy</i>
<i>beauty & ugliness</i>	<i>music</i>	<i>tension & relaxation</i>	<i>conflict</i>

Moving Alone and Together

Although the classic form of authentic movement—a mover and witness alone in a space together—is the most powerful way to experience the practice initially, there are many other uses of authentic movement, applications that break out of the standard structure.

Moving alone. Once one has gained experience with an external witness, one's inner witness may be strong enough to do authentic movement alone, without a witness. This can be a helpful and healing practice, especially in those moments in life when one can benefit from being able to stretch out, breathe, and let the body express how it really feels.

Working in my home office, I often find it beneficial when taking breaks to close my eyes for a moment and follow my body, listening to what it wants and needs. Sometimes it wants to collapse to the floor, my forehead to the carpet, and my back stretched in a way that I do not get to do when at my computer. Other times it needs to move rapidly, to dance.

At night, if I have trouble falling asleep, my first choice is to roll up my bed pillow and sit in meditation. But sometimes my body is restless, my legs need to move, and so I choose to mindfully follow the body, breaking out of the meditation posture and entering into authentic movement. Often I'll move for a few minutes, only to find that the body naturally returns to stillness in a new position. At this point I am usually drowsy and can drift off to sleep.

As a theater artist, I have used solo authentic movement when developing my one-man shows, as a way to enter an improvisatory, creative mindset, following my body and allowing characters and scenes to develop spontaneously.

Later, as a drama therapist developing Insight Improvisation techniques, I began to practice authentic movement as a prelude to doing psolodrama alone, without a witness. (*See Part III, the chapter entitled “Psolodrama Alone” for more on this approach.*)

Moving together. When meeting with a partner to do peer work using any of the exercises in this book, it can be beneficial to include a period of movement as part of the warm up (usually following a check-in and some meditation). It’s particularly helpful to do authentic movement for this activity, but instead of taking turns witnessing, to simply allow for a period of “Simultaneous Authentic Movement” (SAM) with no witness. This allows each person to become completely present to their body and what they need, and to begin to enter the flow of being moved. Doing so prior to other exercises—such as witnessing one another in the progression from authentic movement to psolodrama—is an ideal preparation. SAM not only allows the body to stretch, yawn, etc.—providing an opportunity for some of the stress of the day to melt away and the mask of the social self to dissolve—it also offers the mover the opportunity to notice how she feels within herself, without the gaze of the witness.

A few guidelines and tips for SAM:

Timing. Decide in advance on timing: how long should we move? Set a timer to go off automatically so neither person needs to consult a clock during the movement.

Sound. Also: decide on a ground rule for using sound. One nice approach is to start with silent movement and allow sound beginning midway through, e.g.,

if the warm-up is ten minutes, allow sound beginning at the five-minute mark. This provides each mover a space to arrive fully in the movement and be present, before hearing the other's (and emitting their own) sighs, grunts, hums, etc. Typically, speaking actual words is prohibited during SAM.

Physical Interaction. Also agree on a rule for physical contact. For those new to authentic movement, having a period to warm up and experience their own body without physical interaction is usually preferred. More experienced movers may be very comfortable with contact as it occurs spontaneously in the movement—this could be called “Simultaneous *Interactive* Authentic Movement,” or SIAM. If you'd like to experiment with this form, agree on timing in advance with your partner, e.g. by allowing five minutes of SAM followed by five minutes of SIAM.

Final Thoughts

Authentic movement is an approach of great depth, power, and mystery, both a therapeutic approach and a personal practice. As a form of therapy, it provides a way without words to access and explore what is stored in the body, the memory, and the unconscious.

Insight Improvisation builds on authentic movement by providing ways to begin with this wordless, physical exploration, but then add words (in **shared vipassana**), roles (in the **role stream**), and enactment (in **scene stream** and **psolodrama**) to take the exploration in new directions.

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Additional Resources

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Adler, and Joan Chodorow. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley.

[Essential writings of the creators of authentic movement.](#)

Journal of Authentic Movement & Somatic Inquiry —

<http://www.authenticmovementjournal.com>

Collected writings, interviews, and other material from the authentic movement community. One excellent example, a discussion with Alton Wasson and Aileen Crow about the witness role and projection, is here:

<http://www.authenticmovementjournal.com/?p=794>

Shared Vipassana

The mover enters the space and closes her eyes. She takes a moment to breath. Relaxing her body, she lies on the floor, on her side, and is perfectly still. Slowly, movement develops—first a finger, then a hand, then her whole arm slowly arcs up...and then over, so that her hand rests on her head. She speaks...

“Feeling my hair. Soft. Can feel individual strands, curls. Thinking: I hate this haircut.” There is a pause. “Sound of air vent. Musty library smell.”

She turns, face down, and pushes with her hands until she is resting on all fours:

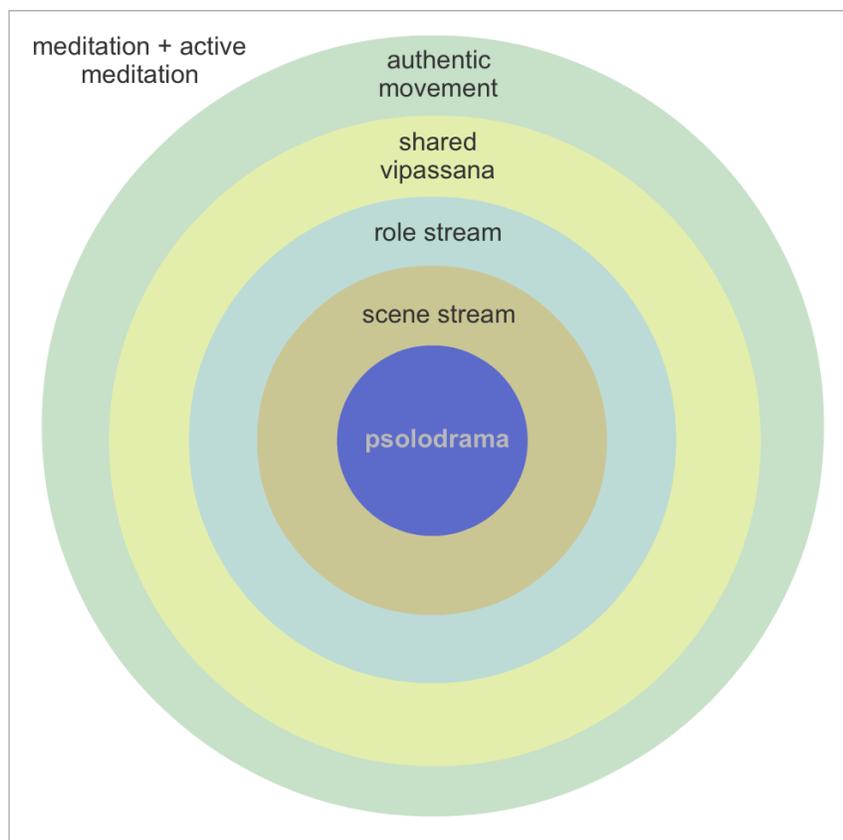
“Puuuushing.....feeling lower back arching, feeling weight there. Texture of carpet. I’m in my childhood bedroom. Light blue shag carpet. Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls. White furniture.”

She arches her back and rolls up her spine, upright on her knees and feet. Her hands stretch up over her head, and come to rest on her head.

“I’m a prisoner. We’ve been lined up to be shot. I look out over fields. There’s a ditch in front of me. I’m sad.”

Her hands drop by her sides.

“Pressure on knees. Belly relaxing. Breathing.” Pause. “Feeling of letting go inside my head. Tongue relaxed. Eyes loose.” Pause. “I’m hungry.”



from meditation to psolodrama

In the progression from meditation to psolodrama, shared vipassana is a pivotal step in that it introduces speech.

For many, the idea of speaking aloud while meditating, or speaking while doing authentic movement, may seem strange and antithetical to those practices.

Our habits around speaking are so strong that the fear is “if I open my mouth, I will go into my head.” To some extent this is true. Speaking is a different mode than

meditating or moving, and our habitual relationship to speaking may not be mindful. Part of the practice of shared vipassana is learning to change our relationship to speaking—to get out of the head, break free of habits we may have such as our tendency to censor, be clever, intellectualize, entertain, etc.—and instead let our speech be a simple, clear, and open channel for self-expression.

Ultimately, we may discover in shared vipassana that by speaking we can be even *more* present, using speech as a way to clear thoughts, express feelings, describe and focus in on bodily sensations and inner imagery. Speech can help us stay present and connected to what is unfolding in the body-mind moment by moment.

In Insight Improvisation, when we say “shared vipassana,” we are mainly referring to “moving shared vipassana,” which is the form of the exercise that builds on authentic movement, as in the example above. But let’s start even more simply, with sitting and speaking...

Shared Vipassana	
Sitting	Moving
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Basics</i> • <i>Benefits of Sharing Aloud</i> • <i>Whom the Sharing is For</i> • <i>Variations:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Shared Vipassana Dialogue</i> ○ <i>Group Shared Vipassana</i> ○ <i>From sitting to moving</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Moving and Speaking</i> • <i>Types of Sharing:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Reporting</i> ○ <i>Expressing</i> ○ <i>Experiencing</i> • <i>Witnessing and Sharing Together Afterwards</i>

Sitting Shared Vipassana

With your partner, decide who will be the “meditator” first. The other is the witness, who will keep time, and afterwards, share their experience of witnessing. The meditator prepares by finding a comfortable meditation posture—typically sitting, but lying down and standing are also possible. The ideal posture is relaxed but alert.

As the meditator, begin by closing your eyes and tuning in—scan through the body, notice the breath, relax. Open the awareness to all the channels: notice sensations, thoughts, emotions. So far, this is a *vipassana* meditation. What makes this shared vipassana: as objects arise in your field of awareness, you can speak them aloud. For example, “Body sensation: left foot touching cold floor. Sound: crickets. Seeing light through eyelids.”

Do not feel a responsibility to share *everything* that is arising—often there is too much to speak about all at once. Allow there to be pauses. On the other hand, it is important in this exercise to speak, rather than sit in silence. There is something to be gained and discovered by adding speech. Take advantage of the opportunity to explore your relationship with words and speaking aloud.

Some thoughts or feelings may arise that you would prefer not to share. That is completely OK. What is important is to share the truth of what is happening to you in the moment in a way that supports your mindful and choiceless awareness.

It can be helpful, particularly when learning shared vipassana, to begin each statement with a label, naming the sense door through which you perceived whatever you are sharing—“smelling,” “body sensation,” “thinking,” etc. This helps one remain present and focused on what is occurring moment by moment, cultivating a quality of awareness

that is alert, precise, and subtle. However, you may find over time that you no longer need to label, at which point you can let it go.

As in traditional *vipassana* meditation, sometimes it is useful to be even more specific in one's labeling. For example, if I find I am planning, sometimes using the more specific label "planning," rather than "thinking," can help me identify and clear what is arising, making it easier to let go and move on to what's next.

You can share in any way you like. Feel free to go slowly and take pauses, to speak rapidly, to make sounds, even to sing your sharing. Find the style that works best for you. Your approach to sharing may change moment by moment.

Shared *vipassana* can include the entire realm of human experience. For example, although you may begin the exercise by noticing and sharing certain sensations (sounds, body sensations, smells, etc.), as you continue, your meditation may also include thoughts, emotions, inner imagery, memories, fantasies, etc., which you can share aloud as they arise.

In a typical silent meditation, it is all too easy to identify with and get carried away by thoughts, memories, planning, fantasy, etc. As we watch the train of mind objects roll by, we have a tendency to jump on the train. Before we know it, several minutes have passed in which we were unaware of anything, completely lost in thought.

In shared *vipassana*, by speaking thoughts aloud we can more easily stay connected to the present moment. For example, by speaking my "planning mind" aloud—"Thinking: I have to prepare for that presentation on Thursday"—I immediately notice what I am doing, and can choose to return to an awareness of the body, the senses, or the next mind object arising. If I speak an image, fantasy, or memory aloud as it unfolds in

this way, it means I am not carried away, identified with these mind objects and lost in them, but rather that I am exploring them with awareness, choosing to give them my attention before returning to the body. Awareness of the body and breath—as in traditional meditation—serves as the anchor in shared vipassana (and in all Insight Improvisation practices), something we can always return to if feeling lost, confused, or not grounded.

Sitting shared vipassana can be done as a short “check-in” for three to five minutes, or as a more substantial practice for ten minutes or more. To end the meditation, either set a gentle alarm to go off, or have the witness ring a bell or say “slowly, in your own time, bring your meditation to a close.” It is best if the meditator does not pop right out to talk with the witness, but really takes her time to transition, keeping her eyes closed for a few moments, noticing her breath, her body, and how she feels.

In the sharing afterwards, the witness can begin by asking “would you like to speak first or shall I?” The meditator can share her experience of what happened. The witness’s role is to provide a mirror, to reflect back what he heard in an accurate, nonjudgmental, and supportive way. The witness can also include his own experience—thoughts and feelings that arose for him during the meditation. As in authentic movement, the witness acknowledges and owns his projections.

Benefits of Sharing Aloud

As a meditator, I find that sharing my inner experience with a witness helps me be more present than I sometimes find myself to be in my own solitary sitting practice. I can more clearly distinguish and focus in on even very subtle sensations. The sharing gives each object its own momentary importance. Even when I am silent during shared

vipassana, I am usually completely engaged, mindful, watching very carefully. This is partially due to the presence of a witness, and partially due to engaging that part of the mind that observes and is readying to articulate what it is noticing.

Shared vipassana also helps me explore elements of thought, emotion, and inner imagery consciously, mindfully, rather than drifting off into daydream or identifying with them, getting caught up in their emotional swirl. By supporting a conscious exploration of (sometimes deep) emotions, shared vipassana can at times lead to both insight and catharsis—the latter an experience of feeling, expressing, and releasing strong emotions. As we add movement to this conscious exploration—in moving shared vipassana, below—and progress from shared vipassana to forms such as role stream (see Part II of this book) and psolodrama (in Part III) that incorporate enactment, the potential for insight and catharsis further increases.

Whom The Sharing is For

It is important to be clear that the “sharing” in shared vipassana is for the meditator, not the witness.

As in authentic movement, the witness’s sole purpose is in service of the meditator. Ideally, the witness is bringing her most supportive, nonjudgmental, engaged, and caring presence to her witnessing, as well as to the mutual sharing process afterward.

So it’s interesting to notice, as the meditator (or mover, as described below), whether I am relating to my witness as a nonjudgmental presence—trusting her in that way—or if I am projecting all kinds of judgments onto her.

Similarly, I find it useful to notice my underlying intentions for speaking as the meditator. Even if my primary intention is to use my speech as a vehicle for authentic

self-expression, and for being present to all that is arising, I may be subtly influenced by my feelings about the witness. Do I want to impress her? Am I afraid of offending her? Am I censoring before sharing?

In my own case, as a teacher and developer of this practice, I may also be laboring under intentions such as “Is this a good example of shared vipassana? Could I be doing a better ‘demo’ of this form?”

One good way to deal with these normal social defenses and concerns is to share them as part of the meditation, and by doing so, help clear them out. If I can speak aloud, for example, “Thinking: is what I’m sharing interesting enough? Projecting: my witness must be bored,” doing so can free me up, help me to enjoy myself more, and allow me to return to sharing openly without censoring.

Variations

Shared Vipassana Dialogue. In this exercise, both partners actively share as well as listen. Begin by sitting facing your partner, in silent meditation. (How long a period of silence can be agreed upon beforehand: a minute or two is fine, but if there is a mutual desire for a longer silent meditation, that’s even better.) For greatest focus, it is best to keep eyes closed throughout the exercise, although it’s fine to open them a little now and then to take in more of what is arising in the visual channel, as well as to see your partner.

One person begins the dialogue by speaking aloud something they are noticing in their meditation: “Body sensation: feeling of cool air in my nostrils.” Then it is the other’s turn: “Hearing: faint roar of truck engine going by in the distance.” The sharing bounces back and forth until the exercise is over (it is useful to set a gentle alarm so that

you do not need to consult a clock during the meditation). A few pointers: allow pauses, preferably silences. Breathe and relax. Take your time. Try not to censor: see if you can go with the first thing that is arising, in this moment. Afterward, share with your partner your experience of the process.

Group Shared Vipassana. It is also possible to extend this idea of a meditative dialogue to an entire group.

Seated in a circle, invite the group to close their eyes, and lead them in a short meditation: first on mindfulness of breathing, then opening to the six sense doors (see the earlier chapter on meditation for more complete instructions), and finally opening to choiceless awareness in a short traditional *vipassana* meditation.

Then invite sharing aloud: “As we continue our meditation together, in a moment we’re going to add a new element: speaking. At any time, anyone can speak aloud something they are noticing in their meditation that is coming through one of the six sense doors—including the five senses as well as thoughts. When you share, I invite you to begin by labeling the sense door you are aware of. For example: ‘body sensation: right shoulder relaxing, releasing’ or ‘hearing: sound of bird calls.’ Other labels can include smelling, seeing, tasting, and thinking. Try to keep sharing brief—a phrase or short sentence. Once someone shares, let there be a pause or silence, for at least a few beats, before someone else speaks. If two people begin to speak at the same time, just pause, let go, and share again later. Let’s begin by taking a few moments more in silence, and then anyone can speak.”

Group shared vipassana can last for any length of time: five to ten minutes is good for a group trying it for the first time; longer can work if the members are experienced

meditators. When time is almost up, the group leader has a few options. If the group is new, with some shy members, the leader can say: “In our last few minutes, I invite those who have not spoken much or at all to share something if they would like.” An alternative for a more experienced group might be to invite closure through sharing emotions: “Before we bring this meditation to a close, let’s use the last couple of minutes to share any feelings or emotions that are present, either directly or through describing an image or body sensation you are having.”

The leader can end the process by saying: “To end our meditation, let’s return to silent *vipassana* meditation for a couple of minutes, being aware of the body, the breath, thoughts, and feelings.” Afterwards, invite the group to share their experience of the meditation.

From sitting to moving. Typically, when doing sitting shared vipassana with a witness, the meditator begins in stillness, sitting in traditional meditation posture. In contrast, moving shared vipassana, which is based in authentic movement, begins with silent movement. However, in sitting shared vipassana it is possible to begin in stillness and gradually add subtle and then gross movement as you follow your awareness. Sometimes sharing aloud can lead to movement: “Body sensation—I feel a tightness in my belly. Noticing breathing in. The tightness is dissolving. My legs feel very light, almost playful. Uncrossing my legs. Mmmm. I want to kick them. Feels good!”

Moving Shared Vipassana

Instead of starting in sitting meditation, shared vipassana can also begin with authentic movement. It is still called shared vipassana because the focus moment by moment is bringing our choiceless awareness to what is arising and passing away through each of the six sense doors, and sharing aloud what we are noticing.

With a partner, choose who will move first and who will witness. Decide on a length of time for moving and for sharing. Have a clock handy for the witness to keep time. Optionally, the witness may also wish to have paper and pen to capture some of what the mover shares aloud, particularly as images and memories arise. When doing so as a witness, it's nice to ask the mover beforehand whether they are OK with your taking notes.

Moving and Speaking

The mover enters the space and finds a place and position to begin—standing, sitting, lying down, or any position—and then closes his eyes.

He takes a moment in silence to breathe and relax, letting his body just be as it is, opening to all the senses, opening to his feelings. He begins to follow movement impulse, letting the body lead, entering authentic movement.

He allows himself to move silently for as long as he likes, typically a few minutes. If sound comes naturally during this time, that's fine. It can be a helpful precursor to sharing to allow natural sounds of breathing, sighing, grunting, humming, etc. to come out spontaneously.

Whenever he wishes, the mover can begin to share aloud, as described earlier in sitting shared vipassana. He continues to practice authentic movement, simply speaking out loud what his inner witness is noticing.

Typically, with moving shared vipassana, we notice three kinds or “levels” of sharing—reporting, expressing, and experiencing:

Reporting

Body sensation: buzzing feeling in feet. Head heavy, tilting to one side. Sound: wind in the trees. Thinking: how can I let myself fully relax right now? Cool breath in mouth.

As with sitting shared vipassana, moving shared vipassana usually begins with reporting, in a fairly neutral tone, what the mover is noticing that is coming in through his six sense doors—body sensations, thoughts, sounds, sights, smells, and tastes. Because the meditator is also moving, there may be more to notice moment-to-moment than when sitting still. There is no need to share all of it—find a pace of sharing that feels relaxed and natural.

Expressing

*Aaaarching back, aaaahhh, bunching shoulders, squeeeeezeing.
Mmmmm.... Smell of wood floor. Feeling free...letting go...*

This next level of sharing is to allow what is being experienced to affect the voice. This can be true not only of body sensations (e.g., letting the feeling of “strehhhhtching” the upper back affect the timbre and elongated delivery of the word), but also emotions (e.g. “Feeling sad...” or “Feeling joy!” said with a tone of voice that expresses the feeling fully).

For some, allowing the feeling of the object arising to affect the voice is natural. They may already be doing it from the moment they begin to move. Others may need to be reminded or even coached to break out of the monotone of reporting and express more congruently using all the different aspects of the voice—pitch, volume, speed/rhythm, timbre, enunciation, etc.

The mover's expressive use of voice is not for the benefit of the witness—it's solely for the mover to allow his voice to be as open and effective a channel as possible for expressing and releasing sensations, emotions, thoughts, etc. The mover must notice and let go of his projections—what he imagines the witness is thinking and feeling—to let himself use his voice fully, neither censoring nor trying to impress, entertain, or engage the other.

As we progress further toward psolodrama in this sequence of exercises, those of us who are actors or performers may notice our tendency to amplify what's happening for the benefit of the audience—the witness. This is an interesting edge to explore: on the one hand, to not add anything to what is happening, but simply explore what is arising in its authenticity, letting my voice be an open channel for what's arising, without embellishing; on the other hand, to notice and appreciate my natural joy and passion in performing, and not suppress it. Part of the fun of this sequence of exercises—shared vipassana, role stream, scene stream, and psolodrama—is to let my performer self out and play, but without the usual fear, tension, or pressure of performing. *(See Part II, on contemplative theater, for more on applying mindfulness in performance.)*

Experiencing

Shoulders relaxed. Balancing...aligned. I'm standing on top of a tall building. Looking out over the city. Nighttime. Arms opening...stretching out. I see stars above. Belly relaxing. Breathing.

The third level of sharing in moving shared vipassana is to notice images and memories arising in one's authentic movement, to speak aloud what one is noticing, and to explore them further through movement and speaking.

This is different from theatrical improvisation in which one may be thinking up clever situations or characters to enact. In shared vipassana—as in authentic movement—the images arising begin with the body. Opening to all the sense doors, informed by body position and movement, the mover may naturally make associations to past experiences, or may envision places or characters they have never encountered in real life. By describing these images aloud, and moving into them, the mover may also find a story begin to develop, discovering as it unfolds how the story affects him emotionally.

Exploring an image through movement and words is quite different from getting lost in thought during a sitting meditation. In the latter, one tends to “blank out,” losing one's connection to the present moment, often carried away with emotion tied to thought (worry, desire, etc.). In shared vipassana, the mover is reconnected to the present through his movement and his speaking, and therefore is less prone to get lost in identification with what is arising.

Some do not experience images or memories as much as others, some not at all. It can take time getting comfortable with authentic movement in order for these associations to arise. Do not push or strive for it to happen. If images or memories arise naturally for you, that's great; if not, that's fine too. In the absence of imagery one can be

even more present to the subtle phenomena arising in each of the six sense doors, noticing one's emotional and mental responses in each moment.

Moving shared vipassana—in particular the exploration of inner imagery—is a fully embodied version of what Jung termed Active Imagination (Chodorow, 1997), a meditation on what is spontaneously unfolding in the imagination, with the active participation of—but not overt shaping or influencing by—the meditator. What shared vipassana adds—movement, speech, and an observing witness—all help support this exploration by making it easier for the meditator/mover to stay focused on what is arising moment by moment.

Witnessing and Sharing Together Afterwards

As in authentic movement, the role of the witness is to create a container of nonjudgmental and caring support for the mover, as well as to observe all that they do; and, in the case of moving shared vipassana, to listen to all they say.

To do this, the witness may wish to move—if the mover is whispering or very quiet, the witness can get up and move closer. (For safety, it's important to remember to maintain some space between mover and witness, in case the mover has a sudden impulse to make a big gesture quickly.)

At the same time, the basic orientation in shared vipassana is that the speaking the mover is doing is *for the mover*, not for the witness. The witness will get what she gets; things she cannot hear fully or does not understand may be clarified in the sharing process afterward.

With the permission beforehand of the mover, the witness may also take notes. This is particularly helpful to capture what the mover says, although notes about his

movement are useful as well. If the witness finds that note-taking is getting in the way of simply being present—if she needs to look down at her page often in order to write—she should let it go. Sometimes taking notes helps one be *more* present; this can vary from witness to witness. (If the mover wishes to capture what he says during his movement, he can also use an audio recording device or app.)

When time is up, the witness can say “Slowly, in your own time, bring your movement to a close.” Alternatively, if the mover is speaking a lot, rather than talk over him, the witness can gently ring a bell. The mover takes his time to bring whatever is happening to a close, letting go of the last image, memory, or movement, and ends with a moment of stillness, noticing his body and breath, relaxing and releasing.

Once the mover opens his eyes and comes to sit with the witness, the witness begins by asking: “Would you like to speak first, or shall I?” This is different from authentic movement, in which it is assumed the mover always speaks first. Because in shared vipassana—as well as exercises to come, such as psolodrama—the mover is speaking, sometimes a lot, they may prefer to be silent for a while and let the witness speak first. Also, having the witness begin the sharing dialogue is usually a more viable option in shared vipassana than in authentic movement, because the witness has had the additional window of speech during the movement to help her understand what was happening from the mover’s point of view—so she is less likely to contradict in her sharing the mover’s own internal take on what was occurring.

When the mover speaks, he can share anything he likes about what arose in his movement, in any way he likes. The witness’s sharing is completely in support of the mover. Ideally, she can intuit from what has occurred in the moving and sharing so far

what would be most helpful to add. Sometimes this may mean tracing back through the movement in chronological order, mirroring back as accurately as possible what she saw and heard. Or, it may be more important to focus in on one or a few key moments—perhaps moments the mover shared about afterwards—and discuss not only the movement and speech but also what the witness perceived and felt during those moments, including what she was projecting onto them.

Final Thoughts

Moving shared vipassana is one of my favorite Insight Improvisation exercises. Practicing it, for me, is like stepping into a warm swimming pool. I have a feeling of instant relaxation, combined with a sense of freedom and possibility—anything can happen, and I can let go of the need to perform or produce anything. My role is just to “be”—and to share what is happening. Because of this comfort and freedom, the experience of the exercise can go quite deep: I often touch on profound and buried feelings that I’ve not allowed myself to experience or express in my day-to-day life. Shared vipassana provides an opportunity to converse with my authentic self.

(For applications of shared vipassana in individual therapy and group settings, see Part IV, Insight Improvisation in the World—Working with Individuals and Groups.)

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Further Exploration with Meditation

This final chapter in Part I offers additional ideas and techniques designed to deepen one's meditation practice, address challenges faced in meditation, and help bridge the gap between being mindful on the cushion and doing so in daily life.

Further Exploration with Meditation		
<i>Five Precepts • Five Hindrances • Facing Challenges</i>		
	<i>Sitting Meditations</i>	<i>Moving Meditations</i>
<i>Solo</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Meditation on Distractions</i> • <i>Gratitude Meditation</i> • <i>Metta-vipassana</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Nature Meditation</i> • <i>City Meditation</i>
<i>Pair</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Eye Contact Meditation</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Mindful Guide</i>

Discussion begins with the Five Precepts, the moral foundation for meditative practice; the Five Hindrances, the main obstacles faced by anyone who embarks on the path of meditation; and ideas about how to apply meditative concepts to real-life challenges. The remainder of the chapter focuses on active exercises as well as silent meditations that provide the opportunity to practice mindfulness, choicelessness, and

lovingkindness, strengthening one's ability to be present and aware, as well as deepening understanding of awareness itself.

The exercises in this chapter may be helpful for those who have tried meditation but find it challenging to focus and be present while sitting still. They may also be of benefit to experienced meditators who are interested in new approaches to freshen up old practices and break free of habits.

The Five Precepts

The Buddha recognized that the basis for meditation is a calm mind. Violations of morality disrupt one's peace and calm, often through lingering feelings of guilt or shame, or through increasing the drama and complexity of one's life (e.g., having an affair can lead to a series of lies that become difficult to maintain). In contrast, living an ethical life—fostering a mind that is clear and free—provides an ideal foundation on which to build a steady meditation practice. As moral guidelines for lay practitioners, the Five Precepts are at the heart of the devoted meditator's path.

Much has been written about the Five Precepts. What follows is a brief summary. You may notice parallels to the Ten Commandments from the Judeo-Christian tradition; many religions have their own similar set of moral guidelines.

1. Not to kill—I undertake the precept neither to kill nor to harm any being.

The focus here is on intention as well as action: in a moment of anger, can I notice my intention to lash out at another, and instead be still—holding my tongue (and my hand) until I can respond with reason and compassion? Each precept invites us to broaden

our awareness. Here we are invited, as Thich Nhat Hanh (1991, pp.94-134) points out, to notice how all beings are interconnected, and to ponder the implications of our actions and lifestyle. For example, if I eat meat, what effect does that have on animals, as well as the environment at large?

2. *Not to steal*—I undertake the precept to take only what is given.

Although the idea of not stealing seems fairly clear cut, to articulate the precept as “taking only what is given” is also useful, as a way to detect morally ambiguous situations and clean them up in one’s own life. Not to report all of one’s income on taxes, to take a neighbor’s grapes that are hanging over the sidewalk without asking, to “borrow” small office supplies from work for one’s own use at home—we encounter situations each day that we might justify to ourselves for a variety of reasons. Ultimately, however, all of these small breakdowns in integrity can detract from having a clear conscience and a calm mind.

3. *Not to engage in sexual misconduct*—I undertake the precept to use my sexual energies only in ways that do not harm others or myself.

Sexual attraction and lust, when followed blindly, can lead to all kinds of problems, from disease, to addiction to pornography, to divorce. For those married or in committed relationships, this precept prohibits affairs; for everyone, it encourages behavior that is respectful and caring to oneself and others—to approach sexuality mindfully.

4. Not to speak falsely—I undertake the precept to speak only that which is useful, true, and supportive of others.

This precept refers to “Right Speech,” and the many ways we use language that neither serve ourselves nor others. How many times have you asked yourself “why did I say (or write!) that?” How we use words (spoken or written) can impact others, and ourselves, as much as physically harming or stealing. The practice of Right Speech means to speak less, to think before speaking, and not to be reactive. Is what I’m about to say useful, beneficial, and is the timing right? When faced with a strong negative emotion, I must take a deep breath, or several, and remind myself not to speak, or act, while identified with this feeling. Similarly, if I am feeling bad about a written message I’ve received, it is a useful practice to wait at least a day before responding—invariably my response is much more grounded and well-considered.

5. Not to use intoxicants—I undertake the precept to abstain from alcohol or other mind-altering drugs.

For those who enjoy the occasional alcoholic beverage, this precept may seem overly strict. But as meditators, we depend on the mind to be sharp and clear, not clouded by substances. Abstaining from alcohol and other drugs—to practice renunciation—encourages a heightened awareness of our tendency to want to “check-out” and not be fully present. By renouncing all intoxicants, I am making a self-declaration of my strong intention to be present, for myself and for others.

The Five Hindrances

In his teachings, the Buddha described five hindrances—qualities of mind that are obstacles for any meditator. The five are: *sensory desire*, *ill will*, *sloth/torpor*, *restlessness/worry*, and *doubt*. Every meditator experiences these in some form; the challenge (and opportunity) is to not allow them to sabotage one's practice, but instead to use the awareness of them to deepen one's practice.

One helpful approach is sometimes described with the acronym RAIN (Fronsdal, 2008):

R—Recognize the hindrance.

A—Accept it.

I—Investigate it: what is this like?

N—Not identify with it: this hindrance is not “me;” like any process, it arises and passes away.

In addition, each of the five hindrances has an “antidote” or counterbalance—a corresponding practice to help overcome it (Fronsdal, 2008):

1. Sensory desire. This can include anything from hunger and daydreaming of food to lust and sexual fantasy—as well as a desire for comfort, to have or experience something, etc.

Modern capitalist societies tend to focus on meeting (and often exceeding) the sensory desires of people (consumers). This is the engine for growth of economies, but it can lead to harmful habits of mind and body for individuals. Learning to recognize our

pervasive patterns of thought and attachment to sensory desire—the water in which we swim—can be challenging and confronting.

The antidote to sensory desire is to investigate it with mindfulness, realizing that the experience of pleasure is impermanent, and is usually accompanied by attachment, sometimes aversion, and ultimately suffering—the suffering caused by one's attachment to the pleasurable experience when it ends.

Paying attention only to the pleasurable aspects of what comes in through our senses is a little like an actor who reads only his good reviews, never his bad. If we are attached to pleasure, it can close us off from learning and growing.

As I eat, for example, if I really notice the process of chewing, of forming the food into a bolus, and how that slimy packet of food enters my throat and travels down my esophagus, I may become conscious of aversion that can balance my attachment to the food. When I'm finished eating, it can be helpful to sit with the experience of fullness, and with the grasping and disappointment that the meal is over.

Sitting in meditation, if I am caught up in sexual desire, it can be helpful to contemplate the fact that that person, too, sometimes has bad breath and bad moods, and will ultimately get old, sick, and die. (It can also be skillful to redirect one's desire, when possible, in a positive direction. What alternatives exist for making love to this person beyond sex? How might I transform the sexual desire into a loving desire to help this person?)

In this way, a meditator cultivates disenchantment with pleasures of the senses, neither clinging to them nor pushing them away, but recognizing them as potential traps to be wary of. Ultimately, the meditator is learning to sit with his desire, to see what

underlies it. Perhaps there is a feeling of emptiness inside him—something incomplete in some area of his life—that is driving the desire. Meditating on desire in this way can lead to insight.

As the Buddha described, our senses are always “burning” like fires (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1993). Through the practice of meditation and self-inquiry, we can begin to extinguish those fires, allowing access to a simpler existence, one a little less strongly driven by consumption, greed, and attachment to comfort. And when I am less caught up in my own desire, I can look around me and more readily see the suffering of others, and how I might help.

2. Ill Will. This hindrance refers to states of mind driven by hatred, resentment, or anger—which could be toward a person, toward the object of the meditation, or even toward oneself (in the form of guilt or self-criticism).

Just as sensory desire is attachment-based, ill will is aversion-based; but ill will can be equally if not more compelling, to the point of obsession or addiction. For example, if I feel I have been treated unfairly by someone, my thought patterns of ill will toward that person may build, to the point where I feel fully justified in hating them, avoiding them, gossiping about them to others, seeking revenge, etc.

The antidote to ill will is *metta*. If I apply lovingkindness to the object of my ill will—be it another person, a body sensation, or myself—the very practice of examining my intention and re-centering on one that is loving, caring, empathic, and equanimous, can shift my emotional and mental state dramatically.

(An example of using *metta* when dealing with anger toward another person appears in the *Meditation* chapter, in the section “Applying *Metta*: Working with Anger.”)

For additional ways of using *metta* when working with objects arising in meditation, see *metta-vipassana* later in this chapter).

3. Sloth/Torpor. This hindrance refers to sleepiness or laziness—a dullness of the mind—that can occur anytime, but tends to be particularly challenging in certain situations: on long meditation retreats, after eating, when short on sleep, in a warm room, etc.

The antidote to sloth/torpor is wakefulness—which can sometimes be as simple as sitting up straight and taking a deep breath. Other techniques that help in the moment are meditating with eyes open, resting the hands on top of the head, or raising both arms in the air (for a few minutes). If these techniques do not work, it is perfectly OK to get up and meditate standing—one of the postures the Buddha is depicted meditating in (standing, sitting in a chair, sitting cross-legged, and reclining). Sometimes what's actually needed is a nap (or a better night's sleep); other times getting up, walking around, washing the face with cold water, and returning to meditate later is what's needed. Walking meditation or other active forms of meditation can also be helpful in addressing this hindrance.

Ultimately, if sloth/torpor is a repeated pattern or habit, one needs to examine, with mindfulness, what is at its root. Is this a form of aversion or avoidance—e.g. growing sleepy in order to not be present? What am I avoiding by becoming drowsy? Or do I just need more sleep? By combining mindfulness and an inquiring mind with some of the physical techniques to encourage alertness listed above, one may begin to understand the cause.

4. Restlessness/Worry. The opposite of sloth/torpor, a restless mind can be equally challenging for meditators—a repeated pattern of extraneous thought, inability to settle down and focus, “monkey-mind.” Restlessness can also be expressed physically in an inability to sit still, constantly needing to shift position, not being at ease or centered. Restlessness often manifests as worry—a mind projecting into the future, making negative predictions, comparing itself unfavorably to others, etc.

The antidote to restlessness is mindfulness—but of course, if mindfulness were always easily accessible, restlessness would not be a problem! It is important to remember that meditation is not about stopping thought—we cannot control the mind (if we try to, this can actually be more harmful than helpful). Certain techniques usually help restore mindfulness in the face of a wandering or worrying mind: in *anapanasati*, using a *gatha* (a repeated phrase) to bring the mind back to the breath—or counting breaths; in *vipassana*, labeling the sense door as each object arises (e.g., “body sensation,” “hearing,” etc.). (For descriptions of these techniques, see “Addressing the Challenges of Meditation” in the *Meditation* chapter.)

5. Doubt. This hindrance is insidious in that it can eat away at one’s motivation to practice, eroding one’s morale. The nature of the path of meditation is challenging—if meditation were easy, it would not be such a powerful process of growth and learning. Voices of doubt creep in: “Is this really working? What if I’m wasting my time? Is enlightenment really possible for any being? Is the Buddha a myth?”

The antidote to doubt is self-examination. The Buddha urged his followers to examine for themselves whether something he taught was true, to not accept it blindly. What benefits do you notice from your meditation practice? What are you discovering?

How do you feel after meditating? Do you notice changes over time? And are you challenging yourself to be present, to explore deeply, to examine subtle phenomena, to encounter and work with suffering in all its manifestations—physical, mental, and emotional? How are you living your practice off the cushion?

When experiencing doubt, interacting with a good teacher is helpful, as is reconnecting with the *sangha*, or community of meditators, by going on retreat or visiting one's local meditation center. Listening to a single good *dharma* talk (there are many available for free on the internet), or reading a good book on meditation, can also refresh and strengthen one's commitment to practice.

Exploring Life Challenges through a Meditative Lens

What is suffering? If I have a stomachache, is the physical pain itself the suffering? Upon mindful examination, I may find that it's the mental/emotional squirming and avoidance in reaction to the sensations that is creating the suffering. Through meditation, I can learn to be present to the physical sensations and hold them with greater acceptance—with curiosity and caring—rather than aversion. (In my own case, this practice may have helped contribute to my chronic stomach issues lessening over time and finally disappearing.)

It is helpful to use meditation as a way to identify some form of challenge or difficulty one is undergoing, and explore it through the lens of the three characteristics of existence: suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*), and non-self (*anatta*).

To use a different example, if I am habitually comparing myself with someone else—thinking that my life, the level of success I’ve achieved, the opportunities I’ve been given, and the work I am doing are inferior to what they have—can I notice these thoughts arising in the meditation, and rather than push them away, work with them:

Suffering: Where am I grasping—e.g., desiring material wealth, fame, success, greater ease or comfort? Where do I have aversion; what aspects of my life—which I view as inferior—am I pushing away rather than engaging with? Where do I have delusion or ignorance, so wrapped up in my comparing state of mind that I am not even present to the richness of existence, the beauty of this very moment?

Impermanence: How am I holding things as permanent, unchanging, when in fact everything is and will change? In the face of the inevitability of illness, aging, and death, does it make sense to compare myself with my friend? The very things that I am jealous of will all disappear—ultimately nothing can be held onto.

Non-self: Is my comparing and jealousy based on a distorted view—that there is a “me,” an “I,” that is inferior to “they?” What if “I” does not exist? Can I realize this life-long project to succeed, or accumulate wealth, or build a reputation is actually empty and meaningless, just tiring me out? When I reorient my perception to “we”—that all beings are connected—can I bring *metta* to my friend, noticing where he may be suffering, and having joy for his successes? I begin to find that my ego-driven view, wrapped up in concerns about “me,” and “my life,” is causing me suffering. The path to freedom lies in listening to others, devoting myself to their happiness and well-being.

Sitting Alone

If you have already tried *samadhi*, *vipassana*, *metta*, and associated practices (described earlier in the *Meditation* chapter), here are a few additional techniques and ideas that can help address challenges arising in regular meditation practice—including working with the five hindrances. It can also be valuable to explore these approaches with a peer as a warm-up to other Insight Improv activities.

Meditation on Distractions

Frequently when meditating one can be distracted—by body sensations, sounds, voices, etc. Our habitual response to the distraction may be irritation or even anger: “This is getting in the way of my meditation!” I may struggle repeatedly to focus, to return to the present, to return to the breath. But the distractions can be overwhelming, particularly if there are many at once.

One paradoxical approach is to make the distractions the object of the meditation. As a distraction arises, say, a sound, I can decide to open to that sound, approach it with curiosity, investigate it, and notice how I am responding to it. Is the sound pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? Am I responding to it with attachment, aversion, or delusion? And rather than be reactive, can I sit with the sound, truly open to it, and cultivate acceptance of it? The answer to that last question is usually “yes”, but depending on what the sound (or other distraction) is, I may find it challenging to just be present to it. It is through confronting these challenges that I strengthen my ability to be present and nonreactive in the face of the wide range of experiences life presents.

Once I have spent a while focusing in on a single distraction, I can let it go and return to open awareness, or to the breath, and wait for another distraction to arise. In this

way, the meditation becomes a conscious examination of each object arising in the field of awareness that is triggering me in some way. Each object provides an opportunity to work with my reactivity and to practice a non-habitual response.

Gratitude Meditation

Related to *metta* practice, gratitude meditation is a practice of focusing on what one is grateful for in one's life. This is particularly helpful when feeling depressed, sad, lonely, stuck in a rut, etc. Gratitude meditation can be practiced in a few different ways:

I. Meditating on Gratitude Statements. The standard approach—parallel to the use of *metta* phrases—is to reserve time at the end of a sitting meditation to state silently, in one's own mind, what one is grateful for, e.g. “I am grateful for children....I am grateful for sunshine....I am grateful for trees,” etc. It is helpful to pause in between each gratitude statement in order to be fully present to the image of the thing one is grateful for. The exercise can often touch emotional depths. After fighting with one's spouse, to say “I am grateful for my husband/wife” invites seeing the other person in a completely different light.

II. Journaling Gratitude Statements. Another approach is to write down the gratitude statements, which can help increase focus during the meditation. This can be combined with the first technique: At the end of a sitting meditation, have a pen and journal nearby. Begin with eyes closed, allowing what you are grateful for to come forth. Then write the statement: e.g., “I am grateful for my body.” Then, with eyes closed again, contemplate that statement for a few moments—explore it mindfully, noticing the feelings that arise in association with the statement. Then repeat the process. Try writing

and meditating on ten gratitude statements and then notice how you feel at the end of the meditation.

III. Vipassana with Gratitude. A third approach combines gratitude with *vipassana* practice: As you open to choiceless awareness of what is arising in the six sense doors, focus in on whatever the next object is—a thought, a sound, etc. What are you grateful for about this object? For example, if you notice your jaw unclench (a body sensation), you might say in your mind: “I am grateful for the ability to relax.” Contemplate the phrase mindfully for a moment—noticing how you feel—then let it go, opening once again to whatever is arising. Gratitude can help with the acceptance of unpleasant objects. If I feel a pain in my back, I may observe that “I am grateful for the ability to feel” or “I am grateful for my body and all that it experiences” or “I am grateful for being alive and present,” etc. It’s important, however, not to let the gratitude statement interfere with being present to the object itself and thus become a form of avoidance. Make sure to take the time to be present to each object, noticing whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and whether grasping, aversion, or delusion results.

Metta-vipassana

Parallel to the third form of gratitude meditation, *metta-vipassana* is a variation on standard *vipassana* practice, with a simple instruction: as objects arise in the field of awareness, hold each object with *metta*.

What this means is to apply in each moment the qualities of the Four *Brahmaviharas*: lovingkindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity (discussed earlier in the *Meditation* chapter).

For example, as I sit in meditation, I may notice a pulsing, vibrating feeling in my belly. Doing *metta-vipassana*, I consciously choose to hold that sensation with lovingkindness, accepting and inviting it. As I do so, my body relaxes, and my sense of equanimity increases. I become more present.

As pain arises, I can exercise compassion, holding the pain as if it were a child, sending it love and caring.

For pleasant sensations and emotions, I can apply empathetic joy.

Metta-vipassana is particularly useful for long-time practitioners of *vipassana* whose practice feels dry or intellectual. It is a way of bringing the heart together with the mind, to deepen the power of meditation.

Sitting with a Partner

Meditating with a partner is not only a powerful way of connecting with another, it can also be a wonderful support in helping one to be more present.

Buddhist teachings often refer to the “triple gem:” the Buddha; the Dharma (teachings); and the Sangha, or group of fellow practitioners on the path. Being able to sit and meditate with a fellow meditator, or in a group of peers, can create a strong container of mindfulness and mutual commitment, enabling one’s meditation to be especially focused.

If you have not already tried them, I recommend starting with **shared vipassana dialogue** (see the previous chapter on *Shared Vipassana*) and then continuing with **metta dialogue** (in the chapter on Active Meditation).

Both of these meditations, which involve speaking, can be preceded by meditating silently together. What follows is a silent partner meditation that works well for this purpose. It's an excellent meditation for couples or friends, and can also be introduced in a workshop setting.

Eye Contact Meditation

Sit together with a partner, facing one another. For this exercise, it is helpful to sit relatively level, eye-to-eye, e.g., avoid having one person in a chair while the other sits on the floor.

Agree beforehand on the timing of the meditation. There are two variations on this exercise regarding timing: one option is to set timers marking when eyes should open and then close once again (e.g., meditate for five minutes with eyes closed, then meditate in eye contact with one another for five minutes, and then end with five minutes with eyes closed once again); a second approach is for partners to open and close their eyes whenever they feel moved to—a timer can be set simply to mark the ending of the meditation as a whole. These instructions will describe the second option.

Begin by closing your eyes, entering the meditation as you normally do. I like to begin by noticing the body and the breath, practicing *samadhi* for a minute or two using the breath, and then opening to all the sense doors, choicelessly, with *vipassana*.

When you are ready, slowly open your eyes. If you raise your eyelids very slowly, this allows you to take in your partner's legs, torso, neck, and then face, before making eye contact. Really look at your partner's body, noticing color, shape, etc.—being aware of what is pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—all the ways we grasp onto and identify with what is coming in through the visual channel—noticing thoughts and feelings arising. As

you look, notice your own body, your breath—what changes are you noticing moment by moment? Take your time.

In this version of the exercise, your partner's eyes may already be open, or not. If they are not, keep looking and exploring. If they are, make eye contact with your partner. Notice what this is like: to see and be seen. Notice the sensations, thoughts, and feelings arising. And, of course, notice their eyes. Can you relax and look deeply into them? Can you maintain the gaze without needing to look away? It helps to remember to breathe and to relax the body. Try opening your mouth to fully relax your face and jaw.

Let your eye contact be relaxed. There is no need to stare: it is OK to look away momentarily and to blink. But then return to making relaxed eye contact.

Once you have moved beyond the novelty of making such prolonged eye contact with another, you can begin to relax into the meditation. Still in eye contact, return to your *vipassana* practice. It may help to label each sense door as objects arise: body sensation, hearing, seeing, thinking, etc.

At any time you like, you can close your eyes, returning to meditating “normally,” but with the added element that your partner may be looking at you. You can also open your eyes once again and return to eye contact at any time. This version of the exercise is a little bit of an improvisational dance—when the two are in eye contact, they are dancing together; at other times, each is dancing alone, but with an awareness of the other (for a physicalized version of this dance, see Part II, the chapter on *The Three States*).

When the timer goes off, both partners can end by closing their eyes for a minute or two, returning to *vipassana* and an awareness of the body, mind, and feelings. When you are both ready, take a few minutes to discuss the experience.

Movement Meditations for One

It can be helpful to vary one's approach to meditation at times, to break free of sitting and to use the body. Not only is it healthy to move, but often the insights we have off the cushion are important for understanding how to apply meditative concepts to daily life.

In earlier chapters we have already discussed a few basic approaches including classic **walking meditation** as well as **movement meditation**, plus **moving shared vipassana** in the last chapter. Here are two additional approaches that invite the meditator to get off the cushion and go exploring outdoors:

Nature Meditation

This form of meditation—as well as City Meditation, below—are practices in following inner “gut” impulse, returning to the present moment, and opening to all the senses.

Nature Meditation can be practiced in any natural setting: a forest, a beach, a garden, etc. It's helpful to have a journal and pen ready for use after the meditation; you may also wish to have a timer to mark when the meditation ends (this is preferable to consulting a watch or phone constantly).

The goal in Nature Meditation is to be fully present throughout the meditation, noticing whatever is arising in the field of awareness: opening to all the senses, body sensations, emotions, and thoughts. In these ways, it is similar to *vipassana* meditation. The difference is that in Nature Meditation, you are able to move, to look around, to touch things, smell things, to experience nature up close and from any angle. Nature Meditation invites us to be children again, exploring with all our senses.

Begin by setting the timer—20 minutes is a good length of time if you're trying this for the first time—and putting away any writing materials or electronics. Your hands should be free. For the next 20 minutes you have nothing to do, nowhere to go, no one to be.

Standing still, take a moment to close your eyes and relax your body. Breathe. Open to all your senses. What do you smell? What do you hear? Throughout the meditation, take your time to pause, relax, and open to what's around you.

When you're ready, open your eyes. Notice what your body wants to do. Follow your body's impulses as it moves around the environment. Notice every bit of sensation as you move—the quality of the air, the feeling of the ground under your feet. What do you see? Notice colors, shapes, patterns. Touch something—a tree, for example. How does the bark feel? As your hands grip the trunk, feel the solidity of the tree. Smell the tree's scent. Look even more closely at the surface of the bark—all the variations in color, the roughness of the surface. Observe and touch the lichen growing on it. Does it feel different from the tree? How does it smell? Etc.

At any time, you can close your eyes, relax your body, breathe, and listen. You can also move anytime you like, to explore something new: the soil, a flower, the sky. You may find yourself standing very still for a long period of time, noticing and observing an animal, bird, or insect closely.

A few guidelines for the meditation: no speaking, writing, or use of electronic devices.

It's OK to rest: if what your body wants to do is to lie down on the grass or in the sand, do it! Trust your body and its impulses.

When your timer sounds, close your eyes and take a minute to relax, breathe, and notice how you are feeling. Then, if you like, sit and journal for 10 minutes or so, capturing what you noticed during the experience, and how you feel afterwards. Feel free to write a poem, make a drawing, or write spontaneously—do not worry about the quality of the writing/drawing. Here's a poem I wrote after one Nature Meditation:

A flower
In all its solid purple
Twisting fibres
Dry and powder
Spring from green

If you do this meditation with a friend (or in a workshop context), it's helpful to discuss your experience once you're done writing. You can start by sharing your poem or drawing with them. Answer this question: "What did I notice during this meditation that I do not ordinarily notice?"

City Meditation

Similar to Nature Meditation, City Meditation is an exercise in listening to our inner impulses and opening to mindful awareness.

My first experience of doing a City Meditation was in Berlin. I had gone there with my partner at the time to visit friends of hers. They all decided to go on a bicycle trip together in the countryside, but having never been in Berlin I wanted to explore the

city and did not mind being by myself for the day. I set an assignment for myself: rather than follow the guide book and do the usual tourist things, I would improvise—I would leave the apartment and follow my gut impulse, moment by moment, allowing myself to discover and explore.

The key ground rule I set for myself was to notice my habits, and to *not* do them. For example, if I notice my habit of standing in bookstores and reading magazines begin to assert itself, I would make a different choice.

What unfolded, moment by moment, was an absolutely magical day. With fresh eyes, I observed the street, the buildings, the people. I spent many moments just standing and looking. I came upon fascinating works of public art and architecture, from old churches and synagogues to remnants of the Nazi regime. Instead of the feeling of pressure I'd so often noticed as a tourist—to see and do as many things as possible in a limited time—I felt a great sense of relaxation and peace. I could smile and marvel at the beauty of a small child or baby going by with its parents. I noticed animals and trees. I opened to the smells and sounds of the city. Everything came alive that day.

A few guidelines for your City Meditation: as with Nature Meditation, no electronics (cell phone ringer off; do not answer calls unless it's an emergency), cameras, writing, or speaking (you can speak if someone addresses you directly, but keep the interaction brief). If you notice a habit arising—e.g., something you tend to do to fill time, or are driven to do by a sense of grasping—make a different choice. Do not purchase anything, unless your body needs sustenance, in which case you have a perfect opportunity to practice mindful eating!

A good City Meditation can be as short as 20 minutes or as long as three or four hours. Find moments to close your eyes, breathe, listen to the body, relax, and be present. Follow your body and its impulses. If you do not know what to do in a given moment, just stand still and observe, opening your senses. An impulse will eventually come to you.

Optionally, end by journaling about your experience. It's also rewarding to reflect on the experience with a fellow-meditator.

Movement Meditations for Two

Several exercises in Insight Improvisation are active meditations for two or more individuals. So far in Part I we have described **mindful massage**; in Part II we'll be delving into a partner movement exercise involving eye contact and physical contact called **the three states**.

The following is a new variation on a classic trust-building exercise. It is a fun activity that can be done indoors or outdoors with a partner and is easily adaptable for use with children.

Mindful Guide

This exercise is done with a partner and is best practiced outdoors or in a sufficiently large and sensory-rich indoor location (see ideas below). It's best if there are few other people around. (For a workshop, however, it's fine if other participants are also doing the exercise nearby.)

One person is the Guide; the other, the Meditator. There is no speaking during this exercise. Set a timer beforehand—15 minutes is a good length to start out—so that you will not need to consult a watch or cellphone during the exercise.

The Meditator closes his eyes and will largely keep his eyes closed throughout the exercise, even while moving. The Guide will guide him and watch out for his safety.

The goal or focus of the Meditator is to be present throughout the exercise, to open to all his senses, and to fully experience the journey the Guide will take him on.

The goal of the Guide is to take her Meditator on a sensory journey or tour of the area and to take care that the Meditator stays safe at all times.

The Guide uses her body instead of words. She can take the Meditator by the hand to lead him forward, gently apply a hand to the chest to stop him, hold his shoulders and apply slight pressure to indicate that he should turn in place or sit down, etc. She can also position the Meditator's head near a flower to smell it or put his hands on a tree trunk to feel its bark. She can even have him hug the tree to experience how that feels.

One special signal that can be agreed on beforehand has the Guide tapping the Meditator once lightly on the top of his head as a signal to open his eyes—a bit like opening the shutter of a camera. The Meditator looks at whatever the Guide has positioned him in front of, until the Guide taps him lightly on the head again, the signal to close his eyes once again.

Throughout the exercise, it is best to proceed slowly with no rapid movements. Pauses and moments of stillness and silence are encouraged. There is no agenda: the Meditator simply takes it all in, which at times may simply be feeling the air around him and his feet on the ground.

It's interesting to try this exercise in evocative locations—such as by a pond, or in a beautiful old cemetery. You might also try this indoors in a natural history, art, or science museum or in a large department store on a day with few people around—just be aware of the Meditator's safety.

When the time is up, the pair can discuss the experience before switching roles. Discuss which moments stood out for the Meditator. It's also interesting to notice what came up for the Meditator around letting go of control, and trusting the Guide. What feelings arose during the experience? How did those feelings impact his ability to be mindful? Etc.

Final Thoughts

Meditation can be an exercise one does every now and then, or a practice one performs every day. It can be a singular experience or a life path. There is no one “right” way to meditate.

In Insight Improvisation, meditation—and, in particular, the focus on mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness—is a window through which one can see one's life and one's art and/or work in a different way.

As an actor, by starting with meditative awareness, I am brought into intimate contact with not only my body and senses, but also my thoughts, emotions, inner imagery, memories, etc. Each of these sense doors becomes a source of inspiration: rather than strive to create or be clever, I realize I can simply listen. And it is the practice of meditation—in my case, a daily practice—that strengthens my ability to listen to these impulses.

Something parallel is true for me as a practitioner of drama therapy—both in the role of therapist, as well as a peer practicing with a trusted friend. By starting with meditation, opening to the sense doors, learning to notice and let go of the neurotic cycling of habitual thought patterns, I am more able to cut through the noise of day-to-day problems or variations in mood, and open to deeper messages from the body-mind, underlying themes emerging in my life, or in the life of my client.

As a person, and particularly as a husband and father to two small children, meditation has increased my ability to be non-reactive in the face of strong emotion, to respond rather than react. I am by no means a perfect person and can sometimes react with anger or rashness in challenging situations. But I have noticed over time an increased ability, coming directly from meditation (sometimes, literally, as I emerge from a morning meditation to greet my family), to remember to be the best husband and father I can be, to be truly present, to connect, and to bring lovingkindness into my interactions with my family and with others.

One of the paradoxes of Insight Improvisation is that by combining meditation and therapy with theater, we are learning to cultivate non-reactivity and inward awareness, while also strengthening our ability to creatively express ourselves. There will be more focus on the latter as we head into Part II, Contemplative Theater.

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Practices such as Nature Meditation and Mindful Guide are resonant with the teachings of Joanna Macy, who uses experiential training to convey her Buddhist approach to environmental activism.

Doha — Vajra Song

Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower,
but is already there, in relaxation and letting-go.

Don't strain yourself, there is nothing to do.
Whatever arises in the mind has no importance at all,
because it has no reality whatsoever.
Don't become attached to it.
Don't pass judgment.

Let the game happen on its own, springing up and falling back
— without changing anything —
and all will vanish and reappear, without end.

Only our searching for happiness prevents us from seeing it.
It is like a rainbow which you run after without ever catching it.
Although it does not exist,
it has always been there and accompanies you every instant.

Don't believe in the reality of good and bad experiences;
they are like rainbows.

Wanting to grasp the ungraspable, you exhaust yourself in vain.
As soon as you relax this grasping, space is there
— open, inviting, and comfortable.

So, make use of it. All is yours already.
Don't search any further.
Don't go into the inextricable jungle looking for the elephant
who is already quietly at home.

Nothing to do,
nothing to force,
nothing to want,
— and everything happens by itself.

— *The Venerable Lama Gendün Rinpoche*

Part II: Playing

Theater and Improvisation as Meditation

Try to be mindful, and let things take their natural course.

Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool.

— *The Venerable Ajahn Chah*

Naked Improvisation

“Naked” describes the experience we encounter when everything extraneous to the essential nature of being falls away: all the grasping and rejection, me and mine, wanting and not wanting, hopes, fears and struggles. What would life be like if we could relax into our world rather than feeling like we always had to cherish ourselves with it or protect ourselves from it? What would it be like to have a “naked” experience?

— Elizabeth Namgyel (2012)

Contemplative Theater: Stripping It Down

In Insight Improvisation, the term Contemplative Theater (CT) refers to the exploration of performance and the art of acting through the lens of mindfulness.

Part II of this book is devoted to Contemplative Theater, and specifically to techniques developed for actors—that can also be enjoyed by non-actors—for use in training, creative exploration and sourcing of new material, and in performance.

(Please note that throughout Part II we will be referring to “the actor,” “the performer,” or “the improviser.” However, many of the concepts discussed—such as Performance Mind versus Being Mind, or the expressive use of voice and body language—can be applied more broadly, e.g. to a presenter or leader communicating with a business audience, or other everyday communication situations.)

I’ve been lucky enough over the years to be able to study with theater artists exploring the integration of theater with meditation and mindfulness, including Jean-Claude van Itallie, Scott Kelman, Ruth Zaporah, and Christie Svane, all of whom are referenced in the chapters to come. Others have explored this union, such as Lee Worley, Professor of Performance at Naropa University (2001).

Several elements distinguish CT from other kinds of theater:

Mindful Intention. Theatre can do many things—it can entertain, inform, warn, question or poke fun at social norms or trends, and/or evoke a cathartic response from the audience. Although CT can do all of these things, its underlying purpose is to create an experience of mindfulness for the audience, as well as the performers. Together, all share in a space of open, heightened, present-moment awareness, appreciating the richness of what is unfolding.

Actor as meditator. CT is interested in the inner state of the performer, and in cultivating acting that is present, focused, open, and connected with other actors and the audience. Although creating a mindful experience for the audience is also a goal of CT, it is equally concerned with the performer’s creative journey, in the present moment, and how their state of mind and body affects that journey.

A “poor” theater. CT is poor in the Grotowskian sense—it is stripped down to its essentials: actor, audience and empty space—with a minimum of sets, props, costumes, lighting effects, makeup, etc. (Grotowski, 1968). As Chögyam Trungpa, the Tibetan Buddhist teacher, once said, “The art of anything is not adding, it’s subtracting.”

Valuing negative space. In CT, what is not happening can be as important as what is. Silence, slowness, breathing, pausing, and movement without words all contribute to the creation of a mindful performance. The actor does not rush to fill space; instead, he breathes fully and deeply, letting the moment in.

Contemplative Improvisation

Insight Improvisation builds on all of the elements described above, with a particular focus on improvisation. Improvisation, as we’ll see in the exercises in Part II of this book, can include acting without a script, but can also include working with a text or a chosen story in a spontaneous way, not planned beforehand. There are several parallels between improvisation and meditation. Here are a few, based on the three types of awareness discussed in Part I of this book:

- **Mindfulness:** Being present—being “in the moment”—is fundamental to both improvisation and meditation; if an improviser is not present, the improvisation will quickly go off the rails.
- **Choicelessness:** Saying “Yes” in an improv scene, e.g., accepting the offer of another actor, or accepting the impulse arising in one’s own body/mind and going with it, is parallel to opening to and accepting whatever is arising in the field of awareness in meditation.

- **Lovingkindness:** The confidence to improvise, as well as the ability to lend support to another actor in the scene, ideally comes from an inner attitude of caring, for oneself and for others.

This chapter offers an introduction to two core concepts in Insight Improvisation and Contemplative Theater—Performance Mind and Being Mind—as well as two exercises by a “Zen Master” of improvisation, the West Coast theater artist, teacher, and ground-breaking producer Scott Kelman (Heffley, 2007).

Naked Improvisation	
<i>Introduction to Part II: Contemplative Theater</i> <i>Performance Mind and Being Mind</i>	
<i>Walk-Stop-Walk</i>	<i>One-Minute Solo</i>

Performance Mind and Being Mind

“Let me give you a brief insight into stage fright. It is an animal, a monster which hides in its foul corner without revealing itself, but you know that it is there and that it may come forward at any moment.”

— Sir Laurence Olivier (1986, pp. 128-129)

As a form of Contemplative Theater, Insight Improvisation replaces traditional theater's focus on performance with an emphasis on the actor's awareness. One of the useful aspects of this change in focus is that it can help the actor to break out of habitual ways of approaching her craft.

We refer to the actor's habitual way of thinking as "Performance Mind," a core concept in Insight Improvisation. Performance mind encompasses a number of actors' tendencies, each of which have an alternative from an Insight Improvisation point of view—a different set of attitudes or responses referred to as "Being Mind."

Acting can often seem the opposite of relaxed. It can feel pressurized, tense, pushed—the need to "perform" takes the fore. It is natural when appearing in front of an audience to be nervous: adrenaline is produced that leads to a flight, fight, or freeze reaction. This can lead to an "out-of-body" experience for the actor—not really being present, speaking memorized lines on auto-pilot.

Something different becomes available to the actor when she breathes, relaxes, slows down, and opens all her senses, taking in the present moment. The actor *lets* something happen, rather than pushing to *make* something happen. Instead of reacting, the actor is inspired by and responds to what is around her. This is what "Being Mind" is—a relationship with acting based on mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness.

The following table delineates some of the main distinctions between Performance Mind and Being Mind:

"Performance Mind"	"Being Mind"
A desire to secure the approval of the audience, by impressing, entertaining, or gaining their sympathy—often driven by an underlying feeling of insecurity, lack of approval, or of not being loved.	An intention to connect with the audience, to be a present and vulnerable human being with them, motivated by a spirit of lovingkindness— <i>metta</i> —toward oneself, the audience, and toward all beings.
A desire to control what is happening onstage, or to "push" in order to make something happen—e.g., to push emotions to make them bigger, or to push in order to make an improvisation more interesting to the audience.	An intention to <i>let go</i> of control and remain open to what is unfolding moment by moment, enjoying and <i>accepting</i> the unexpected—exercising <i>choiceless awareness</i> . To be open to whatever outcome emerges, trusting that what occurs naturally has its own richness and depth, greater than what is produced by controlling or forcing.
An aversion to performance, characterized by stage fright, butterflies in the stomach, a fear of failure, a fear of making a fool of oneself, and a desire to hide.	A love of performance and embracing of the sensations that occur, including a <i>mindful awareness</i> and <i>acceptance</i> of the physical changes present when one is in front of an audience. Noticing the tendency to project into the future and instead returning the mind to an awareness of what's actually happening right now—to exercise <i>mindfulness</i> . Honoring the tendency to hide—having <i>metta</i> for the hiding part of oneself—while also being willing to remain present, open, and vulnerable with the audience.
Strong self-judgment or critique before, during, and after the process of performing.	Noticing and accepting the inner critic without identifying with its messages, then bringing the mind back to the body, reconnecting with the intention to <i>pause, relax, and open—slow down, breathe, and listen</i> .
Lack of connection to the body, the senses, other performers, and the audience—instead being connected mainly to one's own planning and critical minds.	Appreciating the mind's ability to plan, and to take what is useful from that, but then to be willing to <i>enter empty, letting go of "good" ideas</i> and returning the mind to a more <i>choiceless awareness</i> of the unfolding present, the body, the senses, other performers and the audience—to reconnect in the here and now.

A tendency toward Performance Mind is not something only beginners experience. Olivier's stage fright is but one example. Experienced actors can form habits that are hard to break—including a tendency toward needing to please the audience, or toward using technique instead of touching the emotional truth of the moment. What I have seen in Insight Improvisation workshops is that veteran actors and novices have a great deal to learn from one another: novices are inspired by how the veterans use the full range of their voice and body to express what is arising; and veterans are enriched by the novice's "beginner's mind," their ability to make fresh discoveries and ask sometimes profound questions.

Letting Go of Performance Mind

Each of the more than 50 Insight Improvisation exercises and variations are designed to help one strengthen Being Mind while decreasing the reliance on Performance Mind. Underlying many of these exercises are a specific set of techniques that support that shift:

Enter Empty

Our tendency before improvising is to plan what we are going to do, what our topic, theme, or content will be, and to follow that plan. In Insight Improvisation, we break this habit by actively disregarding the "Planning Mind," and, instead, listen to the body and senses in the moment for our inspiration, trusting that whatever arises is what we need to be working with. We allow ourselves to be actors in the play of the moment.

Let Go of “Good Ideas”

Scott Kelman often said: “If you have a good idea, don’t do it.” As we improvise, it is important to notice our habits as performers, and to break out of them, to let go of “Performance Mind.” Our tendencies usually fall into two categories: a desire to impress the audience with how talented, entertaining, clever, or risk-taking we can be on the one hand; and, on the other, a desire to hide. As we perform, the mind works overtime, generating many “good ideas” about how to impress the audience and how to hide from them. These ideas often occur as “wouldn’t it be neat if…” In traditional forms of improvisation, the actor is encouraged to be clever and do all their good ideas. In Insight Improvisation, we drop the good ideas, and tune back into what the body, senses, and inner imagery are telling us. What can emerge from this approach is often uniquely creative, unexpected, and authentic—both to actor and audience.

Close Your Eyes

Working with eyes closed is not recommended as a performance technique, but can be quite useful when working one-to-one or in a workshop context. When we work with eyes closed, it encourages us to focus more on our own inner reality than on the audience—it helps us open to all the other senses: what’s coming in through the body, the ability to notice sounds, smells, thoughts, feelings, the breath, etc. Although not all Insight Improvisation exercises are performed with eyes closed, many are, including the progression from meditation and authentic movement to role stream and psolodrama.

Walk-Stop-Walk

As actors, we don't often notice what's around us onstage: we're more concerned with ourselves and how we're coming across.

This exercise originally comes from Scott Kelman. Both this exercise and Scott's One-minute Solo exercise are best practiced in a group setting; the instructions that follow are from the standpoint of teaching a workshop.

Begin by having participants sit along one edge of the space—either on the floor or in chairs. Have a single row that arcs slightly so people can see each other.

Point out an imaginary line on the floor just in front of their feet extending the length of the audience. “When you cross this line you're entering the space. To exit the space, cross the line again and return to your seat. Once you exit, that's it.”

Have every other person (half the group) stand up.

“When the bell rings, those who are standing will cross the line and enter the space. Once you enter the space, walk. Walk until you stop walking. When you stop walking, check it out: check out the room, check out the audience, check out the clock, check out the floor, check out yourself, etc. Once you're done checking it out, walk. When you hear the bell a second time, the next time you walk, exit the space. Any questions?”

If there are questions, just repeat the instructions—do not elaborate or justify. If they ask what the role of the audience is, “to be the audience” should suffice.

Ring the bell to start them off. Let the movers go for as long as feels right—probably somewhere between 5 to 7 minutes. Then ring the bell to end, and let everyone eventually make their way back to their seat.

Once everyone is seated, engage the group in a short debrief conversation: “What was your experience? Let’s hear from the movers first.” Etc.

When you invite the audience to share their experience, you could also add this follow-on question: “If this were a performance, what would be your experience of it?” And later: “How does it feel to watch this performance?”

Then switch roles and do the exercise again.

Commentary

Walk-Stop-Walk exists on an edge between acting and “real life.”

The movers are given simple instructions to follow, mainly about being present and aware (“checking it out”). If they follow the instructions faithfully, they are not acting—just being.

For the audience, what emerges is a piece of unplanned contemplative improvisation: there is plenty of silence, and the action seems random. It is a dance, but probably unlike any the audience has seen. It is a dance that does not try to force its agenda on us, to entertain or surprise or teach or touch. Instead, it is a dance of chance, of emptiness, of curiosity, of happy accidents—such as those moments when all the movers are still at the same time, or those moments when two or three begin to move simultaneously. Rather than a message being pushed out, the audience is invited in, to explore with their own curiosity, and to choose what aspects of movement, stillness, and interaction they wish to observe.

One-Minute Solo

Same setup as Walk-Stop-Walk: chairs for participants are arranged in a single gently-arcing row forming the audience. Point out the invisible line in front of the participants; crossing it means one has entered, or exited, the space.

“This is an exercise called the One-minute Solo. In a moment, one person will volunteer to go first by standing up. When you cross the line and enter the space, your one minute begins. There are only two rules. The first is, at some point during the minute, acknowledge the audience. The second rule is, if you have a good idea, don’t do it. When the minute is up you will hear the bell—that’s your signal to exit the space. Any questions?”

If there are questions, just repeat the instructions—do not elaborate or justify.

Invite one person to go first. When they are finished, say “we will talk about this afterward, but before we do, let’s see another”—and invite someone else to go.

After two or three participants have done a solo, ask the group, “What are you noticing? What was your experience of being the audience, or the actor?”

Then give others a chance to try.

Commentary

For actors—and most human beings—to find themselves onstage, not being able to do their good ideas, feels like a soldier running into battle without armor or weaponry. One is naked in the space, vulnerable. How this vulnerability expresses itself is unique to each person. Each has his or her own way of dealing with this paradoxical situation.

As audience, we have the privilege of seeing each person's truth—or their defenses or habits. In a sense, the exercise lays everything bare, no matter what the performer does.

Kelman has created a form that is the opposite of what we tend to think of as acting. By doing so, he helps us get at what underlies acting: the performer's relationship with the audience.

Variations

A couple of variations have developed over the years as I've led this exercise in Insight Improvisation workshops:

Speaking. Often the actor does not say anything in this exercise, which is fine. However, it's also interesting to discover what it is like to speak in the context of not doing one's good ideas. At any time the facilitator can say, "let's add a new rule: at some point during the minute say something."

A variation on this variation is to ask the actor to tell a story—something that is even more challenging to do without good ideas.

Duets and Groups. Invite two people to enter the space at the same time with the added instruction: "At some point during the minute interact with each other." You can also try being more specific and assign any of the following to either or both actors:

- "At some point make eye contact with your partner"
- "At some point make physical contact with your partner."
- "At some point speak to your partner."

You can also progress to a group of three, then four, and then see what happens with larger groups.

Naked

One example of how I dealt with my own tendency toward being stuck in performance mind comes from a one-man show I created and performed in 1996, *A Naked Man in Boston*. The first act of this theater piece was made up of performed stories and short improvisational structures that the audience could choose from by way of a random selection process. The plan for one of the improvisations, entitled “Naked,” was extremely simple: I would remove my clothes and stand before the audience. I knew in advance that in such a situation, my normal tendency as an actor would be to want to entertain, impress the audience, or to hide, through a number of different means: e.g., being clever or funny, using self-deprecating humor, distraction, or even physically covering up in some way. Instead, I chose beforehand to approach the improvisation completely differently, using Kelman’s guideline: “If you have a good idea, don’t do it.”

On the night when this improvisation was chosen by the audience, what emerged onstage was a very simple improvisation, with a great deal of silence and stillness. Once I removed my clothing, I remember feeling extremely present. I became conscious of each breath and each gesture I made. Stripped even of my defenses, I stood still—slowing down to take in the moment, to see the audience and to allow myself to be seen by them. Members of the audience shared afterwards that this enabled them to also be simply present, and take in a naked body in a new way. What I discovered was a new freedom as a performer, not to rush through a risky moment, or to try to impress the audience, but to simply be there and appreciate the wonder and strangeness of it all, moment by moment.

Where We're Headed

Each of the chapters which follow in Part II examines a different aspect of the performer's craft through the lens of mindfulness: how to use the actor's instrument—the voice and the body—expressively; how to relate to other actors; how to write and perform a text; how to tell a story effectively; how to play characters and create scenes; and how to apply singing—the use of rhythm and melody and the full range of the voice—to all of the above.

The chapters in Part II represent an alternative or supplement to standard acting training. Acting students—as well as experienced actors—tend to enjoy these exercises, as they provide new and unusual ways of looking at performance. All of the skills developed in Part II are useful in themselves, in day-to-day life as well as in performance, but they are also good preparation for what's coming in Part III, as we delve into drama therapy and psolodrama. In addition, each exercise reflects back on Part I, in the sense that each is a form of active meditation.

Two interesting questions to ask as you encounter the exercises in Part II: “how can I approach this exercise as a meditation?” and “how is this exercise also a form of drama therapy—how is it therapeutic?”

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Amplification

When I asked Suzuki Roshi for his advice about working in the kitchen, he said, “When you wash the rice, wash the rice. When you cut the carrots, cut the carrots. When you stir the soup, stir the soup.” Though very similar, this is not the same as, “be mindful in the kitchen,” which makes it sound like you have two things to do: washing and being mindful, cutting and being mindful, stirring and being mindful. What would that mindfulness part look like? Probably a bit stiff, as your impulse will be to move slowly and carefully so that only a moderate amount of energy and emotion arises to meet the circumstances. In other words most people hear be mindful as keep yourself in check.

Yet what is magnificent and magical is finding out how to manifest the cutting of carrots with your whole body and mind; how to wash the rice with your eyes and your hands, connecting consciousness with the senses and the world—not just going through the motions.... When you stop going through the motions and manifest the stirring of soup, alive in the present moment, emotions may surface. While some find this problematic and seemly recommend dispassion, my suggestion is to invite your passion to cook.

— Edward Espe Brown (2008)

For actors—for all of us, really—the voice and body are our instruments of self-expression, vehicles for communicating and conveying emotion and passion. In order to be fully self-expressed, we can learn to “play” these instruments with abandon and with passion, to explore the range of what the voice and body can do, even to their outer limits. By doing so, we can also better learn to modulate the level of energy we bring to each moment whether cutting carrots or talking with friends.

Ultimately, we can change our fundamental orientation toward the voice and body, no longer seeing them as mere instruments or vehicles for content, but discovering what it is like to be influenced and inspired by our own sounds and movements—the feeling of the voice vibrating in the chest, or an arm slowly raising—creating a positive feedback cycle of self-awareness, creativity, and self-expression.

This chapter introduces the Amplification exercise—a challenging and fun way of exploring vocal and physical range—as well as a number of variations on that exercise that add interaction with a partner, language, story, and role play.

The Amplification exercise was inspired by the work of Ruth Zaporah, choreographer, improviser, and creator of Action Theater (1995) who has been highly influenced by Zen Buddhism. I am also indebted to my training with members of the Roy Hart Theater, especially teacher Ivan Midderigh, for introducing me to new ways of exploring the limits of vocal range. My colleague Lorraine Grosslight and I created the Amplification exercise while working one day in the studio, and I have since added several more variations which appear in this chapter.

Amplification		
<p>Basic Amplification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warming up • Fundamentals • FAQ • Feedback/coaching • Amplification as Meditation 	<p>Primary Amplification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word Amplification • Role Amplification • Amplification Duet/Trio • Amplification Dialogue 	<p>Secondary Amplification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amplified Monologue • Amplified Story • Amplified Scene • ...and more...

Basic Amplification

Warming Up

The activities in the previous chapter, Naked Amplification, make a good prelude for Amplification, particularly in a workshop context. Here's another possible warm-up sequence:

1. Meditate on impulse. After participants begin with their own stretching and/or simultaneous authentic movement, have them find a comfortable position for a brief meditation—sitting on the floor is fine. Invite awareness of the body, and the breath. Then add the following: “Continuing with your meditation, we’re going to shift our awareness now as a way to prepare for our work on Amplification. In the Amplification exercise, we will be identifying sound/movement impulses and amplifying them. In this meditation, we can begin to be aware of how those impulses originate. Shift your

awareness now to notice movement in the body—even small, subtle movements: breath, pulse, vibration, etc. (Pause.) Notice where in the body or mind an impulse to move arises. Notice how you react or respond to that impulse. It could be as simple as relaxing a muscle, or an impulse to swallow. (Pause.) See if you can notice an impulse and not act on it. If you do act on it, can you do it slowly and mindfully, noticing every bit of sensation?” Give time to explore impulses in the meditation and then bring the meditation to a gradual close.

2. Add sound and movement. Following the meditation, invite the group to stand in a circle and introduce a sound/movement warm-up:

Ha! Circle. This is a classic improv warm-up. Pass a “HA!” and a clap around the circle. Next, invite participants to send the HA!/clap to anyone in the circle. Encourage the group to use their energy and creativity.

Advanced Ha! Now replace the “HA!” with any sound and the clap with any gesture. Demonstrate how to use whole body gestures, and whole voice sounds. Challenge the group to not repeat sounds and gestures.

Advanced Ha! with Mirroring. Same as above, but now whoever receives the sound/gesture must mirror it back to the sender before sending something new to someone else.

3. Dialogue with amplification. Invite participants to grab a partner. Have one person begin by sending a sound/gesture to the other. As in Advanced Ha! with Mirroring, the other will mirror back that sound/gesture—but now they will also amplify it. For this warm-up, keep the explanation of Amplification simple: “Amplify the sound

and the movement in any way you like—you can make it louder, bigger, stretch it out, make it faster, repeat it, etc.”

Then the first person does the same, further amplifying the sound and movement, so that it bounces back and forth, becoming increasingly Amplified. “See if you can notice *how* your partner amplified the sound and the movement, so that you can take it further in the same direction. For example, if they increased the pitch of the sound, can you go even higher (rather than, say, make it louder)?”

At any time either partner can send a brand new sound/gesture, to start a new sequence. After a few minutes, invite pairs to debrief with one another, and then rejoin the circle to share what they discovered with the whole group.

Fundamentals

Amplification in its simplest form is a one-person improvisation. Here are the bare-bones instructions:

- 1) **Begin with a sound/movement impulse.**
- 2) **Amplify that impulse in some way.**
- 3) **In any moment you have a choice:**
 - a. **You can continue to amplify the impulse,**
 - b. **You can drop it and return to neutral, or**
 - c. **You can have a brand new sound/movement impulse.**

So, what do we mean by these terms: “sound/movement impulse,” “amplify the impulse,” and “return to neutral”?

By a **sound/movement impulse** (or **SMI** for short) we mean any movement combined with any vocal sound. For example, a twitch of the finger and a little squeak. Or, walking three steps and bending over, combined with a raspy groan and a loud grunt. The SMI can be very short, or can be a slightly longer phrase. It shouldn't be too long—usually 1-5 seconds. (But remember that all the rules in this book were made to be broken!) In the course of practicing Amplification, it's best to vary the length of one's initial SMI. Also note that snapping the fingers or clapping the hands is not an SMI—it's missing the vocal element. If you have an initial impulse that's missing the vocal (or physical) part, simply repeat the impulse and add the missing piece.

By **amplifying the impulse** we mean repeating the SMI with some kind of amplification: making it bigger, faster, louder, stretching it out, etc. However, there are many other kinds of amplification—those we do not tend to think of as amplification—such as making the impulse smaller, softer, slower, shorter, etc. These methods amplify in the sense of bringing attention or focus to the impulse. It is also possible to excerpt the initial impulse, repeating just a part as a way to “spotlight” it. One can also amplify a small physical impulse by gradually having it fill the entire body. (See the chart “Dimensions of Amplification,” below, for a more complete list of ways to amplify an impulse.)

Dimensions of Amplification		
<i>Voice</i>	<i>Body Language</i>	<i>Overall/Gestalt</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volume • Pitch/Inflection • Sound quality/Timbre • Enunciation/Clarity • Emphasis • Singing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gesture • Facial expression • Posture • Stance/Orientation • Use of space • Size (bigger or smaller) • Level (higher or lower) • Open or closed • Expand impulse from one area of body to gradually include entire body—or the reverse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Stretch or Compress ○ Increase or decrease number or length of Pauses ○ Accelerate or Decelerate • Internal Repetition / Number of Repetitions • Excerpt/Spotlight • Emotion/Passion • Image • Role/Character

For example, if my initial SMI is a finger twitch and a little squeak, I may amplify that impulse by gently increasing the range of movement of my finger, while stretching out my squeak to be a longer squeak. Alternatively, I could, over the course of several amplifications, have the finger twitch affect my whole hand, then my arm, then my whole body. At the same time I could make my squeak louder and louder—or, I might change the pitch of my squeak, making it higher and higher.

Note that in Amplification we never just repeat an SMI—we are always amplifying it in some way with each iteration. However, you do not need to amplify every impulse that arises; step #2 in the instructions above can be skipped occasionally. So if an impulse comes that the improviser for whatever reason does not wish to amplify, they can either return to neutral or follow it right away with another SMI.

Also, when amplifying, do not get carried away—respect injuries and the limitations of the body. To experience the exercise fully, it's important to stretch beyond where you might habitually stop—but please do not hurt yourself in the process. (Note that projecting loudly with the voice is fine if one inhales deeply first; feeling a little hoarse after this exercise is normal and should go away within a day or so.)

By **return to neutral** we mean dropping the current sound and movement, returning to a relaxed, mindful stillness. To be neutral one does not need to be standing—I can remain in whatever position my last amplification left me in (e.g., kneeling on the floor), but let my face, arms, and the rest of my body relax and come to rest. Returning to neutral is like wiping the slate clear for whatever is to come next. Note that according to the instructions, it is not necessary to return to neutral after each series of amplifications—sometimes you may have a brand new SMI and go directly into amplifying it.

It's helpful to vary the pattern of returning to neutral versus changing immediately to a new SMI. It is also good to vary the number of times one tends to amplify an impulse. Typically one amplifies an impulse 3-5 times, but in the course of an improvisation I may be moved to amplify a particular impulse 10 times—stretching my voice and body to the limit—while other impulses I might not amplify at all.

The Basic Amplification activity can be as long or short as you like. Working with a partner as your witness/audience, try it for three to five minutes, get some feedback from them, and then try it again or switch roles.

Amplification FAQ

How do I know when to stop amplifying and change to a new SMI?

Answer: whenever you want to. This can be when the current impulse “loses its juice,” or when it becomes too much.

However, notice if you habitually give up on amplifying an impulse before you reach your limit. Commit fully to what is already happening, rather than seek comfort or distraction in something new. See what happens if you amplify beyond what you think you can. You may surprise yourself with what you are capable of. It is when the actor is fully committed that the audience is completely engaged.

What's the difference between amplifying an impulse and transforming it?

Amplification is distinct from transformation. Say I begin with a finger twitch and a high squeak. I could transform that impulse by moving my finger around in different ways, and start to play with the pitches of my squeak. Eventually, this could transform into a dance with my whole hand and a tune I am singing. Then it could become a walk through the room while waving like the queen, and saying hello to the crowd. In the Amplification exercise, we are not continuously changing the impulse into something new—we are consciously choosing to either amplify the original impulse, drop it and return to neutral, or start a new SMI.

Do this (amplification): $a \rightarrow a1 \rightarrow a2 \rightarrow a3$, $b \rightarrow b1 \rightarrow b2$, neutral, c, $d \rightarrow d1$, etc.

Not this (transformation): $a \rightarrow b \rightarrow c \rightarrow d$, etc.

However, it's also important not to get too strict about the “no transforming” rule. Any amplification of an SMI is, in a sense, a transformation of that impulse. What is important is for the improviser to remain aware of the difference between amplifying an initial impulse versus changing the impulse into something totally new.

Can I amplify an SMI across multiple dimensions at once?

Yes! It's great fun to work with multiple simultaneous dimensions of amplification—e.g. to gradually get louder, higher pitched, and faster, all at the same time. When first learning Amplification, try amplifying one dimension at a time (that is, one vocal and one physical dimension at a time), to help practice making specific choices; over time, you can add more than one simultaneous dimension.

What is an internal repetition?

An SMI—or the amplification of an SMI—can contain repeated sounds or movements. For example, if the initial SMI is saying “Hey!” while throwing both hands in the air, one way to amplify it would be to say “Hey-hey!” while also amplifying the gesture physically.

What does it mean to amplify the feeling, image, or role?

As you practice Amplification, you may find your SMI is naturally expressing a certain emotion (e.g. anger), image/picture (e.g., pulling on a rope, or a rushing waterfall), or role/character (e.g. a princess, an old man, a blue whale). Rather than focus on specific aspects of voice or body language, you can choose to amplify the feeling, image, or role itself. Doing so will tend to naturally evoke multiple simultaneous dimensions of voice and body language amplification—e.g., if you're amplifying the character of a giant, you may find your body opening and expanding in size, while you begin to use more of the space; you may also slow down while getting louder. (*See Role Amplification, below, for more on working with roles.*)

Feedback/coaching

When offering feedback and coaching for another's Amplification, the witness and/or audience can be helpful by starting with positives, sharing their own experience, and providing suggestions to improve:

Positive feedback. What did you like, what was working well? What moments stood out as particularly enjoyable or memorable?

Sharing one's own experience. What else did you experience as a witness? How were you affected emotionally/viscerally? What images or associations did you have watching the exercise?

Coaching. How might the improviser improve? For example:

Variety/range. Was there a variety or range in: the kinds of sound/movement impulses they had, the parts of the body they used (don't forget the face!), the vocal qualities they explored, the kinds of amplification they used, and the number of times they tended to amplify each impulse? It can be very useful feedback, for example, to hear that I varied my volume by not my pitch.

Stretching. Did the improviser play it safe, or did they push the limits of their vocal/physical range? If they tended to keep things small or predictable, it can be a useful exercise to go back in and do Amplification again, but this time start with one simple small SMI, and then keep amplifying it, going way beyond what one would normally do (go at least 3 iterations beyond when the improviser would normally stop).

Other aspects. If appropriate, also give feedback on the improviser's pacing (was the whole thing very fast or very slow?), and their level of tension or relaxation (if the improviser was tense, it can be useful to do the exercise again with the goal of remaining completely relaxed throughout).

Amplification as Meditation

One of the challenges in approaching the Amplification form is in maintaining awareness in the midst of the process. Typically, if I am worried about the structure of the exercise, or having inner questions (or inner critique) regarding whether I am doing it correctly or not, this will distance me from being truly present to my body, my voice, and the creative impulses that are arising.

Once you are familiar with Basic Amplification and have tried it a few times, see what happens if you approach it with these added guidelines:

Let go. Do not worry whether you are doing it right or wrong. Let go of mistakes—assume everything you are doing, even the accidents or mishaps, are perfect and there for a reason. Let go of this being a performance. You are doing this for yourself, in a process of exploration, and your witness is simply the container for the process. Let go of entertaining them.

Slow down. Don't rush this. Fully explore the sound and movement impulse through the amplification, noticing each molecule of what you are doing: be mindful. See what happens if you return to complete neutral and wait for an authentic SMI—it might take several seconds. Then there may be a slight body movement as the weight shifts, or your shoulders relax, or the muscles in your face release. Repeat the movement, adding sound. Then amplify that.

Be a scientist. Notice where a new SMI comes from. Is it suggested by your body position, your stance? Is it something in your last facial expression or tone of voice? Is it an idea that popped into your head (“I should do something with a low-pitch voice” or “I see myself with my arms spreading out as if hugging an elephant”)? Also get curious about how you are making choices regarding the kinds of amplification you are using. Are you thinking about each one or is it more intuitive, emerging organically as the improvisation develops? (If you feel you are stuck in the head, let go—assume that your body and voice will do the “right” kind of amplification, and just follow them.)

Challenge yourself. Have you explored the outer limits of what your body and voice can really do? How high or low, for example, can the pitch of your voice go—what sounds come out after you have gone beyond your normal range? Let go of needing to sound or look good. Commit fully to each moment, tapping into every bit of expression your instrument can produce.

With these added guidelines, notice how the nature of the form changes, deepening into a vehicle for strengthening mindful and choiceless awareness—and for practicing acceptance and letting go.

Variations I: Primary Amplification

“Primary Amplification” refers to those activities in which the amplification is the focus of the action and the performer’s attention. (Later we will explore “Secondary Amplification,” in which amplification is occurring in the background.) Basic Amplification, above, is the fundamental example of Primary Amplification, but there are other possibilities:

Word Amplification

This is the same as Basic Amplification, but instead of a sound/movement impulse (SMI), the improviser has a “word/movement impulse”—that is, moving while speaking a word (or short phrase).

Note that the word may or may not have anything to do with what is happening in the moment. It's just a word chosen in the moment. Also, the way the word is amplified may or may not be congruent (match the meaning of the word).

For example, I might have an impulse to do a little leap while saying “tired.” I could then amplify the impulse by leaping higher and saying “Tired” louder and with more energy. After a few more iterations I might be jumping quite high and yelling “TIIIRRED!!!”

For an intermediate step between Basic and Word Amplification, try doing Amplification with gibberish (nonsense words).

Role Amplification

In this variation, instead of an SMI, the improviser identifies a role impulse, and amplifies that. A role impulse can be any kind of role or character, preferably suggested by something already occurring in the present moment (e.g., bodily position, facial expression, vocal quality, emotion or mood) as opposed to thinking something up or being clever. A role need not be a person—it can also be an animal, object (e.g., a talking clock), or fantastic/mythical creature (e.g., god/goddess, monster, etc.). Roles may or may not speak recognizable words.

Once the role is established, the aim of the improviser is to amplify the role. This can be done by amplifying the voice and body in some way, or by amplifying some essential emotional or energetic quality of the role. For example, an “angry dragon” might become more angry and incinerate the populous; a slow, serious butler might become even more dry and deliberate.

As with Basic Amplification, the improviser can drop the role anytime (briefly returning to neutral), and also begin a new role anytime.

Amplification Duet/Trio

Any of the above types of Amplification can also be explored with a partner or partners as a group improvisation. Amplification Duets and Trios are enjoyable and satisfying improvisational structures, especially in a workshop setting. A few tips:

Listen and create space. Working with others, remember that you are not the only one on stage. How can you open to what they are doing, really hear and/or see them, and also create enough space in what you are doing so they can be heard and sometimes have the focus? Hint: Use the option of “returning to neutral” to create space. You can also use more quiet forms of Amplification—rather than a sound getting louder, it can get softer, more focused, with longer pauses in between iterations, for example.

Invite interaction. Look for ways to work with your partner(s) and what they are doing. Eye contact and physical contact are possible. Also look for ways to weave sounds and movements together, by mirroring or contrasting the other(s).

Stay true to your own impulse. Although you are interacting with the other(s) and giving them space, do not let yourself be overly influenced by their sounds and movements. If you find yourself mirroring them habitually, return to your own authentic impulse and follow it.

After each pair or trio performs, make sure to elicit audience response: What did you like? What moments stood out? What worked or could have been better about the interaction?

Amplification Dialogue

This is a different form of Amplification Duet. In the Amplification Dialogue (see also the warm-up version of this exercise described earlier), the two improvisers begin facing one another. If used as a performance structure, they can also “cheat out”—angle their bodies outward toward the audience, or stand side-by-side and experiment with using peripheral vision to take the other in. One begins with an SMI. The other has a choice: to mirror and amplify that impulse, or have a brand new SMI. Impulses bounce back and forth in this way, sometimes amplifying a great deal—over several iterations— or sometimes being dropped and a new impulse beginning.

It is important that any new SMI be distinct enough from the last one so the other improviser is aware of the change. Also, when amplifying an impulse over several iterations, skillful improvisers are aware of *how* the impulse is being amplified, to take it further in that direction (e.g. if my partner stretched my SMI out, when it’s my turn again I’d want to stretch it out even more—rather than make it louder/faster). Finally, don’t forget to amplify your partner’s facial expression, as well as their body and voice.

You can also try this exercise as a trio, quartet, or group improvisation in a line: the impulse starts at one end, and is amplified by each person in turn. You can take turns providing the initial impulse (for a bigger group), or just improvise (in a trio/quartet).

Finally, by combining several different Primary Amplification exercises, you can create a performance score. For example, try Amplification Dialogue with a friend, beginning with sound/movement impulses, and gradually progressing to gibberish, then words, and then roles speaking complete sentences.

Variations II: Secondary Amplification

Secondary Amplification describes those exercises in which the amplification process is a secondary focus—that is, in the background or “behind the scenes.” In the foreground the actor has a different task, such as delivering a monologue, or acting in a scene. But underneath, the actor is doing the amplification process, amplifying sounds, gestures, facial expressions, movement, etc., in a variety of ways.

The result is a funhouse mirror, surreal performance, in which ordinary physical and vocal expressions stretch and distort, becoming dreamlike, nightmarish, or funny in an absurd way. Characters range from eccentric to insane.

Secondary Amplification, done well, offers a window into the inner state of the performer, amplifying hidden feelings. The actor’s inner playwright is unleashed: simultaneously informed and distracted by the amplification of voice and body, the part of the mind that is usually busy censoring language is preoccupied, allowing an unfiltered flow of thoughts and feelings. For this reason, Secondary Amplification can be valuable when developing new material.

Working this way is more challenging than in the simpler Primary Amplification forms: one’s focus is divided, having more than one task to accomplish. Consequently, Secondary Amplification exercises are advanced practices for developing self-awareness. As an actor, when I normally deliver a monologue or act in a scene, I’m not usually so acutely aware of what my body, face, and voice are doing. In Secondary Amplification I am challenged to apply the three kinds of awareness discussed throughout this book:

Mindfulness. How do I return to an awareness of my body—and of my voice—in the present moment? How can I be mindful when my focus is split? How do I accept what is happening moment by moment? How can I slow down, relax, and breathe?

Choicelessness. Can I open to subtleties—how my posture has slightly shifted, or how the corner of my mouth feels like it’s drooping downward—so that I can amplify those details? Am I giving more focus to one element than another—can I open my awareness to what’s been neglected?

Lovingkindness. Can I feel the joy of the process, to let go and have fun with it? Can I send myself *metta* throughout the process, being compassionate if I don’t get it “right” the first (or the tenth) time?

Amplified Monologue

The most basic form of Secondary Amplification is the Amplified Monologue. The actor enters the space and begins to deliver an improvised monologue to the audience. In the background, the actor practices Amplification—noticing what her voice and body are doing and amplifying those sound/movement impulses.

Here’s an example—the first few lines of an Amplified Monologue, along with what the actor did vocally and physically:

Content	Vocal Amplification	Physical Amplification
“Hello, I’d like to talk with you today about cheese.”	Speech slows down and lowers in pitch as if a tape player is beginning to grind to a halt.	Head begins to drop forward as shoulders hunch up.
“Cheese is my favorite food. Without it I’m nothing.”	Pitch has become extremely low (bass) and the pace is glacial—each word stretched out more and more. The lips have become rubbery, giving the sound an additional slurred and hollow quality.	Head is now facing the floor. Shoulders continue to tense, as well as arms and hands, which form fists and begin to rise.
“So, for me, a visit to the dairy aisle at the supermarket is a real joy.”	This line begins by dropping the previous amplification and returning to a neutral tone and speed of voice. However, by the end of the sentence, the delivery is beginning to subtly speed up beyond the normal.	Arms drop to sides, shoulders relax, and head rises—the actor once again makes eye contact with the audience. By the end of the line, the actor is rising slightly onto their toes.
“In fact I often bring my own crackers with me.”	Now the speed is noticeably quick, and high energy.	Higher on toes, back arched, arms half-open, crossing the space, and generally looking up, with an excited facial expression.
“The desire is too strong—I must have some—now!”	Speed and volume increase and climax on the final word.	The vertical quality continues as actor goes higher on toes. Arms spread out fully as face also expands, eyes and mouth wide open.

A few tips when trying the Amplified Monologue exercise:

Enter empty; be flexible. Find the topic as you go. Start with nothing and allow a first line to come to you on the spot. What emerges may be a story, true or fictional, a speech, an advertisement, a poem, stream of consciousness, etc. Allow it to change; do

not be attached to logic or to an expectation of what the monologue needs to be about. Let yourself be surprised.

Let the amplification affect you. Not only is the physical/vocal delivery of the monologue influenced by its content, but the reverse is also true: the monologue is constantly informed and inspired by the amplification, by the feelings and emotions that emerge as the amplification moves the body and voice. For example, a certain amplified facial expression and tone of voice may make you feel a certain emotion (or feel like a certain character or role), which may then affect your word choice and subject matter. Allow this to happen. Also, allow things to take a different turn as you begin amplifying some other vocal/physical impulse. Do not feel you must be faithful to logic; things may change on a dime in this activity.

Explore your range. Your amplification may sometimes be subtle—perhaps only you are aware that it is happening—and sometimes gross, outrageous, comically exaggerated. Play with this range.

Advance the story; avoid repetition. Beware of unnecessary repetition of words, phrases, and sentences—move the storyline forward. Amplified gestures/vocal qualities may repeat (as long as they grow bigger, smaller, longer, louder, etc.), but the content of the monologue should not. (A common tendency with Amplified Monologue is to repeat the same phrase over and over again as one amplifies the sound and gesture that goes with it. One of the challenges of this exercise is to detach the part of the mind speaking the monologue from the part that is noticing vocal/physical details and amplifying them.)

Don't comment. The monologue is about something different than the amplification itself. For example, if you enter with a slight limp, and find yourself

amplifying the limp, do not speak about the limp. Talk about salad dressing, your mother, or the first man on the moon. If you ever find yourself speaking directly about the body or voice element you are amplifying, let the content of the monologue move off in a different direction.

Amplified Story

In the Amplified Story form, instead of an improvised monologue, the foreground task for the actor is to tell a personal story. As in Storytelling—coming up in the chapter of that name later in Part II—the story is chosen in advance, but how it will be told, what scenes are depicted, and where it will end, are discovered in the telling. It is useful to follow Jean-Claude van Itallie’s Storytelling guidelines (to be explored more deeply in the Storytelling chapter), including use of present tense, no “ands,” the three narrative stances, etc.

As you tell the story, do Amplification in the background. Notice how your body and voice change as you tell the story—especially as you portray various characters—and amplify those changes. Allow the amplification to affect the way the story is told; it may even influence the words that emerge from the characters’ mouths.

Amplified Story can be a useful rehearsal technique, illuminating areas where the storyteller can increase her range, or make an unexpected choice. In performance, this technique can turn a mundane story into something unexpectedly engaging and quirky, in turns dramatic, strange, and hilarious. Subtle amplifications add emotional shading to each moment; more gross amplifications turn ordinary characters into caricatures.

Amplified Scene

This is designed as an activity for two or more performers (although it's possible for one actor to attempt this, playing multiple roles). The given task is to perform an improvised scene, optionally given parameters by the audience. In the background, the performers are doing the Amplification exercise, amplifying sound and movement, as well as role and emotional, impulses. The amplification, in subtle and obvious ways, influences the behavior of the characters and how the scene unfolds. Additional tips:

Ask the audience. As in classic improv-comedy, the facilitator or performers can ask for a few suggestions from the audience before the scene begins. These can include the setting (“name a place where this scene will occur”) and key information about the characters, such as an occupation, a challenge he or she is facing, a secret one of them has, etc. (it's best not to overdo this—one or two bits of info per character should be enough for the performers to work with).

Listen more, do less. As there is more than one performer, listening and interaction are key. Part of this is providing space for the other(s) on stage—i.e., not to constantly continue amplifying what one is doing, and by doing so drown out one's partner. When in doubt, return to neutral.

Let go of the outcome. It is important to remain aware of our tendencies as performers to want to entertain, be funny, look good, etc. The most interesting results in this form occur when the actors are not trying to be clever (doing their “good ideas”), but instead are mindful of the amplification and letting it have an impact on the content and direction of the scene.

Ending. The scene ends when the facilitator or a designated participant sees a good ending and calls out “Scene!” This can also be achieved in a performance setting by having a blackout.

Other Variations

Secondary Amplification can be applied to other Insight Improvisation activities, by practicing that activity in the foreground while doing Amplification in the background. Looking ahead in Part II, several exercises in the chapters “Working with Text” and “Singing” would lend themselves well to amplification. One can also bring a conscious intention to amplify roles in the Role Stream and Scene Stream structures. I encourage you to experiment and see what works for you.

In Closing

Amplification can take us to new places. For the actor (and often the audience) it’s an invitation into a surreal world where we can let go of logic and be pushed to our creative edge.

Amplification can help those new to acting break free of assumptions formed by years of seeing naturalistic acting on film, TV, and elsewhere. Also, the idea of doing something in the background while something else is in the foreground (explored in Secondary Amplification) is useful training for working with acting concepts that fall into this category, such as being motivated by a subtext or tapping into sense-memory.

Ultimately, the purpose of Amplification is to foster three main attitudes:

1. A mindful awareness of the body and voice

2. A choiceless opening to vocal and physical impulse
3. An intention to expand our expressive range

By cultivating these attitudes, the aim is to be both fully expressed as well as creatively inspired by our own vocal/physical instrument, to learn to express our passion onstage as well as off.

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The Three States

Two men move together in the space. There is stillness, silence, a sense of mutual caring. They move extremely close to one another, barely touching. Then one holds the other for what feels like a long time. The group, witnessing, does not make a sound. There is a poignancy in the dance, a feeling of loss or grieving. Some in the group are moved to tears—afterward they share how rare it is to see such intimate connection between men.

Next, two women enter the space. Suddenly, a different quality: wild play. Ponies gallop over open prairie. Freedom. Breath. Air. Wind. The group's eyes are wide.

The final pair, a man and a woman, enter the space. It's a barroom brawl waged by two Neanderthals. Grunts, groans, curses in gibberish. A primitive, gut-wrenching battle of the sexes. Belly-laughs from the group.

The Three States is a simple and deep practice of moving in relationship with another. Part dyadic improvisation, and part authentic movement, the exercise provides a liberating context to explore moving in contact and apart from one's partner—all while maintaining mindful awareness. It can be playful as well as moving, and can evoke a wide range of feelings, states, and mutual experiences.

The exercise was inspired by the work of Carol Fox Prescott and Jean-Claude van Itallie, and developed by yoga and improvisation teacher Billie Jo Joy and myself. This chapter describes the basic version of The Three States, as well as variations incorporating sound and words. The exercise is enjoyable to watch as well, so we'll also discuss its use in a workshop or performance context before an audience.

The Three States		
Basics	Use in a Workshop	Variations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Starting Out</i> ▪ <i>Exploring</i> ▪ <i>Returning to One's Own Center</i> 	<p><i>Transitioning from Group Authentic Movement to The Three States</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Sound and Words</i> ▪ <i>More than Two</i> ▪ <i>Performing</i>

Basics

Starting Out

The Three States begins with two partners entering the space, closing their eyes and beginning to practice authentic movement. No external witness is required for this exercise—both partners are in a sense moving *and* witnessing.

As the two move, they are already experiencing one of the three states: moving while **apart**, but with an awareness of the other. They may open or close their eyes at any time during the exercise.

At some point, one or both partners, following their authentic impulse, makes either **physical contact** or **eye contact** with the other.

The state of **physical contact** begins when one person touches the other, making physical contact in some way. The two continue moving in physical connection, without breaking it, for as long as they like. They are still in a sense each practicing authentic movement, following their own impulses—they just happen to be in physical contact. If one person breaks the physical contact, or makes eye contact, they have entered a different state.

Note that while in physical contact, the partners can move and change the way they are connected. For example, if my first impulse brought my fingertips into contact with my partner's back, I may follow that movement by rolling the back of my hand and then my arm against his back, until I end up back-to-back with him. We may then slowly squat until we're sitting back-to-back on the floor together. There is no plan; we are simply following our own authentic impulses while remaining open to what we're perceiving from the other.

The state of **eye contact** begins when both partners have their eyes open, they see one another's eyes, and they maintain the eye connection as they continue to move but without physical contact. It is not necessary to stare: it's OK to blink, or briefly look away—the instruction is to continuously return to making *relaxed* eye contact with the other, while following one's own authentic movement impulses.

As the exercise proceeds, either partner can initiate a change to a new state: moving in **eye contact**, moving in **physical contact**, or moving **apart**. However, you

must keep in mind a basic rule of The Three States: **You cannot be in physical contact and eye contact at the same time—if you initiate one you must break the other.**

Before you begin, it can be helpful to set a timer—perhaps try 10 minutes if this is your first time (as you gain experience, you may experiment with 20 minutes or longer). When the timer sounds, take a minute to transition back into the first state—moving apart—and then gradually come to stillness, with eyes closed. Each person should take a few moments with eyes closed to notice their body, their breath, and how they feel.

Afterwards, set aside a good amount of time to share what the experience was like for each of you. A thorough sharing process can take as long as the movement itself, and is an important part of the exercise. *(You can follow some of the suggestions for sharing which appear in the “Authentic Movement” chapter in Part I.)*

Exploring

The Three States is rich terrain for exploration and exercising both self-awareness and awareness of the other. Once you’ve tried the exercise a few times, the following questions can be used both as “lenses” to look through during the exercise, as well as useful areas for exploration in the sharing process:

The Other/Myself. How does the quality of my awareness of the other—and of myself—change when moving apart, in physical contact, or in eye contact? What happens to my awareness when moving with eyes open versus eyes closed? What affect is my partner having on my own movement, emotions, state of mind? How am I affected by their facial expression, their body language, the way they make eye contact and/or physical contact?

Physical Contact. What do I notice as I make physical contact? Can I take in bare sensation: touch, pressure, texture, weight, temperature, friction? If I slow down and take in the contact, what am I sensing when touching my partner: clothing, hair, skin, fat, muscle, bone? What happens when moving in contact with eyes open versus with eyes closed? What feelings arise for me while in physical contact? Is it pleasant, unpleasant, neutral? What is getting communicated in each moment of touch: connection, affection, distance, support, conflict, desire?

Eye Contact. What is the impact of making prolonged eye contact? Can I relax in the eye contact, let go, return to an awareness of myself and my own body? Or is the eye contact so powerful that I feel pulled by it, or lost in it? Am I still breathing while in eye contact? (Breathing is recommended...!) How does it make me feel: Vulnerable? Shy? Aggressive? Attracted? Fearful? Seen? What role do I feel I am playing as I make eye contact? Can I notice subtleties: the color and shape of their eyes, how much they are blinking/looking away, what emotion/feeling is getting expressed through their eyes?

Impulse. Where does impulse come from? How do I “decide” when to initiate physical contact, or eye contact, or move apart? Is my impulse authentic? Is it driven by desire, aversion, or something else? Can I slow down and notice impulse, but not react instantly?

Relationship. Am I open to being in relationship with this other person? What are my tendencies or habits in relationship? E.g., do I tend to hide, or to be assertive? Am I able to stay in touch with myself and my own authentic impulses while being in relationship? Or do I tend to “care-take” the other?

How does the quality of the relationship change when in the three different states? For example, when moving apart, I may still sense the other, feel their energy—as one can sometimes feel the “chi,” or energy field, when two hands are rubbed together and then held facing one another and slowly brought together. Can I be open to being affected by the other, while not being attached to them?

Status. In each moment, do I notice feeling superior, inferior, or equal to my partner? Have they cast me in a certain status role—e.g. by lowering their body in relation to mine—or am I the one changing things in order to balance or unbalance the status? What uses of gesture, posture, or stance affect our relative status? How about eye contact?

Sensuality, Sexuality, Attraction. Any exercise involving touch or prolonged eye contact can evoke feelings of connection, attraction, or desire—or, conversely, distance, dislike, or aversion. Can I be aware when these feelings arise in this exercise, and open to them, rather than push them away? How are they affecting my ability to remain present and centered? How am I changing my movement or use of physical and/or eye contact in response to these feelings? Can I appreciate the feelings, but not act on them?

For couples whose relationship has fallen into dysfunctional patterns, such as an avoidance or diminishment of physical intimacy, the Three States can be a useful exercise, particularly when facilitated by a trained clinician as part of a therapeutic process. The exercise allows one to experience one’s partner in a new way physically, in a context distinct from sex or affection (and the habits built up around each), and removed from the pressures, constraints, and judgments of daily life. (*More on applications of Insight Improv with couples appears in Part IV of this book.*)

Imagery and Role. What inner images am I experiencing during the exercise—e.g. am I imagining a “scene” happening in a specific place, or that we are playing certain roles in our relationship with one another?

Returning to One’s Own Center

There is a tendency when moving with a partner to focus on—and worry about—the other person and what they are thinking, rather than being grounded in one’s own experience: “Is she OK with the way I’m touching her?”; “I wonder if it’s been too long since I’ve made eye contact with him?”; “Is she avoiding me?”; “Is this too much?”; etc.

Van Itallie refers to this as “**giving away one’s center.**” As actors—or speakers—we sometimes do this when standing before an audience, wondering what the audience is thinking about us, rather than focusing on our intention, or on simply being in the moment. In *The Three States*, it is easy to give away one’s center to the other person.

To return to your center, one of the best ways is to return to bodily awareness. The body is a gateway leading back to the present moment.

If I simply take a breath—feeling that breath in my center, in my belly (also known as the *hara* or lower *dantian* in Eastern traditions)—I am brought back to myself, to the present moment, to a sense of authentic impulse: “gut feeling.”

But any sense door can lead me back to the here and now. Feeling the back of my hand against the cool floor, opening to my sense of smell or taste, taking in my partner’s eyes and noticing their color and shape, closing my eyes and simply listening to the subtle sounds of our movement; all are ways to get out of my head and return to my own center.

When I am connected to myself, my movement is truly authentic. I am no longer *reacting* to what my partner is doing—the reflex to mirror, or please, or protect, or avoid the other. Instead I am able to respond, taking in their movement, feeling the contact (or lack of contact) and its effect on me, but also noticing my own impulse and following it mindfully, intentionally.

The Three States provides a safe container in which to practice having an authentic response to another, a response grounded in one's own center. This is useful practice for real-life relationships, where we often are prone to giving away our center. The next time I have a conflict with my partner, for example, can I stay grounded in present-moment awareness, noticing how I feel, while listening and remaining open to the other's point of view?

Use in a Workshop

The Three States can be taught in a workshop setting, even as an introductory exercise. Because it involves improvisational movement *and* physical contact, ask participants to remove eye glasses, jewelry, watches—anything breakable, sharp, or dangling—beforehand.

Begin with the whole group doing simultaneous authentic movement, with the facilitator as witness. Then, instruct participants to open their eyes slightly while continuing to move, and slowly allow their movement to take them into contact with a partner. Once they have all found partners, say: “Continue following your authentic movement impulses, but do it while maintaining physical contact with your partner—do not break the physical contact as you move.”

After a minute or two, offer some coaching: “As you move in physical contact with your partner, you may find yourself worrying about what your partner is thinking or feeling. ‘Is this touch OK for them? What do *they* need right now?’ Those are completely natural thoughts. However, for this exercise, try to return to your own center, your own authentic impulse. What does your body want to do right now, in this moment? Listen to your body and follow it. If you’re unsure, just be still, relax, and breathe, until an authentic impulse arises. Treat this exercise as a meditation in which the goal is to continually return to your own center. Continue to move in physical contact with your partner for a few more minutes.”

Allow them to try this for a little longer, and then say “In a moment we are going to make a transition: slowly, in your own time, I’d like you to shift to moving in eye contact with your partner, no longer in physical contact. Continue following your body and what it wants to do. Slowly allow your eyes to open and make relaxed eye contact with your partner. You are no longer touching your partner. It’s OK to blink or look away briefly whenever you need to, but see if you can return to making relaxed eye contact with them, as you continue your movement.” In a minute or two, add: “As you move in eye contact with your partner, can you stay connected to your own center, your own authentic impulse? Don’t forget to breathe! Really relax and let go as you move in eye contact with them.”

After a few minutes, introduce a third stage: “In a moment we’re going to make another transition. Slowly, in your own time, I’d like you to break the eye contact with your partner, and move apart from them, no longer in physical or eye contact. Maintain an awareness of your partner as you move apart. What are you noticing coming in

through your sense doors? How is this different from moving in physical or eye contact with them? Follow what your body wants to do...”

And then a final stage: “In a moment I’m going to invite you to continue your movement as an improvisation with your partner, exploring these three states: moving in physical contact, moving in eye contact, and moving apart. Feel free to initiate a change anytime. However, note that you can only be in one state at a time: if one partner makes eye contact, both of you must break the physical contact, and vice versa. As you improvise, stay connected to your own center and what your body wants to do.”

Let the pairs improvise for several minutes, and then talk them through a gradual ending, e.g. “In your own time, begin to find an ending with your partner.” And then: “Slowly make the transition to moving apart now, no longer in physical or eye contact with your partner. Allow your eyes to close. Begin to come to stillness. Take a moment in stillness and silence to relax, breathe, and notice how you feel right now. Let everything go. Take a deep breath and let the body fully relax. When you are ready, you can go meet your partner. Take a few minutes to discuss the exercise: what was it like for you? How was moving with a partner in these three states different from doing authentic movement alone?” Etc.

Variations

Sound and Words

As with authentic movement, the partners in The Three States can agree beforehand on the use of sound and/or words. Note that this is an advanced stage of the

practice, as words and sounding can really pull us off our center. There is a great deal to gain from the nonverbal and silent form of this practice, including a deeper understanding of body language in each of the three states. Once you're comfortable with The Three States as a silent exercise, try allowing the use of sounds. Only experiment with words when you feel ready.

A few ground rules help when adding language in The Three States: speak only about what's happening right now, either directly or through metaphor (e.g. don't deliver a monologue about what you had for breakfast this morning); keep the language spare and essential; avoid unnecessary repetition; have plenty of pauses and silences (i.e., avoid a stream-of-consciousness non-stop delivery). The idea is to be mindful, and notice the effect even a little language has on the interaction, rather than to get lost in a lengthy monologue. Notice how role/story can emerge from the interaction and use of language, and be open to what emerges. But also be open to changing roles/stories as the physical interaction changes. Singing is OK (*see the subsequent chapter, "Singing"*), but again only if it's about what's happening right now.

Here are a couple of interesting variations that can help control the amount of speaking and prevent simultaneous speech:

Assign one person to be the dedicated speaker; the other person must be silent throughout the exercise. Then switch roles. One variation on this variation is to switch roles whenever the pair move apart.

Assign one person the ability to make sound or speak words only when in physical contact; the other can make sound/speak words only when in eye contact. Both must be silent when the pair is apart. This also makes for a very fun

performance score when doing The Three States in front of a group/audience. If three are moving (see below), each can be allowed to speak during one of the Three States. The downside of assigning roles is that it can put the movers into their heads a little bit, as each must remember when they are allowed to speak.

More than Two

It is possible to do The Three States with more than two people.

When doing it with three or four (or more) at one time, add the instruction that it's OK to be in eye contact with one person while in physical contact with another.

As the size of the group increases, the exercise may begin to look like a big "Contact Improvisation Jam." There are some important differences, however:

Participants in The Three States are, within the structure of the exercise, doing authentic movement, in the sense that they are following their body's authentic impulses—rather than thinking and moving intentionally as in Contact Improvisation to find ways of sharing weight, balancing with a partner, etc. If these things happen organically in The Three States, that's fine, but they are side-effects or happy accidents rather than the goal.

Participants in The Three States are conscious of what state they are in: moving in eye contact, in physical contact, or apart. They may be in eye contact with Person A and in physical contact with Person B, but they cannot do both with the same person at the same time. This is also in contrast to Contact Improvisation, where there are no such rules about eye contact and physical contact.

Performing The Three States

The basic version of The Three States, as well as any of the variations mentioned above, can be used as performance structures in a workshop or experimental theater context. The examples at the beginning of this chapter come from one such workshop session.

It is important to remind the movers beforehand about the distinction between Performance Mind and Being Mind: “Break out of your habit to perform or entertain us—instead, stay with yourself and follow your inner impulses, what your body wants to do. Trust that the audience will get what they get.” (*For more on Performance Mind versus Being Mind, see the first chapter of Part II, “Naked Improvisation.”*)

Final Thoughts

Like all Insight Improv exercises, The Three States is a part of mindfulness training, an extension of meditation. It is an opportunity to meditate on relating to others, to open one’s senses and experience the power of sight when in eye contact, the power of touch when in physical contact, and the power of all the senses when moving apart.

The Three States is a practice of being true to the moment while respecting the other. Can I fully take in the other—the subtle expression on their face, the weight of their body leaning against mine, their scent, the sound of their breath—when doing The Three States? Can I really let someone else in, open up to them, with mindfulness?

When doing The Three States, I am *in* a relationship. At the same time, the exercise is a metaphor for relationship. It can echo all the qualities of actual human relationships: intimacy, competition, camaraderie, shyness, domination, seduction,

support, empathy, inhibition, exploration... It may be a misnomer to call the exercise The Three States—it would be more accurate to call it The Infinite States, as there are infinite possibilities that arise when working with a partner in a mindful and open way.

We can extend this idea to all of the exercises in Part II of this book—all explore the mindful relationship to something or somebody. We began with Naked Improvisation, working in relationship to oneself, the space, and the audience; then with Amplification, working in relationship to one's own body and voice; and now The Three States, working in relationship with a partner. We'll see in the upcoming chapters, on Working with Text and Storytelling, how the text or our story can be an inspirational partner as well.

Ultimately, any object of our meditation provides infinite inspiration. When practicing with mindfulness and choicelessness—staying focused while remaining open—the actor, performer, or artist is never at a loss for something to spark their creativity and self-expression. Inspiration emerges from this very moment, with no stress, no pushing. Each moment of awareness presents its own gift to us, if we can remain open to it.

Working with Text

We need to learn to accept our minds. Believe me, for writing, it is all we have. It would be nice if I could have Mark Twain's mind, but I don't. Mark Twain is Mark Twain. Natalie Goldberg is Natalie Goldberg. What does Natalie Goldberg think? The truth is I'm boring some of the time. I even think about rulers, wood desks, algebra problems. I wonder why the hell my mother gave me tuna fish every day for lunch in high school. Then zoom, like a bright cardinal on a gray sky, something brilliant flashes through my mind, and for a moment I'm turned upside down.... We have to accept ourselves in order to write. Now none of us does that fully; few of us do it even halfway. Don't wait for one hundred percent acceptance of yourself before you write, or even eight percent acceptance. Just write. The process of writing is an activity that teaches us about acceptance.

— Natalie Goldberg (1990, p.53)

Imagine putting pen to paper and writing without stopping, being fully present, undistracted, uncensored, allowing your creativity to flow.

And then imagine taking that writing, standing up in front of an audience, and performing it full out, your body and voice expressing each sound, word, and thought with passion and meaning.

Years ago I led the progression of activities described in this chapter at Shantigar in Charlemont, Massachusetts, in Jean-Claude van Itallie's big white workshop tent. I was a little nervous, as respected friends and colleagues of mine were attending the

weekend program, among them professional actors, workshop leaders, and therapists. After a morning of Naked Improvisation (clothed!) and Amplification exercises, I suggested we have a silent, mindful lunch, and invited participants, after eating, to roam freely in the fields and woods, doing their own Nature Meditation (see prior chapters for all of the aforementioned exercises).

When we reconvened for the afternoon inside the tent, each participant sat with a piece of paper or journal and did spontaneous writing for 10 minutes, capturing their experience of their encounter with nature, or whatever else was coming up for them—a memory, fantasy, spontaneous poem, etc. Then, in pairs, participants read each other's writing, underlining words, phrases, and passages they especially liked. The pairs met in groups of four, and each person had a chance to stand up and share their writing, using the underlined text as a kind of script, but improvising with it: using their body and voice, expressing each syllable, each idea fully, repeating words and passages, bringing it to life. Group members rehearsed in this way, offering feedback and coaching to one another.

Then, since it was a beautiful day, we met outside the tent, and one at a time each person got up on a hill overlooking the audience. The performer, text in hand, paused, closed her eyes, took a mindful breath, and then opened her eyes and connected with the audience. What followed was something quite wonderful: a piece of personal writing, delivered in a unique, expressive, aware, and fully-embodied way. Each piece was different, each a moment of true theater. It was a memorable afternoon.

This chapter describes the process of spontaneous writing and performing that writing. Several of the activities were adapted from or inspired by the work of Natalie

Goldberg, Julia Cameron, Christie Svane, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Ivan Midderigh and his colleagues at the Roy Hart Theater, as well as Kristen Linklater, Tina Packer, and their colleagues at Shakespeare and Company. I would also like to acknowledge members of The Author's Group in Boston's South Bay House of Correction, where I taught spontaneous writing for several years in the 90's.

Working with Text	
Writing	Performing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Warming Up</i> ▪ <i>Spontaneous Writing</i> ▪ <i>Editing with a Partner</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Warming Up</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Embodied Tongue-twisters</i> ○ <i>Spoken One-liners</i> ○ <i>Overheard Conversations</i> ▪ <i>FreeText</i> ▪ <i>Variations</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Sung Text</i> ○ <i>Duet/Trio</i> ○ <i>Chorus</i>

Writing

Warming Up

Any Insight Improv activity could serve as a warm-up for spontaneous writing. When working with a peer, it's helpful to begin with a check-in and clearing, meditation, and/or a physical warm-up such as authentic movement. Transitioning directly from

authentic movement to the writing works beautifully, as does a City or Nature Meditation as described above.

Alternatively, a peer session could start with spontaneous writing and sharing that writing as a creative form of check-in, and then proceed to other activities.

In a workshop setting, have participants locate pens and paper *before* starting their warm-up, so they can move directly into the writing uninterrupted.

Spontaneous Writing

The guidelines for spontaneous writing here are adapted from Natalie Goldberg (1990), whose work combines meditation and mindfulness with writing:

Decide on a length of time with your writing partner—10 minutes is a good standard amount—and set a timer.

During the writing, keep your pen moving, don't stop writing. It's OK to write anything, even "I don't know I don't know I don't know"—but keep that pen moving.

Write from the heart, from the gut. Do not censor yourself. Be open to anything: stream of consciousness, poem, memory, rant, story, etc.

Allow yourself to write the worst crap in human history. It's OK if it's bad. Tell your inner critic to take a hike for the next 10 minutes. It's not your role to assess the writing, just to be a conduit for what's coming through your moving hand.

Do not worry about punctuation, grammar, dotting i's and crossing t's, etc. You can fix everything later.

As you notice what's coming up in the writing, do not dance around it, circle it, or delay gratification—instead, dive right in and go for the heart of the matter.

Keep writing until the timer goes off. Once it does, go back and read over what you wrote, correcting any spelling/punctuation errors. In a workshop, the facilitator should give an extra few minutes after the writing stops for participants to read back over their work and correct errors. However, they are not to edit their own writing.

(Note: In addition to Natalie Goldberg's books and retreats, if you're interested in using spontaneous writing as a daily practice, I recommend Julia Cameron's The Artist's Way (2002) and her practice of "Morning Pages")

Rules for Spontaneous Writing

(adapted from Natalie Goldberg)

Keep pen to paper. Don't stop writing for 10 minutes (even if you need to write "I don't know" 50 times).

Be open to anything: stream of consciousness, poem, memory, rant, story, etc.

Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc.—you can fix it later.

Allow yourself to write the worst nonsense in history. Don't judge what's coming out. Let it rip. No censoring.

Go for the heart of the matter—don't dance around, delay, or avoid it.

Editing with a Partner

Once you've written your piece, there are several options for what to do next, depending on the context.

When working one-to-one, and if using spontaneous writing as a form of check-in, or as a reflective technique after an exercise such as authentic movement, you may optionally wish to read your piece aloud to your partner, or read only portions of your writing. Or, you may stand up and “perform” the writing, using the FreeText technique described further below.

In a workshop context, it can be helpful to insert an “editing” step in the process, for a few reasons. Depending on the size of the group, there may not be enough time for everyone to perform their writing in its entirety; the editing process can shorten the material, sometimes significantly. Also, sometimes one can be a little attached to one’s writing—by having someone else edit my writing, I can detach from the narrative flow, and feel more free to improvise with it. For example, if I am given fragments of my own writing, rather than the entire text, I am more likely to be able to improvise and play with particular words/phrases. Finally, it’s nice to let participants in the workshop influence one another’s writing, which helps foster a feeling of mutual ownership of the process.

The editing process is simple: participants find a partner and swap writing with them. Sitting side-by-side, they read one another’s piece, underlining individual words, phrases, and sentences that particularly stand out or that they especially like. How much of the writing they underline is up to them; typically it is 25-50% of the writing. Less is also possible: there may be 3 words plus one sentence that truly stands out. If the editor cannot read the other’s writing, they can ask the writer. But neither partner is to influence the other in the editing process.

When the editing is complete, the two swap the written material once again, and quietly read what their editor has underlined.

(One optional step: invite the writer at this point to underline some of his own writing—something he feels he cannot live without, or would badly like to have back in.)

This process produces the text. It is as if the actor has been handed a script for the first time. Now his challenge is to take that text and explore it, to bring it to life.

Performing Text

Warming Up

Prior to performing any text, a good warm-up is essential. Many Insight Improv activities can be part of a warm-up progression, including authentic movement, shared vipassana, and amplification—the latter is especially useful as a way to warm up and stretch both voice and body.

Additional activities can serve as a more specific warm-up to performing a text:

Embodied Tongue-twisters. Tongue twisters—such as “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers”—are used by actors before going on stage to limber up the equipment needed for articulation, coordinating and amplifying the use of lips, teeth, tongue, and soft palate to produce consonant and vowel sounds quickly and accurately. (For more examples, search for “tongue twisters” on the web.)

In embodied tongue-twisters, we add gesture and movement—ideally, involving the whole body—to accompany and express the meaning of each word of the tongue twister, acting each out as if it were a mini-play, but greatly exaggerated. For example,

try acting this out (it helps to declaim the text loudly and slowly, in a British accent—don't forget to take a deep belly breath before you start!): *“Lillie Langtry lay on the lawn and languidly, lasciviously laughed!”*

Spoken One-liners. These are called “spoken” to differentiate them from the “sung” variety we’ll introduce later in the chapter on Singing. One-liners are a particularly good warm-up in a workshop setting. As the group stands together in a circle, one person whispers a phrase or short sentence into the ear of someone next to them. The phrase can be original, or a short quote from a poem or famous speech. The receiver of the whisper must then “perform” that line, using their full voice and body, for the whole group.

We’re not interested in a naturalistic delivery—let go of logic and let the sounds and imagery of the text inspire your use of body and voice. It’s helpful to employ amplification, repeating words while increasing (or decreasing) one or more vocal and/or physical dimensions. Movement is encouraged—e.g. stepping into the circle, using gestures, making eye contact.

Primarily, this exercise is about the voice: how to use changes in volume, pitch, speed, timbre, and enunciation to explore the sound and meaning of the text. The actor is encouraged to “taste” each syllable of each word—noticing how it wants to emerge in that moment of interplay of breath, vibration, tongue, teeth, and lips. Words and phrases can be repeated, in order to get the maximum value out of each sound and word.

There is no limit to what can be done with a single line. Given “I need to go buy some milk,” the actor may begin by looking around the circle, making eye contact with each person, while saying “Iiiiiiii” in a slowly rising pitch. Then, with “need”, the actor

may fall to her knees, expelling the word with a sharp, low-pitched grunt of sound, and begin to crawl toward the center of the circle. Etc.

A variation on this is the **One-liner Duet**. In a workshop setting, the one-liner duet picks right up from spoken one-liners. Now, however, two participants whisper a line in an ear of two different people in the circle. The exercise is the same as before, but now with two performers, each with a different one-liner. For the exercise to work, the two speakers should make space for the other by pausing and listening. They should also invite interaction through eye contact and/or physical contact. Speaking simultaneously is possible, too, but ideally is a choice of the two actors (rather than the result of a lack of listening and making space for one another).

What emerges is a piece of improvisational theater, a short scene with two characters, speaking text which may or may not make sense. Much of the “meaning” of the interaction is conveyed through tone, facial expression, and how the characters relate physically. If the actors relax and do not worry about performing, all kinds of happy accidents can naturally emerge—e.g. the next word one actor speaks may be a perfect response to what the other just said.

When one person is done, she physically freezes until the other person is also finished and freezes. The two then wait a beat before breaking the freeze. The audience can then applaud—we often like to use silent applause in Insight Improv workshops, a gesture borrowed from American Sign Language (see <http://bit.ly/asl-applause>).

Overheard Conversations. Another warm-up, and a powerful exercise in itself, comes from Jean-Claude van Itallie. Over lunch (or in between two days of a weekend workshop), give participants the assignment to “overhear” a brief excerpt of someone’s

conversation. This could be anywhere—in a restaurant, post office, dry cleaners, on the subway, etc. Remember not only the words, but everything about the moment: the precise inflection, emphasis, cadence, accent, timbre, and emotional quality of the voice—as well as the facial expression, gesture, stance, etc. Go for short excerpts, easy to capture.

One at a time, participants come before the group to share their overheard bits of dialogue. The performer takes a moment in silence, and then speaks, matching his body and voice to his memory of what he had heard. (For a less experienced group, it might be good to have participants practice in pairs before performing in front of the entire group.) The facilitator may encourage him to do it more than once, particularly if he is having trouble getting it exactly as he heard it (and saw it). For example, it can be helpful to slightly exaggerate the changes in pitch in the line, to bring out the musicality of it. Once he has done it to his (and the facilitator's) satisfaction, the facilitator can lead the group in echoing it back vocally and physically—doing a few “call and responses” with the line.

This exercise is so effective that I can still recall an overheard conversation that Lorraine Grosslight shared with a workshop group, some 20 years ago:

Hotdog? Hotdog? It does look like a hotdog. It's a flower though.

The tone was one of sincere interest and deliberation. Lorraine explained that she was in a restaurant, overhearing a caregiver's response to their child's query about the décor.

FreeText

FreeText is pure improvisation with a text. Any text will do: one's own spontaneous writing, a poem, material from a book or play, etc.

Script in hand, the actor is invited to let go of any preconception of how she might normally approach a piece of writing. Entering empty, she closes her eyes for a moment, connecting with herself, mindfully, in the present. She opens her eyes, connecting with the audience. Then she sees her text.

The words are there as a path, but not a path to drive down as quickly and efficiently and linearly as possible. Rather than get swept up in the horizontal flow of the narrative, the actor goes vertical, plunging into individual moments. As with the One-liners warm-up, she can double back, re-explore a section, a phrase, a word, discovering the richness in repeating a syllable, amplifying it, tasting it, each consonant and vowel alive in her mouth.

The body in FreeText is completely alive and available—a vehicle to convey all of the associations being sparked in the actor's psyche. She moves freely in the space, using the floor, levels, gestures, facial expressions, interaction with the audience—fully expressing each image, role, idea, action, and emotion with abandon.

The actor is not buried in her text. She looks down, gets the next line or phrase, and then looks up and delivers it. She does not need to make eye contact with the audience—in fact, she can close her eyes whenever she likes. But she can also deliver lines directly to audience members—sometimes only one word—making the moment of interaction land with meaning and emotional impact.

What's key here is the inner journey. The actor is connected with her own center and how the words on the page are affecting her. This is not a performance: the actor's process is to discover what is in this text, for her. The audience will get what they get.

She is a sensitive instrument, being played *by* the language while also playing it. She is also playing *with* the language, like a kid on a jungle gym, experimenting and exploring, trying something again that feels good, or trying it again in different ways *until* it feels good.

The voice is fluid, exploring opposites: heights and depths, rough and smooth, wild and controlled. Logic is abandoned—the actor is not worried about how a word or phrase “should” sound or would sound normally. Gut instinct takes over and the voice flies free, ricocheting off words into open syllables, song, animal shrieks, laughter. Each word, sentence, image, or idea is at the same time information to express and in itself inspiration for the actor, egging her on in the unfolding creation. She is dancing with her text, at times holding it gently, whispering words, at other times being held by it, rocked by it, swirled by it, swept up in its storm and tossed around the room.

FreeText is an act of creativity, an open canvas to create and discover. In one passage the actor may be center stage, loudly enunciating each syllable as if reading a proclamation to the world. Moments later, she may be huddled in a corner, her back to us, whispering and mumbling to herself like a madwoman. She may then emerge from the corner as a serpent, slithering across the floor toward us, elongating all the TH’s and S’s in her passage, seducing us with sensual imagery. The actor is not doing these things at random: she is letting the text affect her, and letting her voice and body follow what the text seems to need.

When trying FreeText with a partner or in a workshop setting, a few details help create a supportive container:

Coaching. When leading the FreeText exercise in a workshop context, after demonstrating the exercise, give participants a chance to try it in small teams of two to four individuals before performing for the whole group. This provides an opportunity to offer and receive coaching. For those new to the form, it can be helpful to have someone encouraging them to “go vertical,” to slow down and play with one word, phrase, or sentence, letting go of the horizontal flow of the storyline and living each moment fully, mining its infinite possibilities before moving on.

Timing. It can be helpful to set a time boundary up front, with either an automated alarm or the ring of a bell from the facilitator or partner when time is up. It’s important the actor not stop abruptly, so agree beforehand that when the alarm or bell sounds, that is a signal for the actor to begin to find an ending. Five minutes is good amount of time to allot when first experimenting—this can be decreased for large workshops, increased for one-to-one work.

Vertical and horizontal moments. When the actor stands before the audience, she begins with a vertical and a horizontal moment. This practice, from Jean-Claude van Itallie, is a way of beginning that starts with closing one’s eyes and connecting with oneself—sending one’s awareness down into the body—and then opening the eyes and connecting outward with members of the audience, one at a time. *(More on vertical and horizontal moments in the next chapter, on Storytelling.)*

Ending. When done, the actor takes a moment in silence and stillness to breathe and notice how she is feeling. For the audience, this is an extra moment to take in what has just occurred. They can then respond with silent applause.

Rules for Performing One's Writing

Start with a vertical and a horizontal moment: connect with yourself, and with the audience. Then step forward and begin.

Get a line off the page and then speak it—don't be buried in the text.

Use the full range of body and voice to express each sentence, word, syllable, sound. Taste the words.

It's fine to repeat sentences, words, syllables—don't proceed until you are satisfied.

Let the text play you: what effect is it having on you?

Focus on the present moment; do not worry about getting through the entire text.

When time is up, find an ending that feels right to you. Then take a vertical moment in silence, noticing how you feel.

Variations

Sung Text. As fun as FreeText is, it's even more fun to sing the text. One does not need to be a great singer. If one *aims* for singing, all kinds of interesting things can happen—rapping, chanting, country/folk ballads, opera, post-modern atonality. Singing opens the heart as well as the voice, inviting the flow of emotion; the body joins in with rhythmic movement and a greater range of expression. (*More on this in the subsequent chapter on Singing.*)

Duet/Trio. Two people—or even three—can each work with their own texts simultaneously. A brand new text arises spontaneously from individuals each working with their own text.

One helpful guideline is to **listen and make space for the other(s)**—if a new speaker interrupts, the first speaker should usually stop. However, this rule can be intentionally broken; there may be times when the actors choose to speak (or sing) simultaneously—but it should be a choice. The other guideline is to **invite interaction**, physically and through eye contact with the other(s), as well as vocally.

Working with more than one text also invites the possibility of accidental dialogue. One form of this is a rhythmic call and response: e.g., one speaker may be repeating the phrase “she said,” or “my favorite thing is . . .” from his text, while the other cycles through a series of words and phrases from her own.

Chorus. A different performance structure involving two or more people is to have one text, performed by its author, and a chorus, comprised of one or more actors. The job of the chorus is to listen to, echo, and amplify what the performer of the text is doing—both vocally and physically (see the previous chapter on Amplification).

For example, if the speaker says “You will have lights out by 11!,” pointing his finger at the audience, the chorus may repeat the entire line, or just the number “11,” matching the delivery of the speaker but putting some spin on it—it may be repeated several times, with a rising pitch, or whispered. The pointed finger may be pointed straight out, or in different directions, or back at the chorus’s own chest, as if they were the recipient of the speaker’s command.

The chorus must be sensitive not to steal the show—they are there to support the speaker, not overwhelm them. So sensitivity and listening on the part of the chorus are key. If the chorus is comprised of more than one actor, ideally they will not only echo/amplify the speaker's vocal and physical choices, but also do their best to interact with one another, as well as mirror each other's body and voice. The chorus can play roles, sometimes acting like another character in a scene, sometimes being the voice of God or the Universe, sometimes being a little echo in the writer's mind. The chorus can also sing words that the speaker is speaking.

Writing and Improvising—Mindfully

There is something surprising and somewhat miraculous in the way one can take words off the page and bring them to life in a space, for an audience. What has been interior becomes real, fleeting thought made concrete, ideas and emotions made evident on the face, in the voice, through the body, for all to see and hear. The performer reads little squiggles on paper and through skillfully interpreting them can transport us to another reality.

In Insight Improvisation, the act of spontaneous writing, and the performing of that writing, are both forms of meditation. From the point of view of the meditator, *who* I am being—as the writer, the performer, or the audience—is fundamentally a listener. I listen to—witness—my own process, the stream of thoughts and feelings I capture in words on the page. Then, reading back, I listen again: how do those words affect me? When I speak them aloud, what do I feel, moment by moment? And as the audience, what engages or moves me in this performance?

Improvisation isn't always pretty. There will be moments as a writer when the right words don't come, or as a performer when the body or voice do not serve and the audience tunes out. But as meditators we can find added value in those moments. As a meditator I can take the perspective of the witness-self and ask, is this pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? And if unpleasant, am I reacting with aversion, pushing this moment away? Can I reengage in the next moment, bringing acceptance to what is unpleasant, bringing curiosity, even bringing compassion? Can I express my feelings through the writing, or through how I perform the writing—letting my honest, authentic self come through?

In the next chapter, on Storytelling, we'll further develop our spontaneity with language, tapping into memories and telling stories without prior writing or planning. We will draw on all we've developed so far, including our ability to use the actor's instrument both mindfully and expressively.

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Storytelling

Telling a personal story takes courage. It is challenging to stand up and share, with vulnerability and honesty, the truth of one's life—to be seen, heard, and risk being judged. What if my story is uninteresting? What if I don't tell it well? What if this story reveals something *too* personal?

The storyteller enters the space unprepared, unrehearsed. She stands before the audience and closes her eyes, taking a moment to breathe and center. Then she opens them and connects with the audience.

She recalls the first moment in her story as if it's happening now. She speaks aloud what she sees and feels—where she is, what kind of day it is, what she hears and smells—opening to all of the senses.

She re-lives the story as she tells it, moving through the space, portraying characters as they appear, transforming her voice and body.

She takes her time, discovering the story moment by moment, allowing herself to breathe, to feel her feelings. By listening to herself in this way, she discovers how the story needs to end.

I first learned this method of storytelling in the early 1990's from Jean-Claude van Itallie, the original playwright for the Open Theater and a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. Van Itallie's approach felt natural to me: rather than feel a pressure to perform and "get it right," I was being asked to simply re-enter my memory of a time, to relive that moment, and to let my body and voice be an open channel for whatever need be expressed.

There was no judgment about what kind of moment it was—positive, negative, mundane, dramatic. Jean-Claude fostered a safe and judgment-free space where anything could be expressed.

I've come to realize that this method of spontaneous storytelling fosters mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness: in order to relive the moment in all its fullness, one must be completely present, open to all the senses, and connected with one's own emotions—as well as connecting with the audience.

This chapter is based on van Itallie's teachings, as well as other refinements I have incorporated over the years. In addition to Jean-Claude, I'd like to acknowledge my colleagues at the Ariel Group, present and past, who have contributed to my understanding of storytelling.

Storytelling Guidelines	
Basics	Performing a Story
<p>Moment from Today / Childhood Moment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Relive in the Telling—It’s Happening Now</i> ▪ <i>Use Bullet Phrases—No “Ands”</i> ▪ <i>Evoke Sensory Details</i> ▪ <i>Play the Roles</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Enter Empty</i> ▪ <i>Begin with Vertical + Horizontal Moments</i> ▪ <i>Bring to Life in the Space</i> ▪ <i>Focus on Telling Moments</i> ▪ <i>Be Aware of the Emotional Arc</i> ▪ <i>Trust Your Intuition and Take Poetic License</i> ▪ <i>Discover How the Story Needs to End</i>
Feedback & Coaching	Variations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>What did you see and hear?</i> ▪ <i>What resonated for you personally?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Dream-Telling</i> ▪ <i>Duet Storytelling</i> ▪ <i>Amplified Story</i> ▪ <i>Sung Story</i> ▪ <i>Applications</i>

Basics I: Sharing a Moment from Today

Here’s a storytelling warm-up for use in a workshop setting (or one-to-one).

Sitting in a circle with the group, lead a brief meditation. Then add these instructions:

“Keeping your eyes closed, cast your mind back to any moment from today.”

Pause to allow the group to think back to a moment. “Notice the sensory details—colors, smells, etc. Also, who else is with you in this moment; how do they interact with you? How do you feel?”

“With your eyes still closed, I’m going to invite you to share your moment aloud. I’ll begin with mine, and then we can go in any order, like popcorn. Please allow a pause, a silence between one person’s moment and the next, to allow things to land, as well as to clear the slate for what’s next. We’re going to keep our eyes closed throughout to help maintain our mindful awareness, letting the listening and the sharing be an extension of our meditation.”

(Note that the verbal instructions to the group are purposely kept simple at this stage to allow them to tell their moment in any way they like. Later the storytelling guidelines will become more specific.)

As you demonstrate sharing your moment, speak in the present tense, as if it’s happening now. Relax and breathe. Speak slowly, feeling everything you are saying. Your moment should be brief—perhaps six to ten short sentences or phrases. For example:

I emerge from the bedroom, still groggy. There’s Micah in his high-chair, and Jasmine at the table. I go and kiss them on the head. “Good morning, Daddy!” I see a bowl of cereal no one is eating. Soggy Cheerios. Baby spoon. Sweet milk in my mouth. I smile.

Once everyone has shared their moment, end with a brief closing meditation before inviting everyone to open their eyes and stretch. You can also additionally debrief the exercise, inviting comments on what the group experienced.

This exercise can be a surprisingly powerful introduction to storytelling. With eyes closed a feeling of intimacy is created, as when sharing stories around a campfire or listening to stories on the radio (a la “The Moth”). As participants become increasingly comfortable, the sharing can grow progressively deeper and more personal.

Note that if you are leading this exercise first thing in the morning, you can invite moments from the day before, or “the last 24 hours.”

Basics II: Sharing a Childhood Moment

Still in a circle with the group—if you’re continuing from the last warm-up have everyone take a moment to stand up and stretch first—demonstrate sharing a childhood moment. Relive it as you tell it (you can remain seated for this demo, but still be physically animated). For example:

Foggy day. Salty air. Wind—in my face. I’m biking...down a hill, into the schoolyard! [Pedaling rapidly. In a young boy’s voice:]

“Hello, headquarters, this is Agent X-1. Over!”

[Bending over radar screen, pointing at it, and speaking in a gruff, commanding voice:]

“Roger Agent X-1, this is Headquarters, we have you on radar, over!”

“Hello headquarters, this is Agent X-1. I think I see the enemy up ahead. Over...”

“Roger Agent X-1, we have the enemy on radar. It’s dangerous! Turn back! Turn back!”

[The boy gasps and suddenly stops. In a panic:]

*The school building is in front of me. All the windows are like dark eyes,
looking at me. No one is around! What should I do?!?*

I'm Agent X-1. I have to continue my mission. I BIKE ON!!!

[Pedals furiously.]

Use your demo to discuss storytelling techniques with the group: “What stood out? What was different from how one normally tells a story?”

Each of the techniques is designed to remove the distance between the audience and the story, making the moment as immediate as possible:

Relive in the telling—it’s happening *now*. Use the present tense. “I am 10 years old...” (not, “When I was 10 years old...”)

Use bullet phrases. Cut “and” and “um.” End each thought with a small pause, as if you were ending the phrase with a period. “Foggy day. Salty air.” (not, “When I was a young boy I used to wake up and it would be foggy out and the air smelled like salt and um...”)

Open the senses. Evoke smells, tastes, touch, etc. “Foggy day. Salty air. Wind in my face.”

Play the roles. Pay attention to the three narrative stances: the narrator, *you* as a character in the story, and other characters. Differentiate the roles physically and vocally. E.g., how does gruff Headquarters look and sound as he says “*Roger Agent X-1, we have the enemy on radar. It’s dangerous!*”

Next, have the participants close their eyes and recall a childhood moment—go with the first memory that comes to mind—it is not necessary to choose an “exciting” moment, any will do. Have them visualize and recall where they were, the time of year, what they were wearing. Open to the sensory details. See the other characters, hear them. Let the scene play out in their mind’s eye.

When they are ready they can open their eyes. Then have one person share with the group—ask them if they are OK if you coach them a little. If the storyteller would like to stand and move around for their story, encourage them! If the group is large, after a few have shared in the circle, you can split them into pairs or small groups so everyone has a chance.

Performing a Story

Invite the group to sit in a shallow semi-circle, forming an audience. For the Storytelling exercise, we are building on the childhood-moments warm-up by adding a few new guidelines:

Enter empty. In its pure form, entering empty means not choosing a story in advance, but instead letting it “choose you.” As you prepare to tell your story (it could be before, during or after your vertical or horizontal moment—see below), relax and allow any memory from your life to enter your mind. As you see it, describe it aloud—and begin to live it on the stage. Discover the characters and scenes of the story moment-by-moment; find an ending that feels organic.

Entering empty is a little like stepping up on a high diving board: what will happen next? It’s very exciting to take such a risk. But if one proceeds slowly and

mindfully, it's almost impossible to fail: any life moment (or series of moments) can form the basis of an engaging and meaningful story, if one is fully present to each moment.

It helps to slow down—sometimes radically. Take your time to discover what's next. Don't be afraid of pauses, even silences. And if you forget something important, it's OK to loop back and replay that moment. Let yourself break the rules—your narrative can jump around in time if it needs to.

If you prefer to choose your story in advance, “entering empty” can be reinterpreted as not planning the story in advance, and not deciding how it will end, but instead discovering that along the way. Rather than choose a story you've told many times before, try picking one you've rarely or never told. Choose a significant moment from your life, or one that captures a certain feeling or emotion you'd like to explore.

Begin with a vertical and a horizontal moment. A vertical moment is a chance to relax, breathe, and center. Close your eyes, place one hand on your belly, and bend your knees slightly. Breathe into your belly, and let there be a relaxed sigh of relief through your open mouth on the out-breath. Take your time. Only you can be the judge of how long you need—and how many breaths you need—to truly relax and center.

Then, open your eyes and take a horizontal moment. Keeping your hand on your belly, make eye contact with the audience, one person at a time. Take your time and take a fully belly-breath in and out as you make relaxed eye contact with each person. Do not rush and scan the audience. You do not have to meet everyone's eyes, but try to connect with at least three individuals. The key is to relax and let them in: how can you receive

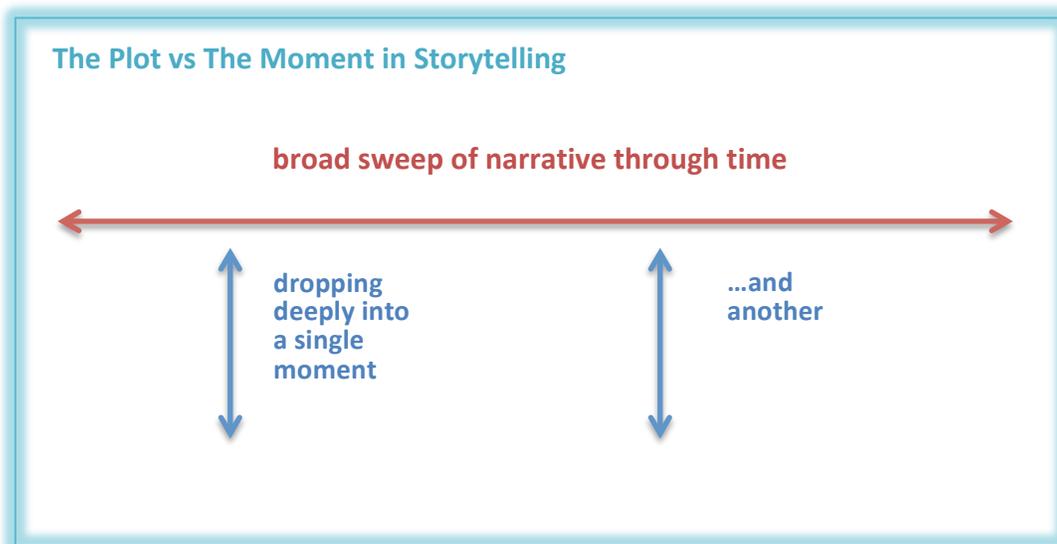
the other person with your eyes? It's okay to smile. Let your mouth drop open to fully relax—don't worry about looking silly. This is an exercise designed to cultivate self-awareness, a training in learning to relax in the face of fear and being seen.

Then, when you are ready, step forward and tell your story.

Bring the story to life in the space. Move, use the whole space, create scenes, etc.

As you play different characters, turn or move your body to indicate their relative position in the dialogue. Use different areas of the space to create various locations: my childhood home might be downstage right; biking into the schoolyard might use all the space further upstage; then when I confront the scary school I might stand downstage center, looking up.

Focus on telling moments; let the broader narrative go. There is a tendency among storytellers to try to include too much—e.g., if I'm telling you how I got married, I'd be tempted to include how I met my wife, the entire wedding day, and what happened afterward. Not only does this take too long, but I end up glossing over truly interesting details. It is more powerful to pick one or two "telling" moments to slow down and bring to life in detail, rather than attempt to convey the entire narrative. For example, I might choose the moment, early in the morning, when a procession of Buddhist monks entered my wife's home in Northern Thailand where the ceremony was to take place. Then I might jump to a moment during the ceremony where I was in such pain from kneeling, surrounded by 100 wedding guests, that I did not know what to do. The skill of the storyteller is to home in on these key moments and drop into them, feeling them fully, conveying the essential sensory, emotional, and character details.



Note that it's always OK in a story to jump in time and/or space. Connecting disparate moments can use a minimum of narration, e.g. "The monks sit on cushions along one wall of the living room. A half hour later, the ceremony has begun. Orapin and I, kneeling, are surrounded by 100 guests..."

Be aware of the emotional arc. The emotional arc of the story is the journey we're taking the audience on, which is not necessarily a simple arc: it could be a complex shape with many peaks and valleys, twists and turns.

Congruity is key to conveying changes in emotion, tone, or energy. If there's a joyful moment in the story, is that showing on my face and body, and through the tone of my voice? Do I tend to smile during serious passages, undermining the intensity of the story? Etc. And behind that congruity, can I actually *feel* the emotions as they change in my story? If I can feel the emotions, my audience likely will, too.

Trust your intuition and take poetic license. Human memory is filled with gaps. You may not remember exactly what happened, in what sequence, what a particular day was like, people's names, etc. You may even forget how the story actually ends.

We must acknowledge that every story is completely subjective: it is told through the eyes of the storyteller. For that reason, no story is “true” and every story is “true,” in the sense that it captures the storyteller's truth.

Trust yourself and your intuitive sense of what happened. As a storyteller you have complete license to fill in the gaps in a way that feels true to you. Aim for truth, but do not be attached to the precise accuracy of every detail of your story.

Discover how the story needs to end. Rather than plan the ending, let yourself discover the ending that feels right to you, today. Saying less, rather than more, is often the most powerful choice. An ending can be a satisfying resolution, but it can also be a cliffhanger that leaves the audience wanting more. Trust that if you say less, the audience will fill in the bigger canvas for themselves.

Feedback and Coaching

What's most important when offering feedback or coaching for the storyteller is to do it mindfully, with awareness of what the storyteller needs. When in doubt, it's OK to ask the storyteller what kind of feedback he would like, if any. If he is open, the facilitator in a workshop context can ask the group two questions:

“What did you see and hear?” This question is designed to invite the group to be witnesses in an authentic movement sense, mirroring back moments from the story—not only words but also physical and vocal aspects. This is helpful for the storyteller, to

reflect back on what he just did, and to get a sense of which moments stood out for the audience.

“What resonated personally for you?” This question invites “psychodramatic sharing” from the group: “how does the story relate to your own life?” Responses will likely include feelings as well as life moments—the latter ideally shared succinctly (if not, the facilitator can remind the group to keep their responses to the point). For a storyteller who just shared something personal and vulnerable with the group, having the group respond in kind is deeply validating, helping him reconnect with and feel the emotional support of the group.

Some storytellers may also want technical feedback from the facilitator/group regarding how they told their story, what worked well and what could have been better. Others may want coaching on how to go further with the story to explore a personal edge, or thoughts on incorporating the material into another artistic endeavor, such as a one-person show.

Variations

Dream-telling

Telling a dream is just like telling a personal story: do not announce it’s a dream or begin by showing yourself asleep. Instead, treat it as a real-life story; it’s happening now. As with any story, don’t be afraid to fill in gaps in the dream by following your intuition.

Duet Storytelling

Two storytellers stand, facing the audience. Neither knows anything about the other's story. They begin simultaneously with vertical and horizontal moments. One steps forward and begins her story. When she comes to a pause in her story, the other steps forward and begins his. They alternate in this way, using the other's pause as a signal.

Although one typically freezes while the other is speaking, it can also be interesting to continue the physical action of a scene in silence. If one storyteller interrupts the other, the first storyteller should take that as a cue that either they've been speaking too long, or that the other storyteller's story has a moment that fits well at this point, and should pause/freeze to make space for the other.

The storytellers may be affected by each other's story, which is fine. What makes this performance structure more than the sum of its parts is the awareness and ability of the two storytellers to incorporate parallel moments, language, and energy—how one story can echo or contrast the other in surprising ways. It is important not to try to force something to happen, but to simply be aware of the possibility of interaction or of resonance with the other's story, and if the opportunity arises, to let it happen.

When both storytellers remain open and aware, but also true to their own story, this exercise can at times evoke an almost magical sense of resonance, even synchronicity.

Other Variations: Amplified Story, Sung Story, etc.

Other techniques mentioned in Part II of this book approach storytelling in creative ways, and are particularly effective for stretching the expressive range of the storyteller. In an Amplified Story, the storyteller tells her story as normal, but is doing the

Amplification exercise “in the background,” amplifying what is happening in her body and voice. In a Sung Story, everything is sung, including the narration and what different characters say—the result can be a mini-musical, an opera, or a rap dialogue. (See the chapters on *Amplification* and *Singing* for more on these approaches).

Applications

Storytelling can be one ingredient—a main ingredient—in developing a theater piece such as a one-person show. Over the years I have helped develop many theater pieces based on personal stories, including Jean-Claude van Itallie’s plays *Guys Dreamin’* (with Court Dorsey and Kermit Dunkelberg) and *War, Sex, and Dreams*; Eda Roth’s *Looking for the New World: a Shtetl Girl’s Journey in America*, and my own one-man shows *A Naked Man in Boston* and *Meditate on Dying*. As a drama therapist, I have also used storytelling with clients to help them develop their own self-revelatory theater pieces. (See *Part IV* of this book for more on these applications of storytelling.)

Further Reading

Van Itallie, J. (1997). *The playwright’s handbook*. New York: Applause.

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.

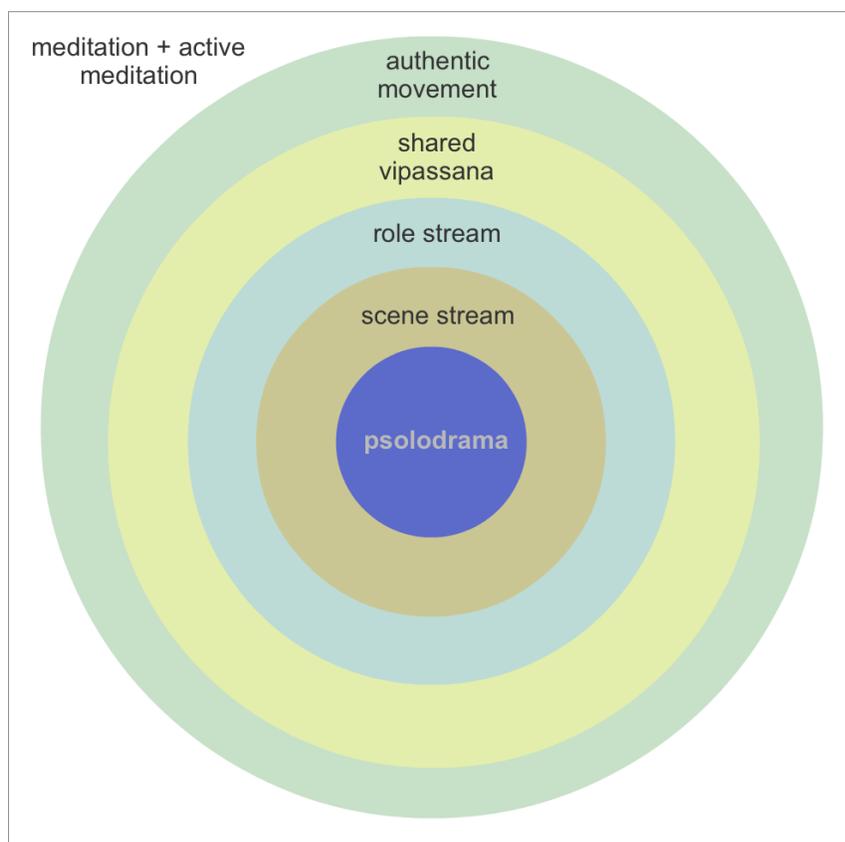
Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up, and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.

— 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.

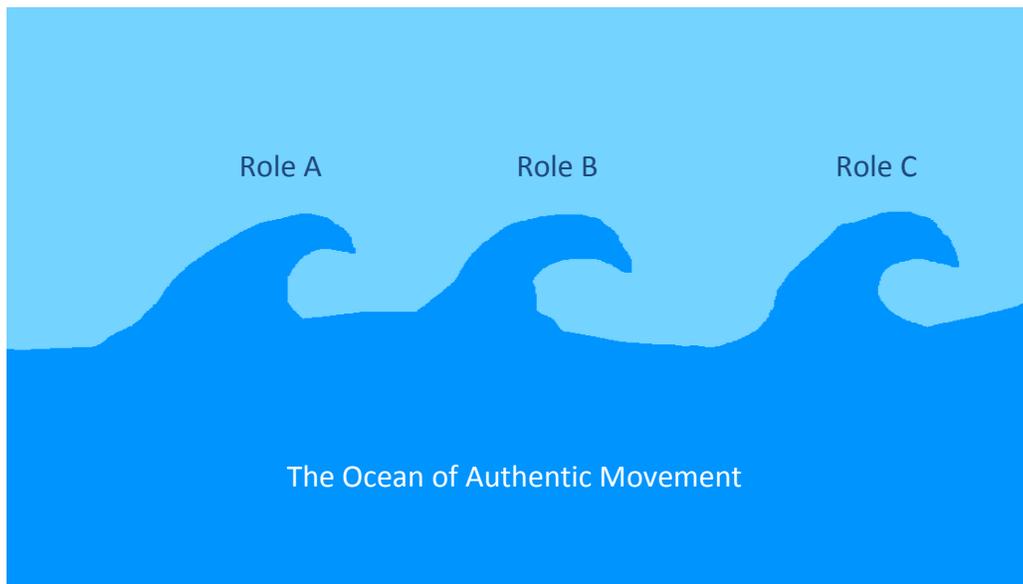
Allow ambiguity. A role may be unclear. For example, you may find yourself making a certain sound while shaking or vibrating your body. This is completely OK, and part of the process—we do not need to understand or name every role that is arising. Sometimes, if we stay with a certain physical/vocal pattern 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.

References

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Singing

In Roy Hart Theatre both men and women push their voices beyond bass and soprano in search of the human voice, as opposed to the specialized voice.

In this work the singer can penetrate more and more the depths of his body and so achieve a new and until now unknown sound, to which the singer listens as if he were listening to a strange voice. But only if the singer experiences that “it” sings, is the state of childhood in the adult restituted, the real active state of creation in the human being. Only then can he be sure that the “it” in the listener hears too and thus art fulfills the same function as religion which, by touching the depth in the human being, leads to the height.

— Roy Hart

(excerpts from writings, 1972 and 1961)

Why Singing?

Many of us are afraid of singing in public. We may sing along with a radio or digital player, or sing in the shower, but when it comes to sharing our voice with others,

we hesitate. We may recall our experience in fifth grade music class, when we shyly mouthed the words. Instead, we listen with admiration as professional singers impress us with their range, power, and technique.

But singing should not be the domain of a few “talented” people. It is our birthright, one of the most joyous aspects of being human. Nearly all peoples engage in singing, and with such great variety that no two cultures or countries sound the same. When we sing, we breathe more deeply, connect with our feelings, and open our hearts with the vibration of sound.

I was not one of those kids who were told to mouth the words. I could sing a little, well enough to be in my junior high school chorus and sing “Copacabana” and “Bohemian Rhapsody.” I was a Soprano I in seventh grade. But once my voice changed that was it for singing—until I met the Roy Hart Theater, 15 years later. In my first Roy Hart workshop, I was asked to use the full range of my voice, from the very highest falsetto to the lowest bass notes. I was amazed at what my voice could do.

When we speak about singing in Insight Improvisation, we are not talking about performing songs written by others, but rather of singing as an in-the-moment, alive activity, unplanned. Although melody is possible, it is not required. The voice can go places it’s never been before—the highest squeaks, rumbling bass notes, scratchy whispers, honking nasal tones, operatic swells—accompanied by words that emerge from the body, from inner imagery, inspired and stretched by sound, gesture, and movement.

Singing in Insight Improv is supported by mindfulness, in the form of a present-moment awareness of sound, as well as choicelessness, opening up to and being inspired by information coming through all the different sensory channels, as well as inner

imagery and emotion. Underlying both of these kinds of awareness is *metta*, which starts with lovingkindness for yourself, as you take the risk to open your voice and heart to sing.

Singing		
Warmups	Applications	FreeSong
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Moving & Humming</i> ▪ <i>Chords</i> ▪ <i>Jams</i> ▪ <i>One-Liners</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Shared Vipassana</i> ▪ <i>Naked Improvisation</i> ▪ <i>Amplification</i> ▪ <i>The Three States</i> ▪ <i>Working with Text</i> ▪ <i>Storytelling</i> ▪ <i>Role Stream & Scene Stream</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>The Basic Exercise</i> ▪ <i>Duet/Trio</i>

The approach to singing in this chapter was inspired by the teachings of the Roy Hart Theatre, with special thanks to Ivan Midderigh, Saule Ryan, and Carol Mendelsohn; the vocal techniques of Kristin Linklater; and the work of Kermit Dunkelberg, Kim Mancuso, and my fellow-actors in Pilgrim Theatre.

Individual Warm-up: Moving and Humming

This sequence can be used when working alone, or as a group warm-up where individuals work independently and simultaneously, guided by the facilitator:

Begin with a brief sitting meditation, and transition into authentic movement.

As you follow your body in the movement, allow yourself to inhale slowly and deeply. You might imagine that you can breathe in through the top of your head, and breathe the air all the way down to the tips of your toes. Or choose a specific part of the body to send each in-breath to, and relax that part on the out-breath.

Next, on the out-breath, hum. At first it may be a somewhat small, quiet sound. Let it grow by allowing your lips to loosen and vibrate with the sound. (It may help you to start with a brief open sound, and then gently close the lips on it and let them buzz with the vibration: “Huh-hummmmm.”) Don’t worry about pitch—a single note may occur naturally, or the pitch might gradually fall or rise.

Hum until the breath naturally runs out. Then take a new inhalation and begin again. With each hum, notice where in the body you feel the vibration—initially it may be more in the lips, but as you focus in and relax more you may notice it in the throat, the chest, the belly, etc. As the body relaxes and vibration grows, the whole body can resonate.

Continue following your body, moving and humming, noticing what changes moment-by-moment, the different locations in the body where you sense vibration, and the different qualities of vibration as you change position. Notice what emotions, memories, or images arise as you move and hum.

If working alone, feel free to progress from humming to letting the sound out through your open mouth on a single, extended note—“Hu-hmmmm-maaaaaaaaahhhh...!” Notice the different sensorial and emotional qualities of projecting the sound outward. (To continue this solo progression, you can also adapt some of the ideas from Jams and One-Liners, described below.)

Humming Dialogue

In a workshop setting, the facilitator can extend the humming warm-up by having participants work in pairs:

“As you continue your movement, please come to silence for a few moments to hear the next instruction. Over the next minute or so, allow your movement to take you into proximity with one other person. This person will be your partner. It’s OK to cheat your eyes open a bit to find someone. Once you find them, continue your moving and humming, but this time in dialogue with the other person. You hum, and then listen for their hum. It goes back and forth. Allow the movement and sound to form a creative dance with your partner.”

Group Warm-up: Chords, Jams, and One-Liners

The warm-ups which follow work particularly well in a workshop setting, but can also be adapted to individual and peer work. What follows are instructions for the workshop facilitator.

Chords

Stand in a circle with the group, and introduce the sequence: “We’re going to continue our warm-ups with the voice by making some sounds together. The first kind of sound is a Chord. Each person will take a deep breath and on the out breath sing a single note. It doesn’t matter what note you choose. Together we will naturally form a chord.”

“When you sing your note, begin with a deep belly breath...” Model taking a deep belly breath, hands on the belly, and then, on the out-breath, sing a single note on

“Ahhhh....,” arms opening out and forward, palms up—as if the gesture were expressing the emergence of sound from the body.

“Be mindful of the in-breath, really feel the belly expand like a balloon. Then, notice what it’s like to follow the stream of sound from inside, up and out through the mouth—become aware of how the body and face vibrate. As others sing, notice the effect of their sounds as well. Allow your sound to last as long as your natural out-breath; don’t push beyond a single exhalation, nor stop the flow of sound prematurely.”

The group makes several chords together. Each person chooses a different pitch each time, so the chord that forms is never the same. (Individuals can also vary the vowel sound they are using: “ah,” “ay,” “ee,” “oh,” and “oo”.) When done at length, this activity can take on a meditative quality, slowing the pace of breathing and greatly heightening awareness. As the exercise proceeds, it often feels natural to let the eyes close, as the group can sense the beginning and end of each chord without seeing the arm gestures.

Afterwards, invite group members to briefly share their experience. Discuss the meditative nature of the exercise, as well as the musical details they noticed—e.g., harmony versus dissonance, or, how beats form with two pitches that are very close but not identical.

Jams

Jams are similar to Chords but with a new element: instead of singing a single note, each participant can vary their sound in any way they’d like.

Describe and model it before the group tries it: “Begin the same way as in Chords, taking a deep belly breath, and engaging vibration on the out-breath. But now you can

play with what emerges, following it to unexpected places. You can vary the sound as much as you like (rather than stick with only one pitch and one vowel sound), and allow your whole body to move with it. Changes in pitch, rhythm, and even adding consonants and pauses are all welcome: ‘OooooooooLAlalala. Mmmaaaahhh!’ As with Chords, you are done when your single breath naturally runs out—don’t cut it off early or push it further.”

“As you do this exercise, let 90% of your focus be on listening to others, and only 10% on producing your own sound. You may do very little, just fitting your sound gently in with what is already happening. This exercise is a group experience, not a collection of individual solos. Let go of the idea of performing, and let this be a group meditation on sound, vibration, and the body.”

Try it several times with the group, coaching them on really listening to the group’s sound and maintaining that awareness as they add their own voice.

Dimensions of the Voice	
Pitch	Bass→Soprano
Volume	Whisper→Scream
Rhythm	Speed (Slow→Fast) Quality (Legato→Staccato) Pattern (e.g., $\frac{3}{4}$ time) Pause (Duration and Number)
Sound Quality	Resonators (Head, Face Mask, Nasal, Throat, Chest, Whole Body) Rough → Smooth
Enunciation	Fuzzy/Slurred → Clear, Sharp, Emphasizing consonants

Duet Jams, trios, etc. After the group has tried jams several times, introduce the duet version: two participants step into the circle, take a deep breath, and begin to jam, varying their voice in whatever way they like, all on a single breath. They can make eye

contact with one other, move, interact, and make physical contact. But when each person's breath runs out, they must come to stillness, and freeze, until the other person is also done. Then they both take a beat of silence, and then break the freeze. (The audience can respond with silent applause—waving their hands in appreciation.)

Listening, pausing, giving space to the other, and singing with—or in contrast to—the other are all important elements to be aware of. It's also fun to try this with trios, quartets, etc.

One-liners

Still standing in a circle with the group, introduce the final step in the progression: “Our last warm-up is called ‘One-liners’. One person whispers in another's ear a single line—a short sentence or phrase (something not too long to remember, and not a line from a song). The person who receives the line then takes a deep breath, steps forward, and sings the line, in a fully embodied way.” Demonstrate this by having someone whisper a short line in your ear, and then sing/improvise with that line.

“You are not limited to a single breath. Feel free to repeat syllables, words, and phrases as much as you like. You can make eye contact with the audience, or keep your eyes closed. The goal is to fully explore the line through song, using the entire range of your voice, letting your body and voice express the meaning of the words. What emerges is not necessarily a melody—it may be atonal, arrhythmic, not beautiful at all. If you aim for singing, you may sometimes rap or chant or make other sounds, and that's fine.”

“When you are finished, take a beat in silence, and the group will respond with silent applause. When you are singing it, do not worry about making the line clear to the group. You can tell them afterward what the line was if they didn't get it.”

Duet One-liners. After a few participants have tried one liners, it's fun to introduce the duet version. Now two participants whisper into the ears of two other participants. The singers begin at the same time, taking a deep breath and stepping forward into the circle. As they sing/explore their respective lines, they meet in the middle, and can interact, optionally using eye contact and/or physical contact. As with Duet Jams, really listening and giving space to the other is key, as is listening for opportunities to sing in unison, counterpoint, harmony or discord with the other person. This exercise can also be tried with trios and larger numbers.

Applications of Mindful Singing

Singing can be incorporated into many of the approaches discussed so far in this book, adding new dimensions of self-expression, emotional connection, and creativity. The variations described below can also serve as a bridge between the warm-ups above and the FreeSong exercise described later in this chapter.

Shared Vipassana

Beginning with authentic movement, opening to the six sense doors, the mover begins to *sing* aloud what he is noticing—including senses, inner imagery, thoughts, feelings, etc. The result is a kind of sung stream-of-consciousness, with the emotional quality of the singing amplifying the expression of what the improviser is discovering in each sense door.

Naked Improvisation

In the One-Minute Solo, the performer is given an added instruction: at some point during the minute, she must sing. What comes out can be surprising, funny, even beautiful.

Amplification

A form of Secondary Amplification: the performer enters, with the assignment to sing a song, using his full voice and body—it could be an actual song or an improvised song. What’s going on in the background: he must amplify whatever he notices in his voice and body. Because the singing itself is being amplified, the song quickly distorts and transforms, potentially changing rhythm, key, timbre, and emotional tone, going to unexpected and extreme places—grotesque, funny, and sometimes alarming.

The Three States

The movers substitute singing for speaking in a vocal variation on the Three States. However, instead of a dedicated “singer” role, or having strict rules about when each person can sing, it is best with singing to leave the structure open, allowing for simultaneous singing and the potential for harmony and dissonance.

Working with Text

The performer sings the text, rather than speaking it. At any time she can loop back and repeat syllables, words, and phrases. Through the repetition she may discover rhythms (and sometimes when aiming for singing a chant or rap may come out); she may also find a melody and/or sound quality that fit that passage and express it best. It may be

worthwhile recording these improvisations—sometimes a wonderful song can be discovered through improvising with a text in this way .

Storytelling

The storyteller sings everything—narration, character’s voices, etc. The use of rhythm, melody, and vocal timbre can add a great deal to the drama and energy of the story—the result may be a little like an opera, or a scene from a musical.

Role Stream and Scene Stream

As the improviser discovers a role through moving authentically, he embodies the role and *sings* as the role. Singing roles, and scenes, as they emerge from the body and inner imagery, can open the heart in unexpected ways. As the voice flows, characters tend to say more, and feel more—there’s more breath, and a tendency toward a less-censored, stream-of-consciousness style of delivery. Singing in a minor key for example, the improviser may discover the tragic nature of a role—being moved by the song, the improviser may be motivated to further explore that role’s narrative, and by doing so find resonance with a part of himself that has been hidden or unexpressed. (*In a similar way, singing is powerful and evocative when used with psolodrama. See “Further Exploration with Psolodrama” in Part III.*)

FreeSong

FreeSong is an open improvisation using singing as the vehicle. An amalgam of the various techniques described above, FreeSong can incorporate aspects of shared vipassana, one-minute solo, amplification, storytelling, and role/scene improvisation.

The Basic Exercise

This is a solo improvisation, with the audience as witness. The performer enters empty, with no plan of what will happen, aside from the intention to be present and to sing.

She begins standing, with eyes closed, relaxing and tuning into her body, noticing her breath.

She begins to sing, following inner imagery, sensations, and emotions, and allowing the voice and body to fully express whatever is happening—a mixture of the truth of what is happening right now, plus the imagination spurred on by images, metaphors, stories. She is actively letting go of her good ideas—“wouldn’t it be clever if...”—and instead is simply following the thread of her own body, voice, words, emotions, and inner imagery.

It’s important to be affected by one’s own singing, to be surprised by it, moved by it—and to let it influence the narrative that is emerging.

Notice melodic and rhythmic patterns that emerge and do not be afraid to repeat or develop them. However, beware of repeating words and phrases too many times, as this can be a way of avoiding moving forward—“treading water” rather than swimming deeper.

If speaking, as opposed to singing, happens, it's OK. Be mindful of how the speaking is different and what purpose it is serving, and then return to singing as soon as is appropriate for the emerging improvisation.

There is no judgment in FreeSong. There is no expectation to sound beautiful, or “good,” or professional, or in tune. You must allow yourself to be the worst singer who ever lived—and to produce sounds that are ugly, strange, off-key, rough, etc. By letting go of the need to sound good, you can free yourself to take the exploration anywhere it needs to go.

This exercise is on the edge between performance and personal process. You must find your own balance in negotiating this edge. Stay true to your own song, your own vision, while remaining open to the audience. When in doubt, err on the side of pleasing yourself, following your own process moment-by-moment, trusting that the audience will get what they get. If something remains a little mysterious or unclear to the audience, so be it. There is usually time afterward for performer and audience to share their impressions.

FreeSong Duet/Trio

In a FreeSong duet or trio, two or three performers begin onstage at the same time, eyes closed, listening deeply, mindful of the body and the breath.

At the beginning something small may happen—a hum from one or gentle rhythmic sound from another.

What emerges is a piece composed spontaneously together, comprised of separate threads, threads that may intertwine at times, at other times diverge or contrast.

Borrowing a little from the Three States exercise, the performers can make eye contact and/or physical contact with one another at any time.

On a sound level, partners listen to one another, create space, and invite interaction. Singing with—in unison or harmony with or in contrast to—is welcome.

In some cases, distinct characters or roles emerge. Feel free to explore these, but do not become stuck in them. Freeing up with physical movement can help.

FreeSong with a partner can be an extraordinary exercise. I have experienced a feeling of being truly in-synch with my partner, together creating something absolutely unique, with an intimate connection and a sense of wild fun and freedom.

Closing Thoughts

Improvised singing is a special activity in that it can tap into parts of us that we do not often connect with in day-to-day life: feelings of sadness, melancholy, or grief; a sense of purity, beauty, and the sacred; and impulses of strong rhythmic power and visceral connection with the earth—heights and depths which Roy Hart explored. Singing is like a direct two-way line to the heart, sparking feelings while also providing an open channel for expressing them. Combined with the mindful awareness and “being-mind” orientation of Insight Improvisation, singing opens up one’s imagination and creativity in potent and unique ways. My wish for you, the reader, is to be able to try the exercises in this chapter—to sing mindfully and explore what emerges—and to experience the power and magic for yourself.

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Further Exploration with Improvisation

The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day.

That is real freedom. That is being educated, and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing.

— David Foster Wallace (2005)

Further Exploration with Improvisation	
<p><i>Improvisation and Meditative Awareness</i> <i>Supportive Practices for the Improviser-Meditator</i> <i>A Final Thought: Performance Mind and the Four Noble Truths</i></p>	
<p><i>Further Exploration for Groups</i> Zen Rock Garden Menorah</p>	<p><i>Further Exploration for Individuals</i> FreeBe FreeBe Duet/Trio</p>

Improvisation and Meditative Awareness

In Insight Improvisation, the improviser is a meditator; but not a meditator who is sitting still. The improviser is an active meditator—a meditator who is being and doing with mindful and choiceless awareness, as well as with lovingkindness.

As an improviser-meditator, what I am doing in the moment is to focus in on something specific—it could be a body sensation, say, a feeling in my shoulder—while remaining open to whatever happens next, whatever comes in through any of my sense doors.

As I focus in on a particular sensation, so much is communicated. The sensation in my shoulder has qualities of spatial location, movement, temperature, tension and relaxation, energy, vibration, sharpness/dullness, etc. As I take these qualities in I may notice they are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—and notice my corresponding tendency to attach to them, push them away, or to zone out. These reactions can spur emotions, images, memories. And this stew of physical sensations and mental/emotional responses may inspire me to move in a certain way, to make sound, or to speak.

This is all happening because I'm able to focus deeply in the moment on one thing and by doing so be inspired or moved in my improvisation. There are moments when my focus is deep and prolonged, and other moments when it is fleeting. But each object of awareness has an effect on me: I am present, even in an instantaneous way, to each, and open to being affected by each.

What enters my awareness next may be pure sensation; it may be thoughts or emotions; it may be an awareness of another actor/improviser, or awareness of the audience and their reaction.

In this way, mindfulness is balanced by choicelessness—I remain open to the six sense doors, not trying to control where my attention goes, but instead purposely choosing to *not* choose, to let the next object choose me. I purposely invite surprise, change.

Ideally I approach choiceless awareness with authenticity and not with censoring. If something comes up that I do not like, my tendency may be to push it away. Perhaps I think it's not appropriate, or that the audience won't like it, or that it's a cliché. But in fact it's those particular kinds of impulses that may be the most interesting. For example, if I let myself enter a cliché rather than censor it I may find it is not a cliché at all, but a rich archetype to learn more about. I may stumble across a part of myself I did not know existed, or kept at arm's length—and now have the opportunity to learn more about.

Supportive Practices for the Improviser-Meditator

Several practices can help foster a meditative approach to improvisation, no matter what type of improvisation it is—theater, music, dance, etc.:

Check-in and Clearing. Is my mind stirred up with the busyness of the day? Or am I arriving in a bad mood—unhappy, stressed, or just tired? By checking-in and clearing beforehand—speaking aloud what's on my mind to my partner or witness—I can return to my center and proceed with less distraction and greater clarity. A “check-in” is sharing how I'm feeling, and why (if the answer is “I'm fine,” say more about that!); “clearing” is to say whatever I need to in order to be fully present—e.g. to speak aloud what is bothering me or on my mind, from any domain of my life (work, home, etc.).

Entering empty. If I enter the improvisation with a plan, a preconception, an expectation, a desire, a goal, etc., I cannot be truly present to the richness of what surrounds me and is inside me. Driven consciously or unconsciously—even carrying a tiny hope that the audience will like me—interferes with my connection to the truth of this moment. It's probably impossible to eradicate this tendency completely: we are social animals, and when in front of a group we generally seek acceptance and approval, wanting to “shine” in front of them. But we can notice this tendency when it is pronounced and choose instead to let go and return to a deeper intention—e.g., to bring awareness to each moment, to remain open, and to connect with and contribute something of value to those I am with.

Metta. *Metta* begins with the ability to care for oneself. As an improviser this means being generous with myself, giving myself permission to experiment, permission to be “bad,” letting go of self-expectations and self-judgment, having the attitude that there are no mistakes, only opportunities for learning. Fundamentally, I must be kind to myself, in order to be able to stand in front of an audience, relax and breathe, trust that what I'm doing is okay, appreciate and enjoy my own work, and feel okay being seen by an audience doing it.

Equally, *metta* encompasses caring about my audience. The improvisation is an offering to the audience, a message of good will, a gift of creativity and art, but perhaps more deeply a gift of myself, a willingness to share who I really am, an authentic self-expression. It is also an act of *metta* to assume the good will of the audience, rather than project onto them hostility.

Therein lies a small paradox for any performer: in order to have the courage to appear on stage I must love myself no matter what the audience thinks. But at the same time I am doing this out of love for that audience. Not knowing what I will receive from the audience, I must be willing to give.

As a meditator-improviser, I am practicing all three types of awareness we've been discussing in this book—mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness—but it's the third that creates the optimal container for the first two. Having an underlying intention of lovingkindness helps me be more present and more open: when I come from an attitude of love rather than fear or defensiveness, I can relax and trust the situation, and return to my focused meditator-improviser self.

Practice. Having a regular practice as a meditator, as well as experience going deeper into meditation (e.g. on retreat) gives an improviser greater access to dropping in to the present moment, remaining open to what's around and inside him, and exercising his ability to care for himself and others. Also, finding opportunities to live in a mindful, less scattered, way—not to be multitasking constantly but instead to look for opportunities to be present in day-to-day life—helps build the habit of mindfulness.

And finally, practice applying mindful awareness to improvisation—doing the kinds of exercises described throughout this book, as often as possible—itself builds the skills needed to approach improvisation as an active meditation.

The following are additional exercises, for groups and individuals, to deepen your meditation-improvisation practice.

Further Exploration for Groups

Zen Rock Garden

This exercise comes from my friend and colleague Dan Kinsey—artist, teacher, and creative spirit.

Like its namesake, Zen Rock Garden is meant to evoke silence, spaciousness, awareness, and emptiness. Ninety-nine percent of the exercise is the spirit with which it's led and received—a sense of the stillness that surrounds everything.

From the start, the group is both audience and potential participants. Assuming a square or rectangular space, invite the group to sit along three sides, leaving upstage open. This three-sided audience helps provide the container for what's about to happen.

The facilitator sets the tone: “This is an improvisational structure called Zen Rock Garden. As in an actual rock garden in a Zen monastery in Japan, everything matters in this exercise. Simplicity is the key. Everything we're about to experience is based on the spirit with which we hold it—our ability to be attentive to silence, and to space. When do we all, as a group, feel like we're truly still together? As our perception deepens through the silence and stillness, a sense of true impulse can develop.”

The facilitator pauses to allow silence and reflection.

“In a little while we'll invite someone, anyone who would like, to enter the space. How you walk and the path you walk is part of the process. End up in a shape. You are now like a rock. After a pause, leave the space and return to the audience. We'll begin by having only one person at a time in the space. Let's appreciate the silence before another person enters.”

“One more thought before we begin: Don’t react to your first superficial nervous system response. Instead, drop below that, into meditative awareness. Once you are experiencing inner stillness, when an impulse comes, feel free to act on it. Do not think about when to enter, or form an image or picture in the mind of what you want to do. Listen to your body and find yourself being moved.”

When a participant leaves the space, the facilitator can optionally say something to clear the space between rounds—the equivalent of raking the sand in a rock garden: “The slate is clear—wash it away” or “End” or “Stillness.” She can also read a haiku. Another option—which can be reserved for clearing the space before introducing a new variation on the exercise—is to have everyone along one side walk mindfully across the space and back to their seats (or have those on opposite sides walk across and past each other, sitting opposite where they started), in effect “raking” the space clear.

Once a few participants have entered and exited the space, the facilitator can say: “Now two people can enter the space. They do not need to enter simultaneously. Take your time, listen to your body, and let authentic impulse emerge. Appreciate the silence. Once you both have found your place and shape, pause there. Be aware of space, space between you and the other. After a pause, either person can leave at any time. How you leave is also part of the whole.”

As the exercise progresses, the facilitator can call out increasingly high numbers—“Now three can enter...” If time allows, do a few “two’s” and “three’s” before moving to higher numbers. Also be sensitive to the effect of increasing numbers: at what point are there too many rocks?

Periodically remind the group about the importance of the stillness before a new round begins: “Stillness is the ground from which an authentic impulse from the body, not the head, can spring. Like a Zen calligrapher, we are spending most of our time in preparation, making our ink. The actual brushstroke is but a moment, an act of spontaneity. Our preparation is stillness and attention.”

Variations

After introducing Zen Rock Garden in its basic form, the facilitator can offer creative variations in a progression of her choosing:

Transforming. Once a rock finds its position and shape, and pauses there, it can slowly change to a different shape, and then be still again. A beautiful version of this is for the rocks to sense when they have *all* arrived, and then gradually transform at the same time (or one could signal this moment with a gentle bell).

Connecting. The rocks slowly uncurl and look at each other, making eye contact with one another. There is stillness, and then the rocks either sequentially or simultaneously depart.

Sounding. Each rock, once in place, can at some point make a sound. The effect is like pebbles going into water, or wind chimes on temple grounds. Someone makes a sound, there is silence after that sound, and then a second rock makes a sound.

Responding. Either the facilitator or someone from the audience can say a word or phrase—e.g. “love,” “the city,” “war,” “autumn,” “the river.” This serves as a title or theme for what happens next. The basic score is the same: when moved by impulse, audience members enter, moving in whatever way they like into a position and shape,

pause there, and then exit when they are moved to. What we're adding is the influence of the title/theme—"allow it to affect how you move, what position/shape you take, how you interact with others, etc." Any of the other variations—transforming, connecting, and sounding—can be used with themes.

Another approach to working with themes is to change the score: "When you enter, form a sculpture together on that theme: let there be a moment in the middle where everyone freezes—as a group you're relating, informed by the theme. You can enter with sound, interaction, even let there be mini-scene—then come to freeze point and hold that freeze for any length of time—then you melt and exit."

There can be a progression of themes. For example, the facilitator can state that each theme should be the opposite of what came before, e.g., "traffic" → "sunny meadow" → "volcano" → "under the sea." The facilitator can start with a few and then open it up to the audience.

Menorah

This improvisational structure can be used as a group warm-up or as the basis for a performance piece. The group begins sitting as an audience (ideally in a gentle arc). There are nine empty chairs in a line facing the audience, with a small gap (a foot or so) between each chair. The middle chair of the nine is a different kind of chair, or has a cushion on it, to set it apart from the others.

The facilitator introduces the structure, demonstrating physically:

"The next activity is based on the menorah, a nine-branched candelabrum used during the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. Each night of the eight nights of Hanukkah, a

new candle is added. The ninth candle, called the shamash (“helper” or “servant”), is used to light each candle in turn.”

“Whoever is in the center is the shamash. Their role is to light the other candles. At the beginning, on the first night, there is one candle to light, so only the shamash and the candle on the far right are standing.” The facilitator can invite a volunteer to demonstrate the first candle, who stands in front of the first chair on the audience’s right.

“To represent flame in this improvisation, we’ll be using movement and, optionally, sound. The shamash will take a moment of mindfulness, with eyes closed, and then begin to move, following his body, finding a pattern or style of movement and maintaining it. He can also add a sound pattern to his movement. Once the sound and movement pattern is established, the shamash will go to each candle in turn and ‘light them’ with his sound and movement pattern. Each person being lit mirrors the sound and movement in their own way—not necessarily duplicating it exactly, but rather to enter the feeling and spirit of the sound and movement.”

“Once the shamash is done lighting all the candles, he returns to his spot in the center, and for a moment we get to see all the candles ‘burning’ together with that sound and movement. Then, gradually, the candles go out: the sound and movement fades to stillness and silence, and the improvisers slowly sit back down in their chairs.”

“Between rounds, the shamash quietly switches seats with the last candle he lit, so that others have a chance to be the shamash. Each new round, an extra candle is added. Once all eight candles plus the shamash have been lit and gone out, the improvisation is over. Any questions?”

The facilitator invites nine volunteers to come sit in the nine chairs. She then asks the person in the center to stand as well as the person on the far right, and the improvisation begins.

For a young or inexperienced group, the facilitator can add this instruction: “Before each round, I will announce what night of Hanukkah it is. For example, if you hear me say ‘the second night,’ then two candles plus the shamash will stand to start the new round.”

(Note: For a smoother transition between rounds, the shamash can swap roles with the last candle he lights as he is passing the sound/movement to them. Or, the shamash can remain the same during the entire improvisation.)

Further Exploration for Individuals

FreeBe — a solo improvisational structure

FreeBe is, in a sense, the sum of all of the solo improvisational exercises that have appeared so far in Part II of this book. FreeBe can incorporate elements of Role Stream and Scene Stream, Amplification, Storytelling, FreeSong, FreeText, etc.

The main idea with FreeBe is to create a solo improvisation that is mindful, present, and focused, but also completely free, open to all of the sources of inspiration: the five senses plus inner imagery, inner roles, emotions, memories, imagination, etc.

In a sense, we are coming full circle from Kelman’s One-minute Solo: we are still not doing our “good ideas”—but now we are intentionally harnessing our understanding of meditative awareness and authentic movement to build an improvisation moment-by-

moment, trusting that whatever is happening, whatever unfolds in the next instant, is perfect.

Starting out. The improviser enters the space and stands before the audience. She closes her eyes and listens carefully to her body, taking a moment of silence and stillness to relax and breathe, bending her knees, letting her jaw relax, her shoulders drop. She takes a deep belly breath, relaxing and centering on the out-breath.

She listens for impulse and lets herself follow that impulse. It may start simply with authentic movement, shifting weight, following where her body wants to go. Then a sound may come.

Building. From there, following her body and inner imagery, she can take the improvisation in any direction. A role may come and she can enter that role, moving, sounding, and speaking as that role. A memory may come; she can enter that memory physically and bring it to life as a story. She may see an image and simply describe it, entering it with her body, creating a physicalized monologue.

She may sing, rather than speak her words, at any time. Any moment offers a choice between *silence, sound, speech, and song*—in the same way that *stillness, gesture, and movement through the space* are all possible.

Letting go. She is not worried about logic. She's not trying to make sense. She's simply following her instinct moment by moment. She is not trying to entertain. Instead, she is actively letting go of her attachment to a certain outcome, letting go of the need to be "good." She is, instead, following her own journey wherever it takes her, knowing that the audience will get what they get.

Returning. If at anytime she is lost or confused she can return to authentic movement, following her body, or just return to stillness and silence and allow her body to relax. She might discover that the piece is over. Or, a new image may come to her, sparking a new physical or vocal impulse.

Timing. There is no optimal length of time for this exercise. Working individually or in a workshop setting it's best to be clear on timing beforehand, although it's also nice to leave the timing open when conditions allow. A typical FreeBe is three to seven minutes long. Working one-to-one, peers can agree to extend the time to 10 or 20 minutes, or longer. The improviser can request a two minute warning be given before their time is up.

For a workshop, if there is a desire to give many participants a chance to improvise before the whole group, shorter times are possible. One variation that works well (suggested by expressive arts therapist Beth Cohen) is to begin the exercise by having each participant enter the space and do a 30-second “mini-FreeBe”—a chance to dip their toe in the water before doing a longer piece. (If the group is sitting in a semi-circle audience, you can simply go in order and have each person jump in; have the group hold their response until everyone has gone.) Then invite those who wish to do a three- or five-minute piece.

Note: Because it can be challenging to work with very little structure, it is recommended to reserve FreeBe as an advanced exercise for more experienced Insight Improv practitioners. If someone is concerned about working with “no net” in this way, it's best to choose a more specific structure that gives a little bit more support—see earlier in Part II for ideas.

FreeBe Duet or Trio

In a FreeBe duet or trio we invite two or more people to be on stage at the same time.

Starting out. The improvisers can start in any position they like— standing, sitting, lying down, etc. Each of them take a few moments to close their eyes, relax, breathe, listen to their bodies, etc. Each moves at their own pace into the improvisation. The facilitator can suggest they begin with silent authentic movement as this is least disruptive to the others. But it's also nice to have no rules and see what happens.

Interacting. What is added in a duet or trio is the possibility of interaction, through eye contact, movement and physical contact, and through sound and words. Relationships may form and then dissolve—as in the Three States exercise, the actors may connect in different ways, and then move apart, but maintain an awareness of the others.

Sometimes the action will feel like a coherent scene between two or more performers. Sometimes there may be simultaneous scenes and monologues going on in different parts of the space. If the performers are listening to one another and maintaining awareness, not trying to perform or impress the audience, the results will be organic, with plenty of happy accidents that will naturally engage the audience.

Working with the audience. With both FreeBe solo and duet/trio versions, interaction with the audience is also possible. This is particularly challenging, as even making eye contact with an audience member can send one back into performance mind, trying to take care of, please, or impress this other person. Instead, it can be helpful to see

each audience member as another actor to improvise with, a friend and peer to play and experiment with.

A Final Thought: Performance Mind and the Four Noble Truths

“Performance mind,” as discussed earlier in Part II, is an instance of the fundamental idea that grasping and aversion cause suffering.

The Buddha’s motivation was to alleviate suffering for all beings. He did this through his teachings, first by identifying the basis for human suffering. This foundational teaching is known as the Four Noble Truths:

1. **The truth of suffering:** suffering exists.
2. **The truth of the origin of suffering:** we suffer because we are caught up in the cycle of grasping and aversion.
3. **The truth of the cessation of suffering:** it is possible to reduce and potentially eliminate suffering.
4. **The truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering:** the Buddha’s eight-fold path — right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The improviser-meditator is living out the Four Noble truths. He’s noticing his suffering, noticing his grasping and aversion, and through applying awareness—mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness—is learning to let go.

Performing itself does not equal suffering. Performing can be thrilling, playful, an unmatched source of energy, enthusiasm, and joy.

But performance *mind*—the mind that is attached to a certain outcome, that needs complete perfection or complete control, that criticizes and judges itself, caught up in tension or fear—is suffering. As I attach to my need to please the audience, needing their approval, laughter, attention, sympathy, etc., I am thrown off balance, seeking something that I cannot control. Because of this I suffer.

One answer is to bring awareness—*being* mind—and through that awareness to let go of my grasping. By focusing on the present moment, through awareness of sensation (or any of the six sense doors), in that moment I am letting go of my need to control the audience's response. If my attention is on cultivating mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness, rather than on winning approval, I can relax, let go, and be truly in the moment, truly centered in the unfolding process, no longer suffering but instead relaxed and free to create.

As we have seen in Part II of this book, by letting go of performance mind, I am free to go on truly unexpected improvisational journeys. And as we shall see in Part III, with a focus on drama therapy, these same journeys can take me to unexplored corners of my psyche, to meet and dialogue with parts of myself I have never met or lost touch with long ago, to encounter what is in my shadow and ultimately learn to embrace and accept it, and to plumb the depths of my being and shine a light on the mysteries there.

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Try to be mindful, and let things take their natural course.

Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool.

All kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool,
and you will clearly see the nature of all things.

You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still.

This is the happiness of the Buddha.

— *The Venerable Ajahn Chah*

Part III: Exploring

Drama Therapy as Meditation

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

— *Rumi*

What is Psolodrama?

“Self-knowledge is not an ultimate end; it is the only opening wedge to the inexhaustible.” — Jiddu Krishnamurti (1956, p.45)

Cautionary Note: Psolodrama is a practice designed for those who can hold and support their own emotional process. It is **not** recommended to use psolodrama with those suffering from severe trauma, depression, anxiety, or other mental illness or disorder.

Psolodrama: A Drama Therapy Practice Based in Mindfulness

Psolodrama blends meditative awareness, authentic movement, theatrical improvisation, and psychodrama, to help one explore existential themes and personal challenges; uncover shadow material; reflect on memories, stories, and dreams from the past; and play out hopes, fears, and fantasies pointing toward potential futures.

Beginning with mindful stillness and authentic movement, the psoloist, observed by a supportive witness, follows her body, and notices as feelings, images, and roles arise spontaneously. She begins to embody and speak as those roles, improvising monologues

and scenes. In the process, she can distinguish and draw upon the psychodramatic roles of protagonist, auxiliary ego, double, director, and audience, reversing roles and exploring the deeper meaning behind the enfolding drama.

Ultimately what emerges is a spontaneous personal drama guided by the psoloist's intuitive sense of what feels most vital and alive, what takes her closest to her own personal growing edge.

Afterward, the psoloist meets with her witness to share her experience and hear what the witness observed. The witness provides supportive, nonjudgmental feedback, sharing not only what he saw and heard, but also what resonated for him personally.

The Power of Psolodrama

Why devote all of Part III of this book to psolodrama? As Parts I and II convey, Insight Improvisation consists of many exercises and techniques. Those in Part I are aimed at opening participants to contemplative practices like meditation and authentic movement; those in Part II are designed for actors and others to apply meditative concepts in improvisation. As described in Part III, psolodrama draws upon and integrates many of these techniques in order to allow practitioners to explore personal issues at a deep level.

As a Psoloist

The practice of psolodrama can be a profoundly moving journey, a path to insight, catharsis, healing, and growth.

I have taught the practice to hundreds of workshop participants and to many individual therapy clients over the years—both in the US and abroad—and the anecdotal evidence is that this is a form that encourages a deep exploration of core personal issues, producing insights that can be transformative.

In my own experience practicing psolodrama countless times over the last dozen years, witnessed by peers (or sometimes practicing without a witness), I have never ceased to be moved to find what lies buried beneath the surface of the psyche—that psolodrama so quickly invites to come out and play. I find that psolodrama complements my daily meditation practice, allowing me to express in words and embodiment so much of what I sit contemplating in silence each day—and by doing so provides a context to work through those ideas and feelings, and to share them with others.

Psolodrama is a form of self-therapy, an open space where almost anything can be shared and explored, powered by the psoloist's drive to seek depth, insight, and learning. The nature of psolodrama is that it tends to often, and rather quickly, unearth existential themes of life and death, one's purpose on the planet and relationship to the universe, and what it takes to lead an authentic life. At the same time, psolodrama is an individualized process; no two people approach it the same way, every psoloist having their own unique style as well as their own set of core themes.

As a Witness

Much of the power of psolodrama comes from the role of the witness, whose purpose it is to provide a safe, nonjudgmental, and caring container for the work.

The witness role in psolodrama is directly derived from the witness in authentic movement (see the chapter on authentic movement in Part I for a detailed description of

witnessing in that practice). What's added to this role in psolodrama is an explicit invitation in the sharing process for the witness to not only be a good mirror, reflecting what he saw and heard (authentic movement reflection), but also to share what resonated with him personally, from his own experience and feelings (psychodramatic sharing), and, if appropriate—e.g. as a therapist or peer empowered by the psoloist to speak openly—to share any insights he may have had into the meaning of the psolodrama, in particular how it relates to the psoloist's life (interpretation).

Above all, the witness practices *metta*: his words and actions are kind and supportive, completely in service to the psoloist.

Having practiced psolodrama over the years with many different peers, I feel privileged and blessed to have been able to witness their psolodramas, which have conveyed such a wide range of personal issues, in such a creative, compelling, and moving way. Being a witness in psolodrama is like being the sole ticket-holder to a great and little-known play: it is opening night, and no one has ever seen this particular drama before. What unfolds can be delightful, scary, moving, disturbing, hilarious, deeply meaningful—a good psolodrama has all the qualities of great theater. I have learned as much witnessing psolodrama as I have practicing it as a psoloist.

(More on the role of the witness in psolodrama and the different types of sharing appears in the chapter "Witnessing Psolodrama.")

As a Therapist

As a therapist, I find psolodrama a helpful and effective approach to use in my practice, for a number of reasons.

Psolodrama gives me a deeper window into who my client is, their strengths, challenges, patterns, etc. What gets revealed in psolodrama is often several levels beneath my client's presenting problems—yet in most cases informs those issues. As a therapist, when I witness my client's psolodrama it is as if I had the direct ability to peer into their head and observe their dreams, innermost thoughts and feelings, inner imagery, and inner roles. And following their psolodrama, in the sharing process, the two of us are able to reference both the literal and metaphorical content of the drama, which can help us frame and work with the client's issues in new and creative ways.

Psolodrama gives me a progression to teach my client, from meditation to psolodrama itself, with several steps in between—there is a developmental path to take with them, and each step along the way is rich with learnings, and useful in the therapy process. Also, I can provide outside coaching as needed, reducing the amount of coaching over time, until the client is truly self-driven.

Teaching psolodrama is a gradual process that allows me to hand the power over to the client, giving them greater control, while at the same time inviting them to be more vulnerable. What begins as a teacher-student relationship or coach-coachee, over time morphs into artist and appreciative audience: ultimately, the psolodrama is the client's and I am merely a witness, a friend to their process.

(More on the use of psolodrama and other Insight Improv techniques in individual and couples therapy appears in Part IV, "Insight Improvisation in the World.")

Origins

“Psolodrama”...suggest[s] a mixture of solo, drama, and a bit of psyche, and the solo may even suggest soul.

— Adam Blatner (personal communication, January 30, 2004)

The origin of the practice—and the name “psolodrama”—was spontaneous rather than thought out. When I first offered the structure of psolodrama to my friend and colleague Jonathan Stein to try out in a movement studio at Lesley University one evening, the name popped out of my mouth as an inevitable twist on “psychodrama.” What would you call a one-person psychodrama? A psolodrama, of course!

At that point I did not yet know about Moreno’s techniques “monodrama” and “autodrama”—ideas similar to but distinct from psolodrama (see the next chapter, *Foundations of Psolodrama*, for more on these approaches). And psolodrama was more than a one-person psychodrama: it was a way to take the inner journey of meditation and the physical journey of authentic movement into language, voice, role, and enactment.

What preceded that evening with Jonathan was more than 20 years of exploration in theater and improvisation, meditation and psychology. In some ways, I’d been searching my entire life for a practice that would allow me to explore, express, and embody all that was inside—to have a mindful and open space for that exploration, and to have a committed listener and witness who could hear and reflect on that expression. As I began to develop and practice psolodrama, and teach it to others, I gradually realized how truly effective the form was, and that others could find it just as helpful as I did.

Locating Psolodrama

Drama therapy is one of the creative arts therapies, along with art therapy, dance/movement therapy, music therapy, and poetry therapy. There are many kinds of drama therapy, some 15-20 distinct approaches (Johnson & Emunah, 2009), including Moreno's psychodrama and sociodrama (the original, oldest forms of contemporary drama therapy), Landy's Role Theory and Method, Johnson's Developmental Transformations, Emunah's Five-Phase Model, Fox's Playback Theater, and Wiener's Rehearsals for Growth.

Insight Improvisation is a form of drama therapy—a use of theater techniques for therapeutic ends. What makes Insight Improvisation unique is its integration of meditation and mindfulness, as well as its emphasis on individual improvisation—the client making his own discoveries in the presence of a supportive witness. Psolodrama is one technique within Insight Improvisation.

(See the last chapter in Part III, “Further Exploration with Psolodrama,” for a comparison of Insight Improv and psolodrama with others forms of drama therapy.)

Who is Psolodrama Safe For? How Is It Used?

When I determine that a client is open to and capable of doing psolodrama, I introduce him to it through a progression of activities, therapeutically useful in themselves, that form the “entryway” to psolodrama, including meditation, authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream (all described in Parts I and II of this book). By the time I introduce psolodrama, the client is quite comfortable

improvising in the presence of a witness, and the amount of external instruction or coaching I need to provide is minimal.

Psolodrama is not a recommended form of therapy for everyone. To be the psoloist demands a certain level of ability and resiliency. Those who—at this moment in their life—lack strong inner resources or ego boundaries should not be practicing psolodrama. This includes individuals with mental illness (such as schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, and some dissociative disorders); those dealing with serious and unexplored trauma or abuse; and those whose mental or emotional capacities are not yet sufficiently mature (such as children or some developmentally delayed adults). For these individuals, other healing modalities—such as talk therapy, play therapy, or more traditional drama therapy or psychodrama—may be more appropriate, typically providing a more structured container and a more active role for the therapist.

Some individuals may be capable of entering into psolodrama, but may require additional support during the process. In this case I recommend working with an experienced drama therapist who can provide live coaching. A comment or question from a good coach can help the psoloist get unstuck or address a repeated pattern. (*See the chapter entitled “Coaching Psolodrama” for best practices.*)

Psolodrama can also be used by two individuals who wish to support one another on their paths of growth. Used in this way, psolodrama bears some similarities to co-counseling, a set of practices for engaging in therapeutic work with a peer (CCI-USA, 2014). The exchange of witnessing that occurs when two peers or friends practice psolodrama together is one of the most exciting and rewarding aspects of this work. Part

III of this book is mainly oriented toward helping peer practitioners learn and use psolodrama.

Finally, for those experienced practitioners who are ready for new challenges and insights, psolodrama can be practiced alone, without an external witness. The chapter entitled “Psolodrama Alone” is devoted to exploring the benefits, best practices, and obstacles when doing psolodrama solo.

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Foundations of Psolodrama

The years... when I pursued the inner images, were the most important time of my life. Everything else is to be derived from this. It began at that time, and the later details hardly matter anymore. My entire life consisted in elaborating what had burst forth from the unconscious and flooded me like an enigmatic stream and threatened to break me.

— Carl Jung (1957)

Psychodrama is not acting. It is a new world.

— Jacob Moreno (1941)

Note: This chapter describes the conceptual underpinnings and key influences that shaped psolodrama. If you'd like to dive in and try psolodrama, feel free to skip ahead a few chapters, to "The Entryway to Psolodrama" and "The Practice of Psolodrama," and return here when you're ready for a deeper understanding.

Psolodrama is based in the present-moment awareness cultivated in meditation; the bodily awareness and openness to impulse developed in authentic movement; the creativity, play, and expressiveness of theatrical improvisation; and the power of interaction and role-play found in psychodrama. In addition, the therapeutic use of psolodrama has roots in the dream work of Freud, Jung’s explorations with archetypes and the human shadow, and Mindell’s process work, among other forms of psychotherapy.

Before learning the process of psolodrama itself, it is helpful to understand these foundations. The purpose of this chapter is not to fully explain each of these root techniques and therapies (there are already many books devoted to these topics), but rather to distinguish and summarize key aspects each contributes to the practice of psolodrama, and to point to where additional information can be found.

Foundations of Psolodrama	
<p><i>Meditation</i> mindfulness • choicelessness • lovingkindness</p>	<p><i>Authentic Movement</i> mover: bodily awareness, being moved, eyes closed • witness: supportive, nonjudgmental container; inner-witness; sharing</p>
<p><i>Theatrical Improvisation</i> joy of performance • dramatic arc • discovering & committing to a role • spontaneity, flexibility, and saying “yes” • trusting the unknown—entering empty</p>	<p><i>Psychodrama</i> five psychodramatic roles • role reversal • surplus reality • warm-up, action, and sharing phases • role rehearsal • monodrama, autodrama, and empty chair • skills of the director</p>
<p><i>Psychotherapy</i> metaphor and symbol • free association • archetype • shadow • existential themes self-actualization • embodiment • peer practice</p>	<p><i>Additional Influences</i> self-revelatory theater • transpersonal drama therapy • the embodied psyche technique • playwriting on your feet</p>

(For a comparison of psolodrama to other forms of drama therapy and psychotherapy, please see the last chapter in Part III, “Further Exploration with Psolodrama.”)

Meditation and Psolodrama

Meditation—both the practice and the concepts underlying it—is at the core of Insight Improvisation, and psolodrama is no exception.

At a basic level, meditation’s contribution to psolodrama is the idea of an introspective journey that leads to greater freedom. A psolodrama *is* a kind of meditation, albeit one that is usually being witnessed, but a meditation in the sense that the soloist is on her own individual journey into the depths of the psyche, in order to heal, grow, and learn about herself. Traditional meditation practices provide models for this journey, which psolodrama builds on.

Meditation is a way to train the mind to cultivate beneficial kinds of awareness and reduce patterns of suffering. There are many kinds of awareness one exercises in the practice of psolodrama, such as the awareness of the body and the five senses; awareness of inner imagery; awareness of roles, scenes, and stories; awareness of the presence of the witness and the quality of one’s own inner witness. However, there are three fundamental types of awareness, three skills or qualities developed in traditional Buddhist meditation practice—discussed at greater length in Part I of this book—which are central to the practice of psolodrama:

Mindfulness—cultivated through *samadhi* (concentration) meditation—is the ability to return to and focus on what is happening in the here and now. In psolodrama,

this ability helps the psoloist to break free of habitual mental patterns of projecting into the future or past (e.g., worrying, obsessing, planning, etc.) and instead focus on what is currently unfolding in the body, emotions, and mind during the psolodrama.

In standard forms of psychotherapy or creative arts therapy, the patient's interaction with the therapist is constantly and naturally returning both to present-moment awareness. However, in psolodrama, mindfulness is a skill that must be developed, as the therapist or peer witness is usually not interacting or speaking, unless they are providing coaching. In practicing psolodrama, as in meditation, both psoloist and witness develop and strengthen the capacity for mindfulness.

As mindfulness grows and deepens, so too does the depth of engagement and exploration in one's own psolodrama. When I listen carefully to my body, for example, the subtlety of my moment-to-moment perception sparks an increasing number of associations to feelings, images, and roles that I can then work with in my psolodrama. In one moment a dull ache in my shoulder may engender a feeling of sadness and fatigue, leading to an image of carrying something on my shoulders, which might cause me to enter the role of a laborer or slave, which I then may associate with feelings of being burdened by family or work. In another moment the sensation of taking a deep breath and releasing my stomach muscles and relaxing on the inside may lead to a feeling of opening and letting go, an image/role of a deflating balloon, and a dialogue between slave and balloon about how it feels to truly release and not hold so much pressure. It is through mindful awareness that the psoloist taps into the flow of themes and associations already present in the body and psyche.

Embodiment in psolodrama becomes an extension of mindfulness, deepening and amplifying it. In the same way a meditator might hold his attention to a painful sensation in the body in order to learn more about it, the psoloist embodies that pain—moving as it, sounding and speaking as it—to learn more about it. (See the subsection on embodiment at the end of this chapter for a discussion of Mindell’s Process Work in relation to psolodrama.)

Mindfulness is equally important in the act of witnessing, and in the sharing process following the psolodrama. For the witness, the psoloist is the “object” of her meditation—she repeatedly brings her attention back to the psoloist, returning her mind from thoughts and other distractions, in order to take in exactly what the psoloist is doing and saying in each moment. In the sharing process, the interaction and dialogue between psoloist and witness naturally activates present-moment awareness. However, of the two, the witness especially needs to take care that she is really listening, engaging, and supporting the psoloist throughout the sharing process, and remains mindful of the words she is choosing to describe what she saw, heard, felt, etc. in order to avoid judgments and projections.

Choicelessness, or choiceless awareness—developed in *vipassana* (insight) meditation—is the ability to open the mind and senses to all channels of information, whatever object of awareness is arising and passing away in a given moment. This ability helps the psoloist enter a state of spontaneity and creativity, the flow of improvisation. By not becoming overly absorbed or attached to a single focus, the psoloist allows the unexpected to enter. Even in the midst of a dialogue between two roles, the texture or temperature of the floor could trigger a certain memory or emotion; a picture in the mind

could affect the position of the body and the quality of voice, leading to a shift in role, etc.

Meditation may take me anywhere—if I am truly open and choiceless while practicing *vipassana*, I may become aware of aspects of myself that I do not confront in daily life: fears, memories, attachments, habits—elements of my shadow that are uncomfortable to hold with awareness. It is the same with psolodrama: if I am truly practicing openness, choicelessness, I do not know what I will encounter in my drama. There will be parts of myself that I do not wish to see that psolodrama is inviting me to dialogue with. If I can stay present and open, not avoid or run away from them, but instead take up the challenge and enter these roles and dialogues with a spirit of exploration—a willingness to not know where they will lead me—greater insight and understanding can develop.

Choicelessness—openness to all six sense doors—is equally a factor in skillful witnessing and sharing. As witness, am I open to all the information coming in, not only what I'm observing in the psoloist but also what I notice in myself? (*See chart "Witnessing Authentic Movement: What the Witness is Aware of" in the chapter on Authentic Movement in Part I of this book.*) In sharing, both psoloist and witness can benefit by cultivating openness to what may arise in the conversation—and what is coming in through all of the sense doors, including feelings/emotions, inner imagery, etc.

Lovingkindness, practiced in *metta* meditation, is vital to psolodrama. In the same way that the witness cultivates a non-judgmental, caring attitude, so too the psoloist is developing an accepting and loving inner witness—for which the outer witness, the

therapist or friend or peer, by being nonjudgmental, present, and non-projecting, can be a model.

Both the inner and outer witness provide the positive container within which the psoloist can take risks and explore new possibilities. In order to embrace all the roles and scenes that arise, I not only need mindful and choiceless awareness and acceptance, I also need to bring a warm, open, and compassionate heart. *Metta* is essential for me to feel safe enough to bring out the shadow parts of me, the parts I tend to neglect or love less, or feel ashamed of.

The witness intentionally cultivates *metta* before, during, and after the psolodrama to create a space so safe that the psoloist feels he can share anything and everything, including the shadow parts of himself. During the psolodrama the witness is aware of her inner attitude, noticing thoughts that are judging or comparing (e.g., herself with the psoloist), and consciously letting those thoughts go. She reminds herself of her intention to serve the psoloist, and returns to her task with a relaxed breath, a smile, a loving gaze, and a caring heart. In the sharing process, *metta* is expressed not only through the witness's careful and caring choice of words, but also through her empathic, supportive connection with the psoloist, expressed through eye contact, vocal tone, physical gesture, etc.

Authentic Movement and Psolodrama

For anyone wishing to practice psolodrama, being well grounded in classic authentic movement is extremely helpful. Authentic movement has influenced the development of psolodrama in a number of important ways:

As Mover

Authentic movement anchors the psolodrama practice in the body, and helps the practitioner differentiate between organic, physical impulse (“being moved”) and one’s habitually controlling, planning, thinking mind. Authentic movement also contributes to psolodrama the idea of working with eyes closed as a way to connect to one’s inner life and let go of performance mind.

As the first phase of any psolodrama, authentic movement helps the psoloist shift their mental and physical state from the busyness of the day and a verbal check-in and/or other warm-up to being receptive, present, and listening to the body.

As I enter the space, by tuning into the body I am better able to let go of excess thought, planning mind, neurotic cycling, etc. Beginning psolodrama with authentic movement enables me to enter empty and let go of “good ideas.” Like diving into water, I am suddenly in a different realm, a realm of the senses, a physical realm that can give rise to feelings and inner imagery.

Although in subsequent phases of the psolodrama I add words, roles, dialogue, etc., the basic grounding in authentic movement is always there, throughout the entire process, informing every moment. Even though I am playing roles, I keep my eyes closed, helping maintain a connection with inner experience and impulse. I proceed slowly, tuning into feelings, noticing what the body wants to do, letting it guide me to what’s next—which might be a new role or scene, or might simply be returning to movement. As described in the earlier chapter on role stream, authentic movement is like the ocean that waves (roles) emerge from, and I can just as easily slide back into the ocean and experience being moved for as long as I wish in my psolodrama process.

As Witness

Authentic movement's other extremely important contributions to psolodrama include the role of the witness, and how the witness helps create a safe, supportive container for the work; the concept of the formation of the inner-witness and how it is modeled on one's external witnesses; and the idea of the sharing process, particularly the way the witness serves as a mirror for the mover, playing back for him what she saw and heard.

(All of these aspects of authentic movement are explored in much greater detail in Part I of this book, in the chapter on Authentic Movement—which also includes references that describe moving and witnessing in depth.)

Theatrical Improvisation and Psolodrama

Psolodrama is a form of acting and improvisation, and by nature incorporates and benefits from all of the skills and training of theater artists. Many of these elements—as well as exercises to practice them—have been discussed in Part II of this book. Here is a brief summary of some of the fundamental ways in which theater and theatrical improvisation contribute to the practice of psolodrama:

The Joy of Performance

A psolodrama *is* a performance—a spontaneous one-person show.

It's true that it is usually for a tiny audience (of one, or sometimes zero); the performer's eyes are often closed; and the “performer” is actually practicing “Being Mind” rather than “Performance Mind” (discussed earlier, in the chapter entitled “Naked

Improvisation”)—actively letting go of her tendencies to perform and instead returning to a mindful, relaxed relationship to the present moment.

Nonetheless, what emerges in psolodrama is a play, a drama, and it is being performed—roles and scenes are enacted, and often a coherent story emerges.

The result, as a performance, can be thrilling. I and others have often said that some of the best theater we get to see is one-to-one with a peer (or as a therapist witnessing clients) practicing psolodrama. What is particularly gripping about psolodrama is the honesty, depth, and spontaneity of it. Usually to see theater of such power we must seek out a well-written and well-rehearsed play; most improvisation is of the “improv-comedy” variety. To see an improvisation that touches on existential themes, personal yet universal tragedy, that is reaching for a deep understanding of the human condition—and doing it in a way that is wildly creative, metaphorical, symbolic, sometimes profoundly touching and other times utterly hilarious—is truly rare.

Most actors love performing, and love to be in a great play. Psolodrama benefits from this inclination: as the drama develops, the psoloist often becomes increasingly engaged in her own process. As she enters “the zone”—no longer thinking, just doing, letting the roles take over and following them wherever they need to go—there is behind the process a great joy and energy that develops, a love of performing the psolodrama, that helps sustain and carry the psoloist through whatever challenges she encounters along the way—fear of going too deep, getting too emotional, not being able to confront certain truths, not knowing where to go next, etc. The sheer joy at simultaneously creating and performing such a potent play becomes the fuel that powers the psoloist to greater heights and depths, and ultimately toward deeper self-understanding.

Dramatic Arc

A good psolodrama is like a good play: there are characters, a story, emotional changes—and usually something is learned in the process. The psoloist is informed by his understanding of story and dramatic structure. Usually this is not intellectual but instinctual—the psoloist is creating a story that is satisfying *to him*, which often means breaking conventions and clichés and discovering different story forms, different dramatic arcs. These are sometimes nonlinear, motivated less by a drive to move the plot forward, and more by a desire to listen deeply to what different roles—different parts of the self—want to say, and to cook the interaction between those roles (as a good psychodrama director would; more about this in the subsection on psychodrama, below).

Discovering and Committing to a Role

The power of psolodrama, for the psoloist, builds as he applies the awareness and skillset that an actor brings. Chief among those skills is the ability to enter a role physically, vocally, and emotionally; to connect with the emotional truth of that role; to empathize with how that role feels; and to act on that empathy.

We say an actor is *committed* when he fully embodies a role—bringing his entire energy, passion, body, and voice. For those newer to acting, psolodrama can help develop the ability to discover and commit to a role. Psolodrama invites the psoloist to play multiple characters and speak as them, to discover how those characters are feeling, and to draw out the specifics of those characters further through dialogue and story. In addition, an outside coach—be it a therapist or a peer—can encourage the fledgling actor/psoloist to more fully take on a role physically and vocally, finding gestures and

body language as well as vocal qualities that bring the character to life. As he enters the role more fully, the psoloist can more easily suspend his own disbelief and invest more completely in the unfolding story.

What frequently results is a cycle of positive reinforcement, in which the psoloist's greater commitment to playing the roles results in a more emotionally compelling psolodrama, which in turn inspires the psoloist to become less inhibited and embody the roles even more.

Spontaneity, Flexibility, and Saying “Yes”

A psolodrama is an improvisation, and many of the principals of good improv underlie effective psolodrama. The ability to jump from style to style, moment to moment, role to role, with complete flexibility and spontaneity is a skill that serves psolodrama, with its intuitive and fluid structure. This is a skill many of us have as children—the ability to naturally assume all kinds of roles as part of play—but tend to lose as adults. Psolodrama encourages and exercises that flexibility.

Part of being spontaneous in improv is learning to say “yes” to what is happening, right now. In role stream or scene stream, a role may arise that causes the psoloist to want to say “Yecch! Not this again!” But if she can stay with that role, let it speak, and bring it into her psolodrama, she will invariably find why it's coming up yet again, why she has such strong aversion to it, and what learning more about that role can contribute to her own understanding of herself.

Classic improvisation works when one actor makes an offer and the other accepts it. If the scene begins with one actor saying “Doctor, I'm worried about an ache in my elbow,” the other actor can accept the offer by saying “Sorry to hear that. Tell me more—

when did you first notice the ache?” Negating occurs when the second actor denies the offer, e.g. “I’m sorry, do I know you?” Good improv is a series of offers and acceptances, causing the scene to naturally build and progress. Psolodrama works precisely the same way, but one person is playing all the roles.

Trusting the Unknown—Entering Empty

An improvised scene, before the first word is spoken or physical action occurs, is like a blank sheet of paper. This can be exciting, a moment of infinite possibility—but it can also be terrifying: what’s going to happen? Will it be good? The same kind of trust and embrace of the unknown that improvisers bring to their craft, the psoloist in psolodrama must also have or develop. This is one benefit of having a series of steps—authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream (the “Entryway to Psolodrama” described in a subsequent chapter)—prior to the psolodrama itself, which gives the psoloist a chance to scribble a bit on that empty sheet, to make random sketches and throw them away, keeping only what is meaningful and building on that.

Psychodrama and Psolodrama

Psychodrama is the system of therapeutic role play created by Jacob Moreno beginning in the 1920’s, in Vienna, and developed in subsequent decades by Moreno and his wife, Zerka, in the United States.

Psolodrama began as a way to do a one-person psychodrama, but one based in authentic movement. Over time, psolodrama has evolved into a more open practice, not

as tied to the structures of psychodrama. But many of the core concepts and techniques used in psychodrama are still central to the power of psolodrama.

Psychodrama contributes a number of important elements to psolodrama:

The Five Psychodramatic Roles

As psychodrama developed, Moreno discovered new approaches to role play, using members of the group to provide support for the central role in a number of creative ways. Typically, there are five roles present in a standard psychodrama:

The Director—the leader of the group, often a clinician, whose task is to warm up the group, to help select a protagonist, to facilitate the action of the psychodrama, and to lead the sharing and closure afterward.

The Protagonist—the central role in the psychodrama, whose story or issue the group is playing out. Once selected, the protagonist usually begins by sharing his story with the director (during a “walk and talk”), and then selects auxiliary egos to play the other roles.

The Auxiliary Ego—any other role in the unfolding story, enacted by another member of the group. Moreno chose the term auxiliary ego (rather than “the other,” or “antagonist”) in order to underscore how the other characters in a psychodrama are actually projections of the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings (and not “real” people). The protagonist usually starts by casting a group member to play the role, and then models the role for that person (through “role reversal”—see below). The protagonist continues to supply words and action for an auxiliary by role reversing throughout the psychodrama, although sometimes the director may allow an auxiliary to improvise.

The Double—a special form of auxiliary ego, the double represents the inner voice, or hidden thoughts and feelings, of the protagonist. Usually chosen by the protagonist (when prompted by the director), the double typically stands next to the protagonist and slightly behind, at first mirroring the protagonist physically and echoing key words. Next, the double may venture to speak, and begin to amplify, what she senses the protagonist is feeling but is not saying. The protagonist can then choose to repeat those words, or instead say what is really true for him. By deeply empathizing with the protagonist, and helping him get in touch with hidden or unexpressed feelings, the double can help the protagonist break through to a new level of authenticity and self-discovery. (Adam Blatner’s chapter on the double in *Acting In*, 1996, is a useful and succinct guide to the range of possibilities contained in this role.)

The Group—in classic psychodrama, the group is not merely a passive audience, but instead plays a number of active roles: warming up together, actively listening to and supporting the action of the psychodrama, staying open and available to being cast as auxiliary ego or double, interacting in various ways with the protagonist when prompted by the director, and speaking personally in the sharing process.

As described in subsequent chapters, the five psychodramatic roles also play a central part in psolodrama—each of the five roles can appear, but in a form adapted for a one-person enactment. (The Five Roles exercise, described in the next chapter, is designed to provide focused practice on embodying and speaking as these different roles.)

Role Reversal

One of Moreno's major discoveries, one that sets psychodrama apart from standard role-play, is the technique of role reversal: at any time, the protagonist can switch roles with an auxiliary ego, taking on their role while the person playing the auxiliary ego temporarily becomes the protagonist. The power of role reversal is that it is empathy embodied; e.g., if I'm arguing with my spouse I can *try* to empathize with her, but if I literally must become her and speak as her, I cannot help but empathize and feel how things must feel from her point of view.

Whereas in psychodrama there are alternatives to role reversal—such as the person playing an auxiliary ego role improvising in that role—in psolodrama all dialogue happens through role-reversal, as there is only one psoloist.

Surplus Reality

Surplus reality is Moreno's term for the imagination. Psychodrama is not married to mundane reality, to how things actually happened in the past or "should" happen in the future. In psychodrama, the protagonist can play out his memory of childhood, for example, without concern for complete accuracy; instead, the director helps him find what feels emotionally true. By doing so, a window is opened in the heart, inviting feelings (as well as insights) that may not have been fully expressed in childhood.

The concept of surplus reality offers infinite freedom: one can play out a dream, a desired or feared future, a corrective version of the past, even an absurdist fantasy. In fact, practically all of psychodrama is surplus reality—even a carefully remembered

scene from the past is still a memory that by nature is subjective—the original moment is “re-imagined.”

Ultimately, surplus reality is, in Freudian terms, projection—psychodrama (and perhaps even more so, psolodrama) is the protagonist’s (or psoloist’s) projection of himself onto the blank canvas provided by the psychodramatic stage (or psolodramatic empty space).

Psychodramatic Phases: Warm-up, Action, and Sharing/Warm-down

Warm-up. When doing psychodrama with an individual or group, the director provides a warm-up to the action (the psychodrama itself), so that participants can be fully ready and present throughout. A warm-up can include some kind of check-in or dialogue; sociometric, improvisational, and physical exercises; and—in the case of a group—a selection process to choose a protagonist for the psychodrama. The importance of sufficiently warming up a group or individual cannot be overstated; the success of psychodrama—and psolodrama—is largely based on this. *(See the next two chapters for warm-ups and “entryway practices” typically used before psolodrama.)*

The action phase is the psychodrama itself, which begins once the protagonist is chosen. Action often starts with a “walk-and-talk,” in which the director accompanies the protagonist in a walk around the space, eliciting a description of the issue the protagonist would like to work on. The next steps are typically “setting the scene”—asking where the scene takes place, and sometimes arranging chairs or props to evoke the setting—and “casting”—choosing one or more auxiliary egos (and sometimes a double) to help play

out the scene. The scene is then enacted (through dialogue and role-reversal), usually leading to further scenes.

The action phase in psolodrama is parallel to but a good deal less structured—more fluid and improvisational—than the psychodramatic one.

Warm-down/Sharing. Once the action phase is complete (either due to a natural ending or the director finding an ending in the allotted time), there is a final “warm-down” phase, of which the sharing process is the major component. Often before sharing, auxiliary egos are asked to “de-role”—taking off their assigned role(s) as if they were invisible costumes, and saying, for example, “I am no longer your father, I am now ____” (their actual name). De-roling is designed to help prevent both protagonist and auxiliary actors from carrying the residue of the role, or the projection of roles onto others, into the sharing phase or beyond the session.

In the psychodramatic sharing process, the group sits in a circle with the director, who invites group members to speak about how the psychodrama resonated with their own feelings and life experience. Analysis and advice are prohibited; instead, the group is invited to share their vulnerability in the same way the protagonist did by sharing her psychodrama. The sharing process is not an afterthought but actually one of the keys that makes psychodrama so powerful: as others share from their own lives, catalyzed by the emotional content of the psychodrama, they too can become moved—making the sharing circle a place where the psychodrama is truly shared with each and every group member. Seeing how her psychodrama affected others, the protagonist’s experience is integrated, socialized, and normalized. She realizes that “I am not the only one who has felt this

way;” “I am not the only one who has behaved this way;” “I am not the only one whose family dynamic is like this;” etc.

Following the sharing process, the director can optionally end the session with some kind of closing ritual, which can include speaking (e.g., one-word feelings/take-aways standing in a circle), physical contact (such as holding hands), making a sound together as a group, etc. Some groups may require more warming-down—e.g., yoga or other physical activity, a more extended “check-out”, etc.—depending on the impact of the psychodrama and the nature of the group.

In psolodrama, there is also a warm-down and sharing process. Explicit de-roling is not necessary but before meeting her witness, the psoloist may take a minute or so in silence to relax, let the last role or scene go, take in what just happened, and notice what her current emotional state is. Although the sharing process in psolodrama is typically between a single witness and the psoloist, rather than an entire group and the protagonist, it can be equally deep and revealing—sometimes more revealing—given the intimate bond between the two.

Role Rehearsal

A specific application of surplus reality, role *rehearsal* (not to be confused with role *reversal*) is the psychodramatic technique of trying on a new behavior in a future context. Often the last step of the action phase of the psychodrama, role rehearsal provides the protagonist an opportunity to take what she has learned in her psychodrama and practice it through role play.

For example, a woman who is challenged when trying to communicate with her father may play a final scene in which she imagines calling or visiting her father

sometime in the coming week, drawing upon what she learned in the earlier, past-based scenes of her psychodrama in order to better relax and empathize with her father.

Role rehearsal can appear spontaneously in psolodrama as real-life roles emerge that the protagonist wishes to speak to. This is driven not by a conscious choice on the psoloist's part to prepare for the future, but rather by the intuitive, non-linear emergence of roles from the body, inner-imagery, etc.

Sometimes a psychodrama can take the form of a “spiral,” (Chesner, 1994) in which the action begins in the present (the presenting issue), spirals back to the past to understand the root of the problem, and then spirals into the future to practice alternatives (role rehearsal). It's useful to be aware of the psychodramatic spiral; however, psolodrama, with its nonlinear, spontaneous approach, less commonly conforms to such a pattern.

Monodrama, Autodrama, and The Empty Chair

As Moreno developed psychodrama, he distinguished variations on the form in which one person had greater power over the unfolding action. These three techniques—monodrama, autodrama, and the empty chair—are clear predecessors of psolodrama. In particular, the empty chair—described at length in the next chapter—can be used as an important intermediate step when training to do psolodrama.

Monodrama

A monodrama is a psychodrama in which the protagonist plays all the auxiliary ego roles. In a sense, most psychodramas are really monodramas, because the protagonist enacts all the roles through role reversal. But in a strict monodrama, other members of the

group do not participate; the director works only with the protagonist. Monodrama can also be one approach for individual psychotherapy using psychodrama; however, in a strict monodrama the therapist does not step in to play other roles or to double the protagonist.

Autodrama

An autodrama is a psychodrama with one key difference: the protagonist directs him or herself. This technique can be used in a therapy group, and is particularly apt for a group member who seems irritated when being directed by another, or who tends to jump ahead and make decisions about what should happen next. Autodrama works best when the protagonist has seen a few psychodramas and has a good idea of the form, how role reversal, doubling, and the psychodramatic spiral work. But with a little outside guidance, even someone brand new to psychodrama can do a simple autodrama, if given the right instructions—e.g., inviting her to use other group members to help enact a scene from her life.

If a psychodramatist were to walk into the room in the midst of a psolodrama, what he would see would look like a cross between a monodrama and autodrama: the psoloist is directing herself, *and* playing all the roles. (Of course, he might wonder why the psoloist's eyes are closed—and where the strange plot and characters came from...)

The Skills of the Psychodrama Director

So much of what a good psychodrama director does informs what the psoloist does in psolodrama. In particular, the director's ability to create a safe container; provide sufficient warm-up for the group as a whole and the protagonist in particular; listen for

and develop the seeds of the drama; use the tools described above, such as role reversal, the double, etc. to “cook” the conflict and/or emotion; and help the protagonist find a satisfying ending—all of these skills can help make psolodrama a more creative and effective practice.

Conversely, I have personally found that my practice of psolodrama makes me a better, more intuitive and flexible psychodrama director. (More on this in the subsequent chapter, *Further Exploration with Psolodrama*.)

Foundations in Psychotherapy

Psolodrama as a form of psychotherapy has its roots in the work of Freud, Jung, Rogers, Mindell, and others. Those influences are described at greater length in my academic treatise on Insight Improvisation (Gluck, 2005). Here is a highly condensed version:

Metaphor and Symbol

As in Freud’s work with dreams (1900), so much in psolodrama is communicated through metaphors and symbols. Freud’s interpretation of these was often sexual; in psolodrama the themes are more often (but not exclusively) existential.

A key difference between symbols in dreams and those in psolodrama is that the ones in psolodrama can often interpret *themselves*, through role-play and dialogue. For example, if I find myself playing a “Mud Monster” in my psolodrama, I may ask, as the protagonist, “what are you doing in my psolodrama?” The monster may reply: “You need to get your hands dirty! Dig in the dirt! Try new things! Play! Be messy!” Much of

psolodrama's power to convey insight is through this ability to let symbols/metaphors speak.

Free Association

There is a strong parallel between the roles of witness and psoloist and the roles of analyst and patient in Freudian analysis. One link is the concept of free association, in which the patient is encouraged to speak about whatever comes to mind. Psolodrama is like a fully embodied form of free association: the psoloist is enacting whatever comes into her mind—or body—and bringing it to life through monologue and dialogue.

Archetype

There is something about the psolodramatic process that tends to invite roles that are archetypal. Whereas typical psychodrama tends to deal with real-life relationships (family, friends, co-workers), typical psolodrama taps into fantasy realms that draw forth characters from mythology and fairy tales (valiant princes and talking animals), as well as unexpected leaps of the imagination (a rotting tree trunk, God, the Buddha, a soldier in Vietnam). As Jung described (and Landy, in the drama therapy world, has helped catalogue—1993, pp. 256-260), archetypes are fairly universal from culture to culture, and carry their own special power and meaning. The prevalence of archetypal roles in psolodrama is another factor that helps make it such a powerful, evocative, form.

Shadow

As described in *The Red Book* (2009) and elsewhere, Jung took it upon himself to personally journey into the realm of the human shadow, beginning with his own. The

concept of the shadow—beautifully described by Robert Bly (1988)—is intrinsic to the purpose of psolodrama. Like Jung, the psoloist is embarking on her own personal journey into her shadow, with the explicit goal of discovering, unearthing, and exploring some personal theme or challenge through the practice by consciously taking herself to her own growing edge.

Existential Themes

As described in the work of Yalom and other existential psychologists, the dilemmas of human existence—the inevitability of death, freedom and responsibility, existential isolation, and meaninglessness (1980, pp.8-9)—are central to the work of psychotherapy.

Psolodrama tends to gravitate toward these themes for a number of reasons. First, as an individual exploration, it naturally invites contemplation of isolation—one’s individual journey through life—as well as reflection on death; second, it is a mindful practice that allows the mind to settle and focus beyond surface issues to deeper, underlying concerns; third, the presence of a supportive, nonjudgmental witness tends to allow the psoloist, over time, to feel sufficiently safe to explore his deepest fears and challenges.

Self-actualization

Another influence on psolodrama (and Insight Improvisation as a whole) as a form of psychotherapy is client- or person-centered therapy, and the work of humanistic psychology pioneer Carl Rogers. Rogers believed that it is the role of the psychotherapist to unconditionally affirm the client, to empathize with them, and by doing so help the

client discover his own answers (1951). Psolodrama fits this Rogerian approach: the psoloist is finding her own answers, within the empathic, supportive container provided by the witness, both during the psolodrama itself and in the sharing process afterwards.

Embodiment

A Jungian psychologist, Arnold Mindell discovered through his own experiments with “secondary process”—the unconscious patterns of the body and mind—the power of embodying the unconscious and bringing it to life. In Mindell’s Process Work (also known as Process-Oriented Psychology), the therapist helps the client tune into secondary processes and express them through visualization, movement, sound, and words—and by doing so help integrate what has been unconscious into one’s “primary,” conscious process (1985).

Psolodrama works in a similar way. Authentic movement provides the vehicle to let the body lead, so that secondary processes can arise naturally, unfiltered by the censoring mind. The psoloist responds to these organic impulses by letting them fill her body with movement, sound, and words—she embodies the secondary process by becoming a role or character. As this role (an auxiliary ego) interacts with other roles, including the protagonist, the psoloist is able to integrate the secondary process/auxiliary ego with her conscious primary process/protagonist, with the help of the director, double, etc.

Peer Practice

Forms of peer-to-peer therapy and mutual support, such as co-counseling (CCI-USA, 2014), have strong parallels to psolodrama. Psolodrama is a form designed to be

practiced by friends/peers (its development began that way), although it works equally well within the context of a client-therapist process. In co-counseling the role of the counselor is to help their partner work through whatever issue is arising for him, mainly by helping him express his emotions fully. The witness in psolodrama has a similar task, but carries it out through silent and supportive witnessing (unless the psoloist requests coaching), and by sharing after the psolodrama.

Additional Influences

A few other important influences on psolodrama bear mentioning:

Self-revelatory theater is a drama therapy term (often shortened to “self-rev”) describing personal, psychologically revealing theater, typically taking the form of an autobiographical one-person show. I have practiced self-rev for years, creating my own pieces as well as helping others (theater colleagues and therapy clients) write and perform their own. Psolodrama is, in a sense, the simplest form of self-rev, with no set, props, costumes, writing, or rehearsal required—it is a spontaneous form of self-revelatory theater.

Transpersonal drama therapy. Having trained in the transpersonal drama therapy approach with Saphira Linden (2012) and Penny Lewis, I feel particular resonance with the concept of the whole person: the idea that each individual is fundamentally well and whole, and that as therapists our goal is to help the individual get back in touch with this original self. Psolodrama, too, is based in the idea that given a supportive and caring container the psoloist can find her own way to discover the core of herself that is essential, whole, complete, and well.

The Embodied Psyche Technique, created by Penny Lewis, is a transpersonal drama therapy technique (2000, pp. 268-275) in which parts of the psyche dialogue with one another—e.g., the inner child talks with the ego, and the two go on a journey to find the unclaimed inner feminine. Psolodrama often resembles the Embodied Psyche Technique, as parts of the self emerge, dialogue, and seek understanding and integration.

Playwriting on Your Feet, a technique developed by Jean-Claude van Itallie (1997) during a period in which I was actively collaborating with him on several theater projects, uses authentic movement as a launching point for improvisations involving the characters in a play being developed. I cite this as an inspiration for psolodrama, as it shares the same basic progression from silent authentic movement to active role play with multiple characters.

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Additional Resources

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Warming Up to Psolodrama

spring begins—

even for a gate

without grass

spring begins—

at least I'm human

fifty years now

my ramshackle hut—

just as it is...

spring begins

— *Issa*

As in psychodrama, psolodrama has three phases: the warm-up, the action (psolodrama itself), and the warm-down or sharing phase.

Warming up enhances the experience of psolodrama, by helping us enter the process with a relaxed body and an open mind. When practicing psolodrama with a peer, we can warm-up by using a variety of exercises to help connect with our partner, become more present, get the voice and body engaged and limber, and spark the imagination.

This chapter contains warm-ups I have personally found helpful—for myself, my clients, the groups I work with, and for peer practice—from verbal check-in and clearing, to sitting meditation and authentic movement, to fun and energizing improv games such as Impulse Dialogue, Role Dialogue, and “Yes!” Improvisation.

But “warming up” can also be thought of in the longer-term sense of learning the skills needed to master a new practice. The second half of this chapter describes training prerequisites and additional exercises used when learning psolodrama, including The Empty Chair, The Five Roles, and Life/Dream Scene.

Warming Up to Psolodrama	
<p style="text-align: center; color: white;"><i>Preparing for a Psolodrama Session</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readying the Environment and Yourself • Checking In, Clearing, and Establishing Ground Rules • Warm-Up Activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Meditation ○ Authentic Movement ○ Improvising with Your Partner (Impulse Dialogue, Role Dialogue, and “Yes” Improvisation) • Planning a Warm-up Sequence and Timing • Other Possibilities 	<p style="text-align: center; color: white;"><i>Training</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In One-to-One Therapy / In a Workshop • Authentic Movement • “Entryway” Practices • Embodying Sensations and Emotions • The Empty Chair (Group Empty Chair & The Four Chairs) • Psychodrama • The Five Roles • Life/Dream Scene • Additional Training

Preparing for a Psolodrama Session

Readying the Environment and Yourself

When practicing psolodrama, start by finding a comfortable environment for your warm-up and practice. A good-sized empty space with a clean floor will give you room to roll, stretch, and roam. Although psolodrama can be done in a few square meters on the floor of one's bedroom, a spacious movement studio with a wooden dance floor is a perfect setting. Some may also prefer to work on a carpet or rug or even outdoors. It's also nice to have cushions to sit on. Temperature and lighting should be comfortable. However, do not let the search for an ideal space delay your practice.

Sound is an issue. Minimize interruptions by turning off all phones and alarms, close doors/windows if necessary. Choose a space where you will not be overheard, or use a white noise maker outside the door to mask sound.

Other parts of the preparatory ritual before a psolodrama session might include changing into clothes more comfortable for moving in, not eating right beforehand, and making sure other work is complete and put away so you can completely focus on the here and now.

Checking In, Clearing, and Establishing Ground Rules

When working with a partner, it is always beneficial to start with some kind of a check-in. This can be a brief "how are you today?" (if the answer is "I'm fine," say more, because "fine" can mean many things!) or a deeper ritual, reviewing recent events in your lives.

One kind of check-in I particularly value is **clearing**: each person says whatever he or she needs to in order to be fully present. Clearing is valuable not only to the speaker, who gets to “clear out” all the thoughts and feelings that may be humming along in the background (and unconsciously driving him), but also to the listener, who later on will be serving in the role of witness. Listening to another’s clearing is a perfect warm-up to the attentive, non-judgmental, supportive stance of the witness—and also informs the listener’s understanding of their partner.

Ground Rules. If you and your partner are new to one another, it is important to discuss any ground rules you’d like to have for your work together. Confidentiality may be the most important one: agreeing that any aspect of the work and anything shared between psoloist and witness will not leave the room. Explicitly agreeing on confidentiality beforehand creates a safer, stronger container, helping the psoloist be more open and vulnerable, go deeper, and have a richer experience.

Warm-Up Activities

Psolodrama itself plus the sharing process afterwards can typically take 30-40 minutes per person, so given time constraints one either needs to be selective or do short versions of warm-ups. (More on planning a warm-up sequence appears at the end of this section.)

Everyone is different: one person may prefer a series of warm-up exercises while another might like to jump right in. As we’ll see in the next chapter, psolodrama has a kind of built-in set of warm-ups called “entryway practices,” so experienced practitioners

often find that not a lot else is needed. For those new to psolodrama, however, it can be very helpful to begin more gradually, to ready the body and mind for what's to come.

My wise friend Christopher Ellinger says that the first question to ask when warming up is “What do I need?”— physically, emotionally, vocally, and in other ways. Here are some possible answers to that question.

Meditation

Meditation can be a wonderful way to begin the warm-up period. This can be as simple as agreeing on an amount of time to sit in silence. Or, the two can agree on what type(s) of meditation to practice, e.g., *samadhi*, *vipassana*, *metta*, or more active forms such as walking meditation, metta dialogue, etc. (see Part I of this book for ideas and options). If preferred, one person can facilitate the progression, offering a guided meditation. No matter what the type of meditation, this activity can help participants become more present, attain deeper levels of focus and awareness, and let go of surface or day-to-day issues.

Being fully present, aware of mind and body in the here and now, is essential for practicing psolodrama effectively. By meditating first, we open up to a more subtle level of observation, inviting creativity and intuition, which later, in the entryway to psolodrama, creates the space for inner imagery and archetypal roles to appear.

Note that some may prefer to do a physical warm-up first—stretching, yoga, authentic movement, etc.—prior to meditation, as a way to free the body and be more present in one's sitting.

Authentic Movement, SAM, and SIAM

Practicing psolodrama always renews my respect for the power of one of its root forms, authentic movement. If there is sufficient time, one of the best warm-ups for psolodrama is to practice the pure authentic movement form, taking turns witnessing and being witnessed. Each movement period can be followed optionally by a short period of writing or drawing, followed by brief sharing. Variations can include inviting the witness to move in response to the mover.

If time is tighter, or there is a desire to get into working with roles sooner, a common pre-psolodrama warm-up is to do something a bit unorthodox: both participants do authentic movement simultaneously, with no witness. To an experienced mover this may sound odd: the role of witness is considered core to authentic movement. However, an experienced mover can move by herself, and bring her own inner witness to bear, treating the movement as an active meditation. In my own experience, doing **simultaneous authentic movement (“SAM”)** with a partner, but with no witness, helps me tune into my body and allows me to move freely. I become much more present to all the senses and to my intuition, and more deeply relax and release the stresses of the day.

More experienced movers may also wish to agree beforehand on whether to invite physical contact—**simultaneous interactive authentic movement (“SIAM”)**. For some, physical contact while warming up is a distraction; for others, it’s an opportunity to open further and connect.

Some agreement should also be made about the use of sound—another form of contact (e.g., “let’s do the first five minutes in silence, and in the second five minutes allow sound to come.”)

Following simultaneous movement, drawing/writing and/or sharing are all possible, but not necessary—SAM/SIAM can be a jumping off point directly into the activities that follow.

(See Part I, the chapter on “Authentic Movement,” for more on the practice, as well as variations including SAM and SIAM.)

Improvising with Your Partner

Following meditation and/or authentic movement, partners can raise the energy level by improvising together with movement, sound, words, and roles. Here is a series of three fun pair exercises that build on one another and work well before psolodrama—Impulse Dialogue, Role Dialogue, and Yes! Improvisation:

In an **Impulse Dialogue**, one person begins with a brief sound and movement impulse, and then stops. The other responds with a different sound and movement impulse, and then stops. As the exercise continues, the result is a kind of dialogue. Unlike a traditional acting exercise, however, the Impulse Dialogue is rooted in authentic movement—instead of “performing” for or reacting solely to one’s partner, one gives equal attention to one’s internal experience—bodily sensations, internal imagery, emotions, etc. Whereas in a traditional sound and movement acting exercise, one might clap and say “HA!”—sending the impulse directly to one’s partner—in an Impulse Dialogue, one is just as likely to gently groan and collapse to the floor in a heap. Eyes can be open or closed at any time, and physical contact is possible.

In Impulse Dialogue (and Role Dialogue, below), the pause between impulses is a special moment, an invitation to stop, breathe, and listen with awareness. The improviser is not only listening to his partner (listening for the “cue” when her next impulse is

finished), but also to himself: he opens with mindfulness to his body, his breath, his own emotional state, all of his sense doors. He may notice his planning mind, already wanting to think up what his next impulse will be—and he lets it go. Instead, when it's his turn again, he opens to what his body wants to do, letting it express both physically and with sound.

A typical impulse is one to six seconds long. Note that in order for the exercise to work, the improviser must make a sound along with his physical impulse, so that his partner will know when his impulse is over (she may have her eyes closed or be facing away from him). If his impulse is silent, and his partner does not get the cue to begin, he can either replay his first impulse with sound, or have another, different impulse with sound.

The **Role Dialogue** is similar to the Impulse Dialogue, but instead of inviting a sound/movement impulse, the first improviser begins with a role or character “impulse,” informed by her physical position and how she feels in that moment. She moves, sounds, and/or speaks in that role, briefly, and then stops. Her pause is the other improviser's signal to have a role impulse of his own.

Roles can be imaginary or real people, animals, objects, etc. Speaking is OK, and as the dialogue continues small scenes often occur spontaneously. However, in a Role Dialogue, unlike a standard partner improv scene, each person's role/character impulse may be occurring in an entirely different reality. There is no responsibility to connect with the other person, through eye contact or physically. However, when these connections occur, and some link is made between very different roles, the results can range from the absurd or comical, to unexpectedly emotional or meaningful.

Finally, in a **Yes! Improvisation**, the pair can improvise freely together without pausing, with one rule: each must say “yes” to any new impulse, role, scene, or reality introduced by the other. However, once a scene is established, each person has the option of continuing the scene or shifting to a new reality/new character. Unlike the Role Dialogue, the Yes! Improv demands that both partners, as quickly as possible, enter the same reality—to make sense, in some way, of their relationship and what is happening. Often, the results are absurd, wild, and comical. But some scenes can be serious, or even disturbing, as the pair taps into deeper themes. The challenge in the Yes! Improv is to maintain the same level of mindful awareness discovered in the Impulse Dialogue, so as not to lose touch with one’s own body, one’s center.

(Yes! Improvisation was inspired by master improv teachers Daena Giardella and Ruth Zaporah. In the drama therapy world, its closest analog is Johnson’s Developmental Transformations.)

The sequence of Impulse Dialogue, Role Dialogue, and “Yes!” Improvisation accomplishes several things at once: it more thoroughly engages the body and voice; it deepens the connection between the partners by inviting interaction and contact; it adds a high-energy, playful quality to the warm-up (particularly in the “Yes!” Improv); and it introduces the playing of roles as a new element—an important faculty to warm-up before entering psolodrama, especially for those new to the practice.

Planning a Warm-up Sequence and Timing

Following the check-in, experienced practitioners usually plan their warm-up sequence in advance, allocating timing to each step and deciding who will keep time. One advantage of advance planning is that each subsequent step of the warm-up can flow right

from the last—there is no need to stop and discuss what the next step should be. For example, it is especially nice to be able to transition directly into authentic movement from one’s sitting meditation (I often suggest that my partner and I not even clear our sitting cushions, but let the movement start right from the sitting posture).

Given limited time, it may be necessary to choose only one or two warm-ups—and as mentioned early, for experienced psoloists a warm-up following the check-in may not even be necessary. Different warm-ups serve different needs—and each person may need something different. I try to pick warm-ups I think will help counterbalance the state I find myself in. For example, if I’m already in a high-energy, playful mood, I may need to slow down and enter a more contemplative state using meditation and authentic movement. Likewise, if I’m already relaxed and present, or my energy is low, the three improv activities (Impulse Dialogue, etc.) can help warm up my imagination, body, and voice to better prepare me for playing roles. If you and your partner have opposite needs, try having each person pick their own favorite warm-up, and divide up the time.

Following the check-in, a thorough 30 minute warm-up sequence could work as follows:

- Silent Meditation: 10 minutes
- Simultaneous Authentic Movement: 5 minutes separately and in silence, 5 minutes allowing sound and/or physical contact
- Impulse Dialogue: 3 minutes
- Role Dialogue: 3 minutes
- “Yes!” Improvisation: 4 minutes

A different approach is to agree on the order but let the timing be more fluid—allow one or both partners to signal a transition whenever they feel it is time to move on to the next activity.

Other Possibilities

Any expressive activity can make a good warm-up to psolodrama. Other Insight Improvisation activities that can work well include Movement Meditation, the Three States, FreeSong, Amplification, and the many variations on these activities appearing elsewhere in this book. Other kinds of sound and movement, vocalizing/singing, and improvisational movement/dance or theater exercises can also be included. What's important is to choose warm-ups that both partners feel comfortable with and enjoy and that prepare mind, body, and voice to be relaxed and available.

Training

A good deal of psolodrama's power as a practice is that it is unplanned and unstructured—truly an open canvas or stage to create or explore anything. However, without training or outside guidance a new psoloist can feel confused, overwhelmed, or lost. With training, he learns what to do in these situations: how to return to authentic movement, be inspired by bodily awareness, access supportive roles such as the director and the double, etc.

To practice psolodrama fully and skillfully, the psoloist greatly benefits from a firm grounding in its foundations: meditation, authentic movement, theatrical improvisation, and psychodrama.

In one-to-one therapy, I typically introduce meditation as well as the entryway exercises gradually over time—authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream (see next chapter, “The Entryway to Psolodrama,” for details, and see earlier chapters for descriptions of each of these exercises or practices). In parallel, I teach the concepts of psychodrama through exercises such as the Empty Chair (described below) and Couple/Family Therapy, as well as psychodrama itself. Once all of these have been experienced and understood, introducing psolodrama is a relatively simple task. *(See Part IV, the chapter entitled “Working with Individuals,” for more information on the Couple/Family Therapy exercise and other approaches to individual therapy using Insight Improvisation.)*

In a workshop setting, training a group in psolodrama typically requires two to three days. The agenda includes meditation, authentic movement, psychodrama, shared vipassana, role stream, scene stream, and psolodrama itself, and given sufficient time can also include the Empty Chair, the Five Roles, Life/Dream Scene, sung psolodrama, and other exercises. Much of the learning occurs through working in dyads; by witnessing and sharing with one another, participants quickly develop strong empathic bonds, as well as a greater understanding of the therapeutic processes and container underlying psolodrama. *(See Part IV, the chapter entitled “Working with Groups,” for more information on leading an Insight Improvisation workshop.)*

Below is a summary of key exercises useful for training in psolodrama, as well as full-length descriptions of those exercises not included in other chapters:

Authentic Movement

Understanding and experiencing authentic movement—described in detail in the Authentic Movement chapter in Part I of this book—is essential to the practice of psolodrama.

From authentic movement, the psoloist learns how to follow the body and “be moved,” rather than control the movement with her mind. In a broader sense, she learns how to follow impulse—inner imagery, role, emotion, and “gut feel”—and distinguish those organic impulses from the “good ideas” of the planning/judging mind. Authentic movement also teaches her how to improvise with eyes closed, how to enter empty rather than plan in advance what to work on, and how to let go in the presence of the witness and not perform for them. Finally, as mover, she is learning how to develop her own supportive and nonjudgmental inner witness, modeled by the supportive and nonjudgmental qualities of her witnessing partner.

There are many learnings as an authentic movement witness, as well, that can be applied to the witness role in psolodrama: being fully present and treating witnessing as a meditation with the mover as the object; bringing nonjudgmental and unconditional support to the mover; and in the sharing process learning how to be a mirror for the mover, and to use language in a caring way that conveys the subjective nature of the witness’s point of view.

In addition to standard authentic movement, certain variations—described in greater detail in the authentic movement chapter in Part I—are particularly useful as preparation for learning psolodrama:

The **“Lenses of Awareness”** invites mover and witness to observe what is happening through a range of perspectives—to see the unfolding of experience through different lenses. This can help both partners break out of habitual patterns of seeing and doing. (See also the exercise *“Witnessing For”* in Part III, *“Witnessing Psolodrama.”*)

Authentic movement with images and childhood memories, coupled with the sharing of “image-story-image,” develops the skills of tapping into and embodying inner imagery, and the ability to enact a personal story in the first-person—all useful in psolodrama.

“Entryway” Practices

The four main steps in the **“entryway to psolodrama”—authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream**—are not only rich and deep practices in themselves, but are also useful training steps that can be practiced independently without proceeding to psolodrama. All four are described in detail in their own chapters earlier in this book; the next chapter discusses how they are used as a progression together leading directly into psolodrama.

Embodying Sensations and Emotions

This exercise, based on the Process Work of Arnold Mindell, is about learning to listen deeply to the body, one of the fundamental skills needed when doing psolodrama. The exercise is also useful in itself as a way to understand what messages the body may be sending us, and what emotions, images, memories, and roles are stored in different parts of the body.

We can choose to use either a physical sensation or an emotion as the basis of the exercise. Pick something that you might ordinarily ignore—what Mindell would call a secondary process. Here’s how to work with a body sensation (to use an emotion, simply substitute “emotion” for “sensation” in these instructions):

The exercise begins either in meditation (standing, sitting, or lying down) or in authentic movement. With the eyes closed, become aware of the body, noticing bodily sensations. Next, focus in on one sensation. It could be one that is standing out in this moment (e.g. an ache in the belly, a vibration in the arm, a slight dizziness), or a sensation that has been present over time (e.g. a chronic back pain).

As you meditate on that sensation, allow it to slowly expand out from its current location, to begin to fill the body. For example, if it’s an ache in your belly, imagine and let yourself feel that ache gradually spread out through your torso, and into your arms, legs, and head. As it spreads, feel that feeling and allow it to affect your body posture/position, the expression on your face, the way you breathe, etc. Allow sounds to come that express that feeling—for example, as that achy feeling spreads I may find myself curling up and emitting an “urrrrrrggggghhhhh” sound. Continue to amplify that feeling, allowing yourself to move and make sounds. Allow words to come—what is this feeling saying? Let it speak to you: what message does it have for you? For example, my belly ache may say (in a very achy voice): “I’m sad...stressed out...I need a break. Why do you keep working all the time? I need to breathe. I need space. Let me rest.”

This exercise can be useful as a form of therapy, as training for psolodrama, and also as a launching-off point when practicing psolodrama, by having the protagonist

respond to the what the sensation/emotion is saying and develop a dialogue between the two roles.

The Empty Chair

This technique, developed originally by Moreno, and then adapted by Fritz Perls in Gestalt Therapy, reduces psychodrama to its very essence: a protagonist speaking to a single, imagined auxiliary ego. It is called the Empty Chair because it begins with the protagonist sitting or standing facing an empty chair. The therapist/director asks the protagonist: “Take a look in this chair—who do you see sitting there?” They can further add:

Imagine someone from your life, someone you would like to talk with. It may be a loved one, or someone you really miss and wish you could speak to. Or it may be someone you have unfinished business with. This person may be alive or dead. See that person now... How do they look, sitting there? What are they wearing? How is that person sitting? What’s the expression on their face? Notice how you feel right now in their presence.

When the protagonist is ready, he begins to speak to the imagined person in the empty chair. This usually takes the form of an extended monologue, facilitated by the therapist’s further questions and exhortations (e.g., “If you could speak your complete truth in this moment, what would you say to [the empty chair person]?”).

There are a couple of variations on the empty chair exercise that I find particularly useful in workshop settings when training participants to do psolodrama:

Group Empty Chair

Similar to what is described above, except that the entire group is standing, in an arc, facing a single empty chair. The group is given the instruction simultaneously to look into the empty chair and see who is there. The facilitator then visits each participant in turn, asks them to say aloud who is in the empty chair (this should be brief, e.g., “my mother,” or “an old teacher of mine”), and invites them to say something to that person. Although by necessity this version of the exercise is condensed—each participant gets to say a sentence or two—it often invites an unexpectedly strong expression of emotion. As the exercise proceeds, each participant’s sharing inspires the next one to go deeper, bringing tears of sadness, as well as surfacing deep, unexpressed anger.

In Thailand, where I have led this exercise many times, a wide range of emotion and physical expression is often elicited. If the empty chair figure is a deceased relative or loved one, participants will often move toward the chair, sit at the feet of the empty chair figure, lay a head in their invisible lap, hug them, and weep openly. In the case of someone they feel angry toward, I have seen participants kick the chair over and scream at the empty chair figure. (In Thailand, where great importance is placed on proper behavior and showing respect and restraint in hierarchical relationships, participants’ strong reactions to the exercise may in part be a response to the pressures created by those societal norms. The exercise becomes a safe container to express feelings that are usually hidden in day-to-day life.)

Note that if the group is too large, or if the facilitator wishes to work more deeply with individuals, a single protagonist can face the empty chair, with the group seated

along both sides of the space, lending support, and one member from each side waiting “on-deck” to be the next protagonist.

The Four Chairs

This variation on empty chair introduces two new concepts: doubling and role reversal. Participants work in pairs or trios, each having four chairs arranged so that two chairs are side-by-side facing the other two. (A demonstration of how the exercise works can be helpful beforehand, especially for groups new to doubling and role-reversal.) The two active participants sit next to one another so that the one volunteering to be the protagonist is in the “driver’s” seat (on the left) and the other—designated to be the double—is in the “passenger’s” seat—each is facing an empty chair. (If working in a trio, the third person sits to the side, witnessing from the outside, and can provide coaching or support if asked for or needed by the protagonist.)

The exercise begins with the protagonist looking to see who is in the empty chair, and then briefly telling the double (e.g., “I see my grandmother—my mother’s mother”). As the protagonist then begins to speak to the empty chair figure, the double starts by simply mirroring the protagonist physically, now and then repeating key words or phrases—the role of the double is first to empathize with (and, by doing so, reinforce and support) the feelings of the protagonist. As the exercise continues, the double begins to venture guesses as to the deeper feelings and thoughts the protagonist may be having, and speaks those aloud in the first person (e.g., “Grandma, I’m really sad.”); the rule is that the protagonist must respond in some way to the double, either by repeating the line (if he agrees with the double), or by correcting it (e.g., “No, it’s not that I’m sad—it’s more that I’m angry...”). Note that both partners speak only in first person, directly to the empty

chair figure facing them. It's also important that the double not lead the action—the double needs to allow sufficient space for new thoughts and feelings to emerge from the protagonist.

At a certain point, the facilitator of the exercise says: “Now reverse roles.” (Alternatively, this can be an organic decision on the part of the protagonist.) The two then get up and move to the seats directly facing them. If the group is new to reversing roles, the facilitator might encourage both protagonist and double to get into the new role, adjusting their posture, body language, and voice to match the empty chair (now auxiliary ego) role. As the protagonist-as-auxiliary speaks, the double at first mirrors, but gradually can begin to venture guesses as to the deeper thoughts/feelings of the auxiliary ego—which the protagonist-as-auxiliary can either repeat, or instead say what feels really true for that role.

After a little bit, the facilitator then says: “Now feel free to reverse roles at any time.” Pairs continue the exercise, with the protagonist-auxiliary dialogue continuing for several more minutes, and the protagonist determining when role reversal should occur. The facilitator tells everyone that they have a minute or two left to find an ending. Afterward, sharing in the small groups is encouraged. The protagonist can say anything he'd like about his experience; the double (and witness/coach, if there is one) offers psychodramatic sharing—what resonated for them personally in the dialogue—neither analyzing nor giving advice about the situation.

The “Four Chairs” version of the empty chair is effective because participants get to work in intimate pairs or trios and ideally form a close bond between the protagonist and the double. If the double does her job well, and is able to deeply empathize with the

protagonist, the protagonist feels fully supported by her, to the point where the double practically disappears—her presence and words simply and subtly facilitating an emotional deepening of the process. Supported in this way, the dialogue often exposes hidden feelings, which can lead to cathartic release as well as new insights—not only about the relationship with the auxiliary, but also often bigger insights into the protagonist’s life, patterns, and/or family history.

What the Empty Chair Teaches

For psolodrama training, the Empty Chair introduces and practices the skill of speaking to an invisible other, but it does this in a structured, contained way: in the Empty Chair the other is in a physical chair, whereas in psolodrama the invisible other(s) one is speaking to can be anywhere. In the Four Chairs, participants also practice role reversal and doubling, two other fundamental psolodramatic skills.

One question that sometimes comes up with participants new to the process is how to play the auxiliary ego role: “I do not know what she would say.” This is an important question that lies not only at the heart of psychodrama and the Empty Chair exercise, but is also intrinsic to psolodrama. One answer to this question is “go with the first thought that comes to mind.” Another answer could be: “Allow yourself to imagine this dialogue is really happening, right now. As you get into the role of [your grandma], feel in your gut what feels right for her to say. Take it slowly and only speak what you feel—which sometimes might be to say ‘I do not know what to say to you.’ If you can deeply empathize with [your grandma], you will know what is right to say.”

It’s important to underscore that there is no responsibility to play an auxiliary ego accurately—it is acknowledged that the portrayal is, by nature, completely subjective (the

very term “auxiliary ego” emphasizes the subjective/projective nature of the role). What the auxiliary ego often really represents is an unacknowledged part of ourselves.

The process of imagining and embodying the auxiliary role is perhaps the most fundamental element behind the power of psychodrama and psolodrama. By putting oneself in a role and allowing oneself to empathize with, to imagine, how the other feels—to enter, embrace, and trust the surplus reality (rather than negate it or not trust it by saying: “I do not, cannot know what the other is feeling or would say”)—a new possibility is unlocked that provides a pathway into deeper self-understanding, as well as understanding of the other.

Psychodrama

Psychodrama, so valuable in itself, is a foundational form of training for psolodrama. Working with a good psychodrama director, having a chance to practice role reversal, and to play the roles of protagonist, auxiliary ego, and double, can help the new psoloist understand those techniques and roles, an awareness he can apply directly in his psolodramas. Once he has gained some experience, it is also very helpful to practice directing psychodrama. To do this, one can take a course or join (or form) a practice group—an opportunity for peers (such as students studying creative arts therapy together) to gain experience directing one another, to share ideas, coach one another, etc.

(See Additional Resources at the end of this chapter for helpful books and websites for learning and practicing psychodrama.)

The Five Roles

In early attempts to teach psolodrama in workshop settings, I discovered that participants needed further training in being able to draw upon the various psychodramatic roles. The standard Empty Chair exercise is useful for creating dialogue between protagonist and auxiliary ego, but psolodrama incorporates three other roles—the double, the director, and the group (in psolodrama called “the audience”).

Thus the “Five Roles” exercise was born—a sort of “psolodrama with training wheels.” Below are the basic instructions to practice with a peer, but it is easily adapted to teach in a workshop, with participants working in psoloist/witness pairs. The witness or group facilitator can lead the psoloist(s) through the following steps. Each step can be roughly one to three minutes. When working one-to-one with a peer, rather than timing each step, it’s best for the witness to sense what is needed and respond accordingly:

1. **Begin with authentic movement.** Enter the space, close your eyes, and allow yourself to follow your body. (I recommend continuing with eyes closed throughout the entire exercise to maintain focus on your inner experience and avoid “performing.”)
2. **Choose an auxiliary ego.** Imagine someone you’d like to talk to. It could be anyone from your life, living or dead, a historical person, or even an imaginary being or force of nature. (Note: this exercise works best when choosing an auxiliary ego who is a distinct “other,” separate from the protagonist. Try not to pick yourself as the “someone” you’d like to talk to—choose someone else.)

3. **Speak as the protagonist.** As yourself, begin to speak to that other person or being.
4. **Reverse roles and speak as the auxiliary.** When you're ready, become the other. Move and speak as them, as if they were responding to you. What would they say? If you are unsure, follow your intuition—what might you say if you were in their shoes?
5. **Continue the dialogue.** Now at any time you can reverse roles between yourself and the other, creating a dialogue between the two.
6. **Bring in the double.** What are you not saying in this scene? Find the double's voice. Allow yourself to speak the hidden feelings or truths that you are not saying aloud in the scene so far. What would you really like to say to the other person? Let the double express anger, sadness, unexpressed desires or needs—whatever the hidden “elephant in the room” is.
7. **Continue the scene.** Feel free to move between protagonist, auxiliary ego, and double. (You can also experiment with doubling the auxiliary ego, if you like—each character can have their own double expressing their innermost truth.)
8. **Add the director.** What would you (the protagonist) like to ask your inner wise mind, or say to it? What might a good coach ask or say at this point? When becoming the director, notice what makes the role unique—how would the wise part of you appear physically? How would they speak? What questions might they ask? Dialogue between protagonist and director for a bit,

and see if this leads to a change of scene or some new step. Continue the drama, incorporating the director role.

Note that the director role is ideally that of the “wise counselor” who asks good questions that lead the protagonist to find his own next steps—rather than a dictator telling the protagonist what to do. The director may ask, “How do you feel right now?” and then possibly, “What do you need?”

9. **Introduce the audience.** The audience is someone who has watched this whole drama play out. Speak as them. They may be an inner critic, a supportive voice, or something different. Then become the protagonist and respond to the audience. The audience can get involved in the scene—e.g. by arguing with the protagonist, or by proposing a whole new approach and demonstrating it.
10. **Find an ending.** Find an ending to the drama which is satisfying to you.
(Optional: find a way to honor or thank all the roles that helped out along the way.)

When done, debrief with your partner. What was your experience of this drama? What was it like to play the five roles? The witness can share what she saw and heard, as well as how the drama resonated for her personally.

Variations

As described above, the initial stages of the Five Roles follow the pattern described in the Empty Chair exercise (above). There are two variations on the Five Roles that move the process closer to psolodrama:

If the psoloist knows the role stream exercise, it is possible to start with authentic movement and role stream, become a role and speak as it, and then reverse roles and have the protagonist (“yourself”) speak to that auxiliary ego. The exercise can then continue from step five, above.

Another variation is to do role stream and scene stream, get two characters to dialogue, and then continue from step six. In this case, the psoloist can either decide who the protagonist is, let that distinction go, or bring in the protagonist separately in step eight, to dialogue with the director about the scene so far.

Life/Dream Scene

Life/Dream Scene is an improvisational structure that can be used one-to-one or in a workshop setting.

Instructions: “Think of a moment from your life, something fairly recent, from the last few days or week—any moment where you were interacting with someone else—that stands out in your mind. It could be a moment of conflict, connection, realization, etc. Then, putting that aside for a minute, now think of a dream you have had. It might be a recent dream, or alternatively one you remember from the past because you had it repeatedly. Pick one character from that dream. We will call this the *dream figure*. (Do not share this information aloud.) Your task now is this: begin to act out the real-life moment as faithfully as you can—you will play all the roles. At some point in your enactment, the dream figure enters the scene. From here on in, the scene is an improvisation. Discover what happens when the dream figure enters the real-life situation—what changes? Don’t plan it in advance; let the scene unfold moment by moment. Let it surprise you.”

For example:

Protagonist: *Mom, if you'd like to have us over for Thanksgiving at your apartment, why can't we stay over? It seems very expensive, inconvenient, and not fun, to find a hotel.*

Mother: *It's perfectly normal to stay at a hotel when visiting. I have many friends who do not have a big enough apartment—when their children visit they stay in a hotel.*

Protagonist: *But you have an enormous apartment with two extra beds!*

(The dream figure enters—a strange, evil looking woman with a large German Shepherd on a leash.)

Protagonist: *Sorry Mom, I have to go... (hangs up) excuse me, ma'am I didn't realize this conference room was being used.*

Woman: *don't leave*

Protagonist: *No it's fine—I'm done with my call.*

Woman *(looking protagonist in the eye): you must call your mother*

Protagonist: *What? What are you talking about? I just spoke with her.*

Woman: *DO IT NOW!*

Dog *(growls at protagonist): Rrrrrrrr...*

Protagonist: *OK, OK!*

(...and the scene continues...)

Although the premise of Life/Dream Scene makes it sound like a performance—and in fact it can be quite engaging for the witness or group—the exercise works best when the improviser enters with no expectations, just sticking to the task given and staying open to what happens (not trying to be “clever” or “good”).

As training, Life/Dream Scene helps develop a similar attitude when approaching psolodrama: to stay open to what’s arising and allow a scene to develop. In addition, it provides practice in role reversal and the use of surplus reality—particularly in the way the dream figure changes the real-life story into something completely unexpected.

Additional Training

The exercises described in Parts I & II of this book—**active meditations** as well as **theatrical exercises based in mindfulness**—are excellent training for psolodrama. Each exercise helps develop mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness; Being Mind rather than Performance Mind; and each teaches the budding psoloist how to enter empty, let go of his good ideas, and follow his body, inner imagery, and intuition. Within those chapters, a few exercises are especially useful training for psolodrama; they include: the One-Minute Solo, which helps one develop the capacity to let go, relax, and listen to inner impulse; Amplification, which stretches the body and voice toward greater expressiveness that in turn can help bring roles and scenes to life; and FreeSong, which helps the psoloist tap into the power of singing, connecting the voice and the heart, and taking one’s psolodrama to another level of expressive power and emotional self-exploration.

Being well-grounded in **actor training** and having the opportunity to experiment with **group and individual improvisation** are invaluable preparations for psolodrama. In particular I'd recommend: actor training in the tradition of Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre (1968), Roy Hart (Pikes, 1999) and Linklater (1976) vocal training, van Itallie's Playwriting on Your Feet (1997), Zaporah's Action Theater (1995), Kelman's approach to improvisation (elements of which are described in the chapter in Part II of this book entitled "Naked Improvisation"), and Boal's theater games (1992).

Other forms of creative arts therapy and psychotherapy—including those mentioned in the last chapter, "Foundations of Psolodrama"—can enrich one's practice of psolodrama. These include other approaches to drama therapy, such as Landy's Role Theory/Technique (1996), Johnson's Developmental Transformations (2009), Lewis's Embodied Psyche Technique (2000, p. 268), and the practice of self-revelatory theater (Rubin, 2007); Mindell's Process-Oriented Psychology or Process Work (1985), Agazarian's Systems-Centered Therapy (2004), Schwartz's Internal Family Systems (2013), Gendlin's Focusing (1982), the practice of co-counseling (CCI-USA, 2014), as well as talk therapy integrating mindfulness and meditation (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2013).

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Additional Resources

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For more information on drama therapy, visit The North American Drama Therapy Association (NADTA) online at <http://www.nadta.org>.

Further information on psychodrama can be found at The American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama (ASGPP) online at <http://www.asgpp.org>.

The Entryway to Psolodrama

Treat every moment as your last.

It is not preparation for something else.

— *Shunryu Suzuki*

The Entryway to Psolodrama	
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Entryway Stages</i></p> <p>I. Entering the Body—Authentic Movement</p> <p>II. Giving Voice—Shared Vipassana</p> <p>III. Embodying Others—Role Stream</p> <p>IV. Inviting Dialogue—Scene Stream</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Other Topics</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Witnessing the Entryway • Planning, Timing, and Guidance • Training • Preparing for the Psolodramatic Journey... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ...by Letting Go ...by Dealing with Fear ...by Gathering Material

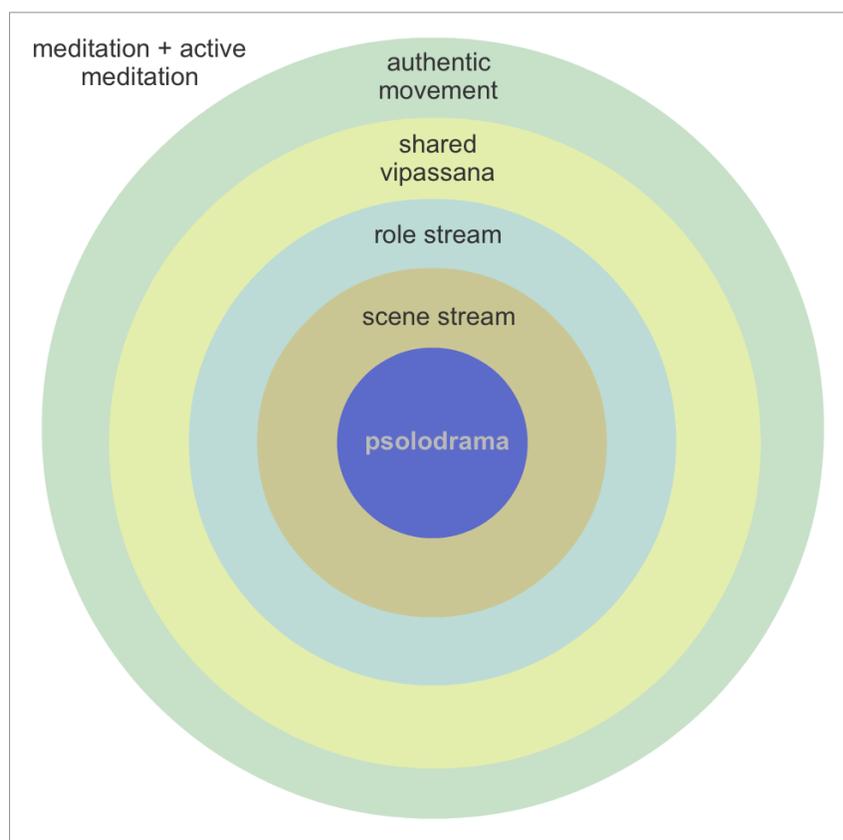
If psolodrama is a burning fire, the entryway practices are kindling, helping to catch a spark and spread the flame.

When psolodrama was first developed, it became evident that starting from nothing and finding one's way into a solo improvisation, portraying interactions among

several roles, could be challenging. Over the years, four steps which precede the practice have evolved, serving as an ideal entryway into one's psolodrama.

By beginning with authentic movement, then adding words with shared vipassana, entering roles in role stream, and letting those roles dialogue with one another in scene stream, the psoloist is given a more gentle, gradual path, in which he can be fully present, listen to his body (instead of his thoughts), and allow what is inside to emerge organically.

Each of these four entryway steps is a deep and worthwhile practice in itself, and all four practices have been covered individually earlier in this book. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the sequence as a whole when used as a prelude to psolodrama and to discuss best practices for the psoloist. The chapter concludes with thoughts about timing and how the witness can offer support.



Entryway Stages

All four entryway steps were described earlier in greater detail, and readers new to these exercises are encouraged to peruse the chapters “Authentic Movement,” “Shared Vipassana,” and “Role Stream and Scene Stream.”

The purpose of this section is to paint a vivid picture of what happens when these practices are used together as a prelude to psolodrama.

The following is a sample entryway sequence as a knowledgeable practitioner might experience it—a fluid, organic progression. Later in this chapter we will discuss how a therapist might introduce a client to these stages, and how peers newer to the practice can guide (and provide timing for) one another.

Mindset. The psoloist begins the entryway process with the intention to enter empty; to let go of her goals, preconceptions and “good ideas;” to be present. Rather than treat the stages as preparation (as Shunryu Suzuki warns against, above), she immerses herself fully in each phase as a practice in itself.

I. Entering the Body—Authentic Movement

The psoloist enters the space, finds a comfortable position to begin in—standing, sitting, lying down, or some other position. She closes her eyes.

She begins with stillness and silence, taking a moment to listen deeply to her body and inner state. She opens to the six sense doors—the five senses, as well as mind

objects: thoughts, inner imagery, etc. She also opens to how she feels: her mood, emotional or energetic state.

To an experienced, perceptive practitioner, the first moment of authentic movement contains volumes of information. It is important not to skip over this moment but let it inform what is to come. For example, it's not unusual when entering the space and physically relaxing for a wave of emotion to arise—sadness or grief, relief, joy or energy, etc. Learning to open to these feelings and following where they lead is a skill that authentic movers and psoloists develop over time.

By taking her time in these opening moments, the psoloist opens to “being moved.” She relaxes her muscles, releasing any unnecessary tension, and lets the resultant movement simply happen. She is keenly aware of sensations, noticing the coolness of the floor or the texture of the carpet, smells, small sounds, etc. In doing so she completely drops any agenda she may have unintentionally entered with—she is now fully in the present moment, following the flow of sensation and feeling moment-by-moment.

She follows her body's movement impulses, opening her eyes only if necessary, and only slightly, to avoid collision. As she follows her body and what it wants, she lets her mind be a nonjudgmental inner witness. She becomes more present, feeling herself opening physically. As her movement unfolds, she encounters new sensations, and can experience images, memories, and feelings.

II. Giving Voice—Shared Vipassana

Eyes still closed, the psoloist begins to speak aloud what she is noticing—whatever is arising in any of the six sense doors:

“Tension in left thigh....Sound of air conditioning, white noise....Relaxing face, lips loose....Thinking: ‘I haven’t allowed myself to relax like this all week’....Faint sound of birds....Musty smell of carpet....Feeling back of hand dragging against carpet, flopping forward...”

Speaking aloud helps her become even more present than before. She is fully aware of every sensation, every impulse. She proceeds slowly. She does not try to share everything—pauses/silences are welcome in shared vipassana. As she continues, imagery may naturally emerge:

“Hand reaching forward....feeling of rug on fingertip....I’m in the desert....Can barely move....scratching in sand....distant oasis....mirage....”

As with any thought, feeling, or sensation, imagery arises and passes away, leaving space for something new to arise, such as a memory:

“Thirsty....pain in knees....remembering jumping off bed and onto knees as a child....aware of belly....heavy belly....relaxing belly with in-breath.”

The psoloist is not speaking for the benefit of the witness. The witness will get what he gets. The psoloist is speaking to articulate her moment-to-moment experience, at first just **reporting** it, as a way to release thoughts and impressions; then **expressing** it, by allowing her voice (and body) to be affected by what she is sharing; and finally, **experiencing**, entering and describing feelings, inner imagery, roles, memories, and stories—aspects of which continue and develop further in role stream and scene stream.

III. Embodying Others—Role Stream

The psoloist, continuing her movement with eyes closed, begins to notice what role or character her body position or movement reminds her of. She moves, makes sound, and speaks as that role. At any time she can let go of the role, return to authentic movement, and then enter another role.

“I’m a dog....(sniff, sniff)...yooowwwwwrr...I love smelling...everything! The floor....my hand...a trail someone left behind...(silence as the psoloist follows her bodily impulse, laying down on her back, crossing her arms over her chest)...I’m an Egyptian princess...lying here for thousands of years....”

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 sounding (growling, humming, singing, screaming), by the mind (e.g., inner imagery, emotion, etc.), or often by a combination of several of these elements at once. The psoloist is avoiding “thinking up” a role—she is not trying to be clever or entertain the witness (a particularly challenging habit for actors to break). Instead, she is tuning into her body and noticing what is already emerging, naturally.

Roles can be real or imaginary—the psoloist may become her own mother in one moment and a robot, fairy godmother, roaring truck, or singing lobster in the next.

Some roles may make sound. Others may speak, or sing, recognizable words. Others may babble word-like gibberish. Some roles may be silent. Something interesting tends to happen when a role is invited to make sound and/or to speak: emotions and thoughts are expressed, and the role evolves and clarifies further. For this reason, an

experienced psoloist will usually invite sound and/or words to a role that is silent, to open up to the richness of these additional dimensions.

Often, the first sounds the psoloist makes in a role help develop and clarify the role. When entering a role she may choose to describe the role while speaking as that role (e.g., “I’m a soldier...toughened by battle...”), but that is not necessary. Mainly, her aim is to fully embody and explore each role, seeing where it leads.

Note that a role may be unclear. For example, the psoloist may find herself making a certain sound while shaking or vibrating her body. This is completely OK, and part of the process—she does not need to understand or name every role that is arising. Sometimes, if she stays with a certain physical/vocal pattern or feeling, a clear role emerges; other times she goes back into authentic movement to discover the next role. 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.

IV. Inviting Dialogue—Scene Stream

As the psoloist continues the role stream, she begins to open to dialogue between roles, allowing herself to return to a previous role to let it reply to what is being said.

Princess: I’ve been lying here for so long...why can’t I get up? I’m stuck...help!

(Becoming the dog again—sniffing.)

Dog: What’s that voice? I’ll save you! (Begins to dig with its paws.)

(Laying down once again as the buried princess.)

Princess: My dog...my sweet doggie...I cannot see you...but I can hear you. Please get me out of here!

Dog: Yes, princess, I'm coming. I'll dig faster! (Digs furiously.) Found you!!! (Leaps on her and starts to lick her...)

Princess: Hey! (laughing) I missed you too! OK, OK!! (Getting up, looking around) Doggie, what is this place...?

As in the previous stages, the psoloist's eyes are still closed, and she is following what her body wants to do. At any time she can drop a role or scene and return to silent authentic movement, eventually noticing what new role wants to arise. She can loop back to any role at any time, creating scenes with two or more characters.

Transitioning into Psolodrama

Once she is practicing scene stream, the psoloist is usually well on her way to psolodrama—channeling roles, creating scenes, and often developing a broader storyline.

As we shall see in the next chapter, what separates scene stream from psolodrama are two main elements: first, an intention to explore the underlying or emerging theme, issue, or challenge, and how it relates to the psoloist's own life; and second, an awareness and use of the five psychodramatic roles, to help “cook” scenes and explore the themes arising.

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 C → role A → role C → role D, etc.
Psolodrama:	protagonist → auxiliary ego → protagonist → auxiliary ego → protagonist → director → protagonist → double → auxiliary ego → audience, etc.

Use of Roles in Role Stream, Scene Stream, and Psolodrama

Witnessing the Entryway

Witnessing the entryway practices is the prelude to witnessing psolodrama. Ideally, the witness treats his role as a meditation, bringing mindfulness, choiceless awareness, and lovingkindness to how he observes and interacts with the psoloist. His goal is to create a supportive, caring container for the psoloist's work—he is completely in service to her.

The trap in witnessing prior to psolodrama is to treat the initial phases as “less than,” as in “this is not the actual psolodrama, so I don't need to pay attention as closely.” In fact, the opening moments of authentic movement, shared vipassana, etc., contain a vast richness of information. So much is happening for the psoloist in these moments; if the witness can tune in and observe carefully, he will see (and feel) every movement, every moment, each emotion and image, etc., even before the psoloist speaks.

A skillful witness observes the entryway practices so closely that he can begin his part of the sharing process by recounting what he saw and heard prior to the psolodrama itself, with accuracy.

(For more, see the chapters “Witnessing Psolodrama” and “The Psolodrama Sharing Process.”)

Planning, Timing, and Guidance

Planning & Timing

Peer session. In a one-to-one session between peers, once checking-in and any preliminary warm-up exercises are complete, partners check in again briefly to see how they are doing, how much time is left, and how best to use the time. Usually, a plan is made to divide the remaining time equally, providing each person with time to do their psolodrama (including the entryway practices) and then share with the witness.

If the total session length is two hours, and the initial check-in and warm-ups take roughly 40 minutes, that leaves 80 minutes, or about 40 minutes per person, for psolodrama and sharing.

Each person can determine how they would like to use their time, but a good rule of thumb is to leave as much time for sharing as for the psolodrama itself, i.e. 20 minutes for each. Some may feel they need more time for their psolodrama and request 25/15.

The minimum amount of time required for psolodrama plus sharing is probably 15/10, or 25 minutes total. This requires keeping the entryway practices brief or skipping some (see “Untimed,” below). If pressed for time, therefore, partners can get together, briefly check-in, and witness one another doing psolodrama in the course of a single hour.

Therapy. For a therapy session, the total time needed is less because there is only one psoloist (the client), and one witness (the therapist). 90 minutes is recommended for therapy sessions using psolodrama to allow sufficient time for initial check-in and clearing as well as sharing and closure after the psolodrama. But a shorter session is possible.

Guidance

Whether and how the witness (either a peer or therapist) provides timing and/or guidance for the entryway practices depends on the psoloist's needs, desires, and experience level. Roughly speaking, there are three typical approaches (although elements of these can be combined):

Guided. The witness provides a verbal introduction, and if needed, instructions, to transition from one phase to the next. The witness and psoloist can agree beforehand whether the transitions will be based on time (e.g. three minutes per step) or more fluid, based on what the witness is seeing. Note that someone new to authentic movement and these other practices will likely need more time with each step (see "Training" below).

Timed. The psoloist and witness agree on timing beforehand, and the witness rings a bell to mark the beginning of each step (if the psoloist likes, the witness can also say the name of the step, e.g., "Entering shared vipassana..."). Allowing two to three minutes each for entryway practices can leave 10-15 minutes for the psolodrama itself.

Untimed. For a more experienced practitioner, no guidance or timing is necessary; he can enter these four phases in his own time, in an organic way. Psoloist and witness agree beforehand only on the total time for the psolodrama (including the

entryway practices), e.g. 20 minutes. The psoloist lets go of concerns about time, and simply follows his body and instinct. He can skip steps, do them in a different order, etc., whatever works best for him to enter into psolodrama. Skipping steps is not an intentional act: the psoloist may lie down on the floor and within seconds find himself in a role and talking to another character. He's jumped from authentic movement to scene stream in a matter of moments. (He can even let go of the "goal" of practicing psolodrama entirely: he may end up doing 20 minutes of meditation, authentic movement, or shared vipassana, or any of the entryway practices—and have a full and rich experience of doing so.)

No matter which approach is taken, guided, timed, or untimed, the psoloist can also request a two-minute warning before the end of the psolodrama itself, which the witness can provide verbally or by ringing a bell.

Training

Although one goal when learning psolodrama and the entryway practices may be to work untimed in the most spontaneous and organic way, it is equally important for those new to these approaches to have a chance to experience each phase fully and deeply. When teaching psolodrama in workshop settings or to individuals in my private practice, I make sure novices have the chance to experience authentic movement at length—ideally 20 minutes or longer—and at least 10-15 minutes each of shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream. For a therapy client these may be introduced over a series of sessions; in a workshop I generally introduce the phases gradually over the course of one to two days, in alternation with exercises such as the empty chair and group psychodrama, which introduce complementary concepts and skills. (*More on the*

use of all of these techniques in individual therapy and group workshops appears in Part IV of this book and in the appendix “Sample Agendas for Group Work.”)

Preparing for the Psolodramatic Journey...

...by Letting Go

One could compare the entryway practices to traveling down a stream or river: I consciously let myself be carried by currents I do not understand or control. Sometimes the themes, emotions, images, and roles that emerge will make their way into the psolodrama proper, sometimes not.

In some ways, the entryway sequence serves as a psychic or emotional palette cleansing, a way to slough off the surface tensions and issues of the day and drop into a deeper level of work.

The entryway can also be compared to flying through the layers of a hurricane—after moving through cloud, being buffeted about this way and that, we eventually reach the eye of the storm, a calm, open place where we can see clearly and in a new way.

In another sense, the entryway is the beginning of a shamanic journey—we trust that if we follow the path and go down the hole into dark places, we will eventually meet a guide who has an important message for us.

...by Dealing with Fear

It is possible to be fearful of doing psolodrama—one longtime practitioner shared with me that he knows of people, even skilled improvisers, who are terrified of it. Psolodrama is not only an act on vulnerability—sharing one’s innermost thoughts, feelings, issues, and challenges—but it also has some of the scary aspects of performance: will my psolodrama be good? What will happen? To enter psolodrama is to enter the unknown. The same person also shared that doing psolodrama, for him, is a little like going swimming: there is resistance to going in the lake, but once he’s in, he is usually very comfortable and feels like he could stay forever.

The entryway practices greatly ease the entry into psolodrama, helping relieve these feelings of fear at the threshold—or what Agazarian would call the “turbulent boundary” (2011, p. 116). The psoloist can enter authentic movement and completely relax, letting go of the idea of psolodrama completely, comfortable in the understanding that he can go as far as he feels comfortable in the progression—he may do 20 minutes of authentic movement, or of authentic movement and shared vipassana, etc. What typically happens is that once he begins, the psoloist feels so comfortable that the transition from phase to phase is natural, often automatic. Before he knows it he is happily in the midst of his psolodrama, creating scenes, weaving fantasy and real life characters, etc.

...by Gathering Material

The entryway to psolodrama is not only a warming up but a winnowing process: whereas in authentic movement we bring completely open awareness and a surrender to bodily impulse, in shared vipassana we begin to select and share aloud some of what we

are noticing. In the role stream we focus further—on roles only; in scene stream we zero in on interactions between those roles.

This winnowing process is like a funnel for the unconscious, gathering the rich, chaotic material offered by the body, emotions, and imagination, and focusing it more and more into a form that can be embodied in roles and played out in scenes.

When the preparation for psolodrama is relaxed, thorough, and deep, the psolodrama process is effortless—the feelings and roles discovered in the preparatory steps are organically incorporated into the story that emerges.

References

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Additional Reading

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The Practice of Psolodrama

The light that gradually dawns on him consists in his understanding that his fantasy is a real psychic process which is happening to him personally.

— C. G. Jung (1977, pp. 528-529)

Cautionary Note: Psolodrama is a practice designed for those who can hold and support their own emotional process. It is **not** recommended for those suffering from severe trauma, depression, anxiety, mental illness or disorder.

Psolodrama is a melding of meditation, authentic movement, theatrical improvisation, and psychodrama. It is a practice of spontaneous and creative self-expression, an invitation to the body-mind to relax, open, explore, and express what lies inside. It is a vehicle for self-discovery, inviting deep exploration of personal challenges, patterns, and existential themes.

Like any of its constituent elements—meditation, authentic movement, etc.—psolodrama is a practice, which deepens and strengthens over time, with repetition. Every psolodrama is different, although certain themes and sometimes particular roles and/or scenes may be revisited over time.

As in authentic movement, psolodrama typically requires two people, **psoloist** and **witness** (the exception to this is when practicing psolodrama alone, described in the chapter aptly titled “Psolodrama Alone”). The witness role, as well as the sharing process that occurs following a psolodrama, is described in detail in subsequent chapters. The focus of this chapter, as well as the next two chapters (“Psolodrama Examples” and “Troubleshooting Psolodrama”) is on the role of the psoloist—essentially, how to practice psolodrama mindfully, deeply, and skillfully.

The Practice of Psolodrama	
<i>Intention and Attitude • Starting Out</i>	
<p><i>Use of the Five Psychodramatic Roles in Psolodrama</i></p> <p>Protagonist • Auxiliary Ego Director • Double • Audience</p>	<p><i>Guidelines for Psolodrama</i></p> <p>Enter Empty • Go for the Heart Follow Intuition • Let Go of Performing Ask the Director • Ask for Coaching if Needed Enjoy It!</p>

Intention and Attitude

A psolodrama takes place in the imaginal space where healing can occur. — Cate McQuaid (personal communication, March 23, 2011)

The purpose of psolodrama is to experience a full expression of, transformation of, and/or new insight into, the core emotion, conflict, issue, or theme arising.

In the process, psolodrama can evoke a profound sense of catharsis, opening, or resolution.

Like a good psychodrama, a good psolodrama is often not “comfortable”—it is a powerful way to explore one’s growing edges, and calls for vulnerability, honesty, and courage.

That said, the psoloist’s impulse to explore and be at her growing edge is balanced, ideally, with the intention to relax, bring mindful awareness, follow the body, and listen deeply to what’s happening inside—if not, the psoloist may find that she is controlling the psolodrama rather than allowing it to emerge organically.

Therein lies a paradox at the heart of psolodrama—on the one hand, to follow the body/mind as a meditator or authentic mover would do, letting go of planning/controlling mind, and being a witness to the process; on the other hand, to notice the themes arising, follow them, explore them, and even “cook them,” as a psychodrama director would do, with the aim of discovering something new.

To maintain a balance between the two—letting go while exploring what’s arising—requires holding each intention lightly.

Starting Out

*(We shall assume for this chapter that psoloist and witness have already checked in, warmed up, and agreed upon timing and other details. For more information on this, please see the previous chapters *Warming Up to Psolodrama* and *The Entryway to Psolodrama*.)*

The psoloist enters empty, without a preconception of what will happen. He finds a comfortable place and position to start in, and closes his eyes. Tuning into breath and body sensations, he enters into authentic movement, becoming aware of feelings and inner imagery.

One best practice is to follow the “entryway” progression of authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream—described in the last chapter—before entering into psolodrama. Often the last characters discovered in the role stream or scene stream make a perfect launching-off point for the psolodrama. One of these characters may be the protagonist, the other an auxiliary ego; from this point the psoloist can develop a dialogue between the two, and can optionally add any of the other psychodramatic roles described below.

However, for advanced practitioners, a little authentic movement may be all that’s needed to begin a psolodrama. From his movement, the psoloist may immediately sense the presence of a character or role, or have an image for where he is or what he is doing that suggests a role or scene. The psoloist adds sound, then words, and then finds himself in one of the five psychodramatic roles described below.

The solo improvisation that develops is a series of spontaneous monologues and dialogues featuring these roles, all embodied by the psoloist.

Use of the Five Psychodramatic Roles in Psolodrama

(In addition to descriptions of the roles, brief examples of dialogue appear below to illustrate how each role works. For more extensive examples from actual psolodramas, please see the next chapter, “Psolodrama Examples.”)

As described earlier, in the chapter “Foundations of Psolodrama,” psolodrama owes a large debt to psychodrama and its creator, Jacob Moreno. In psolodrama, the five roles typically found in psychodrama—protagonist, auxiliary ego, director, double, and group—are adapted for use by the individual playing all of those roles, the psoloist.

Although the distinctions of the five psychodramatic roles are useful in psolodrama, they are not essential. A psolodrama can be as simple as a single character’s monologue, or a dialogue between two characters. Like any tool, the distinction of the five psychodramatic roles can be applied or not, depending on the need.

The Protagonist: The Hero; or, Oneself in the Drama

The protagonist is the central character of a story. Because a psolodrama can contain more than one scene, and because the psoloist’s point of view can shift during psolodrama, it is quite common to have more than one protagonist role arise in a single psolodrama.

There are three basic kinds of protagonist that tend to occur in psolodrama (parallel to the three narrative stances distinguished by van Itallie in his teachings on storytelling—see the chapter “Storytelling” in Part II of this book):

Present-Day Self (P1). The first type of protagonist, most similar to the protagonist role in psychodrama, is the psoloist herself, right now in the present moment,

the person who is not only enacting the psolodrama but also experiencing it, and able to comment on and question the experience as it unfolds. As P1 protagonist, the psoloist speaks in the same voice as when she did shared vipassana: first person, present tense.

Past/Future/Transformed Self (P2). The second type of protagonist is the psoloist in the past or future, e.g., as a child, a teen, an old woman or man, etc. This type of protagonist may appear when she replays scenes from earlier in her life, or when she engages in “role-rehearsal,” playing out hypothetical situations or practice future interactions. P2 can also be the psoloist in an imaginary state—e.g., before birth, after death, transformed into a different gender, etc.

The Hero/Heroine (P3). The third type of protagonist, which can emerge from role stream or scene stream, is a role or character that is not the psoloist, yet feels like the hero or heroine or central figure of the story. E.g. if in her improvisation a conflict is emerging between a worm and a butterfly, she may naturally feel that the worm is “her” (the heroine of the story) and that the butterfly is the “other” (also called the auxiliary ego—see below). However, she could just as easily feel that the butterfly is the heroine, not the worm.

In the following example, **P1, P2, and P3** denote the three different kinds of protagonist:

Worm (P3): *I don't care if I'm not beautiful like you, butterfly! I'm just going to go in my hole and sulk.*

(The psoloist steps to the side as if she's now observing the worm and butterfly from outside the scene.)

Pat (P1): *Wow...this worm seems really depressed. It's like when I was a little girl and used to just stay in my room.*

(Throwing herself on the floor.)

Patty (P2): *I don't care! No one likes me. I'm going to cry until this blanket is soaking wet.*

Although the protagonist is typically the central figure in the drama, it is important the psoloist not get stuck in a P1 monologue. Embodying a variety of roles—and having them interact physically and verbally—is essential to the power of psolodrama. That said, sometimes a role—often P3—is so satisfying to play that one's impulse is to stay with it and explore what it has to say. The psoloist may end up staying with that role, letting it speak, for the entire psolodrama.

Sometimes it is unclear which role is the protagonist. It's important to not force clarity on this situation. Instead, the psoloist can let the scene play out and see what emerges. It may be that the scene is about two opposing forces (e.g. a mother and father arguing; two boxers in a ring; etc.). Perhaps P1 (present-day-self) will later step out of the scene to comment on it, ask the director a question about it, or speak to the two other roles.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, a psolodrama can be comprised of a number of scenes, each with its own P2 or P3 protagonist. After each scene, the psoloist may return to movement, role stream, or scene stream to discover what's next. Or the next character or scene may present itself immediately.

The Auxiliary Ego: The Other

Auxiliary egos are other characters who may appear in the scene, real or imagined. These can be:

Specific people	e.g., the psoloist's mother, Bruce Springsteen, the Buddha
Archetypal roles	the King, a beggar, a wise old hag
Talking animals, plants, or objects	a whale, a rotting tree trunk, a treasure chest, a ball of energy
Gods, forces of nature	Zeus, a mud monster, fire
Parts of the self	the Inner Critic, the Guide (see the Director, below), the Procrastinator, the Feminine or Masculine side (Anima/Animus), Inner Angels or Demons
Ideas or emotions	Death, Love, Jealousy, Forgiveness, Enlightenment
...or anything that one can imagine...	

Auxiliaries are sometimes supportive (a beloved mentor, an ideal parent, an angel), antagonistic (e.g., the inner critic, an ex-spouse, a pack of angry dogs, an abusive boss), or changing (e.g., a scary monster that later in the drama becomes an ally or guide). There is a parallel here to the meditative concepts of desire, aversion, and delusion: some auxiliary ego roles we love, others we hate, and others are ambiguous, mysterious, illogical, or hard to grasp.

In psolodrama, what distinguishes the auxiliary ego from the protagonist is an intuitive feeling of “other,” or “not me.” However, this feeling may change during the

psolodrama—what began as an auxiliary may later become the protagonist of the story. From a Jungian perspective, such a change from auxiliary ego to protagonist may represent an integration of the shadow.

Much of the power of psolodrama (and, originally, psychodrama) comes from entering the role of the auxiliary ego and playing it fully. E.g., if the psoloist is playing his father, the experience deepens as he takes on his father's stance, body language, facial expression, vocal delivery, etc. In doing so, he more readily empathizes with his father's feelings and thoughts, attitudes and beliefs.

There is no limit to the number of auxiliary egos that can appear in a psolodrama. In some of the most honest psolodramas, the psoloist is ruthless in including every single voice that enters his head, embodying every thought and feeling as a character—even down to the voice that is imagining how stupid the witness must think the psolodrama is (or how screwed up the psoloist is). Jumping from character to character, dialogues arise and evaporate, as the psoloist spirals down through layers of self-judgment, shame, and story to discover the heart of his issue.

Ultimately, through playing a wide range of auxiliary egos, the psoloist learns to expand the repertoire of roles he can spontaneously play in life. And by letting parts of the self speak and express in ways they have not done before, the psoloist learns to be more open and less inhibited, qualities that can carry over into his daily life.

The three additional roles which follow, the Director, the Double, and the Audience, can be thought of as special cases of the Auxiliary Ego role:

The Director: The Inner Guide

The director is the psoloist's inner guide, wise mind, inner therapist, or coach. Whereas in psychodrama, the director is the psychodramatist leading the session, in psolodrama the director is a role the psoloist embodies—a role with its own distinct point of view, voice, physicality, etc.

The protagonist (usually P1) can call upon the director to help clear up confusion, answer a question, get unstuck, etc.:

Pat (P1): *Wow...this worm seems really depressed. (Pause.)*

Director, why is this worm in my psolodrama anyway—it's such an ugly, depressed creature.

(The psoloist steps to a new spot and turns to face where P1 just stood. She pauses for a moment to breathe, center, and relax. She speaks in a deeper, more grounded voice:)

Director: *When you look at the worm, how do you feel?*

(Returning to the spot where P1 was, the psoloist takes a moment to tune into her feelings.)

Pat (P1): *I feel sad. It's like when I was a little girl and used to just stay in my room.*

Director: *What do you need right now?*

(The psoloist begins to cry.)

Pat (P1): *I want to talk to my father. Dad, why didn't you come and talk to me when I felt so alone and hated?*

(Pat becomes her father and the scene continues...)

The director can dialogue with and ask questions of the protagonist, such as “How do you feel right now?” or “What do you need?” and can also suggest or confirm what the next step might be. If the psoloist is truly stuck, the director can get more creative, e.g.: “If you could have someone, anyone in the world, enter the scene right now, whom would you want it be? Go with your gut instinct.” Rather than create a prolonged dialogue with the protagonist, the director’s questions are designed to return the psoloist to action.

It is important to distinguish the director role from the “inner critic.” The director is there to ask questions, and gently guide, not to chastise the protagonist or boss her around. This is not to say that embodying the inner critic is bad or wrong; in fact, taking on the inner critic as a role in psolodrama and letting it speak can be very powerful. But it’s helpful to differentiate the critic from the director so that the inner supportive resource the director role embodies remains fully available to the psoloist.

The Double: The Truth-teller

The double gives voice to the inner thoughts and feelings the protagonist does not yet feel able to speak.

When becoming the double, the psoloist is invited to speak his full truth, and express all of the feelings present for him in that moment. It helps when becoming the double to move slightly (e.g., to take a step back), to represent that this is an inner voice speaking.

For example, in a psolodrama scene between the protagonist and his mother, the protagonist may be thinking all kinds of things he would not ordinarily say to his mother. By becoming the double, he can say it all, as in this role-rehearsal conversation::

Mother (auxiliary): *Let me be honest. If you decide to marry him, I just cannot give my approval.*

Protagonist (P2—future self): *Well...I...I don't know what to say to you.*

(The psoloist takes a step back and becomes the Double.)

Double: *I know what to say—you're driving me CRAZY! Who are you to judge whom I choose to be with? Whom I choose to marry? It's MY LIFE! Not yours! To heck with you, Mom.*

Mother: *(Gasps.) Well I never. You don't talk to me like that!*

Protagonist (P2): *NOW I do! And let me tell you, mom, here's news for you: I'm gay. So you'd better get used to the idea.*

It can be useful, as in the scene above, to allow the auxiliary ego to hear what the double is saying and respond to it. Once the truth is out, the protagonist, emboldened, can take over the dialogue from the double if he feels ready to. As in psychodrama, the double is there to unlock inner feelings; once those feelings are expressed, the double may no longer be needed.

Any role can have a double. In an interaction between the auxiliary ego role of Wicked Witch and the protagonist role of Dorothy (P3), Dorothy might be too afraid to

yell at the Wicked Witch. By becoming the double, the psoloist can access and speak all of what Dorothy feels inside, or what the present-day adult mind of the protagonist wants to say. The psoloist can also take a step back from the Wicked Witch and speak as *her* double:

Wicked Witch (auxiliary ego): *I'll get you my pretty! And your little dog, too!!*

(The psoloist takes a step back.)

Witch's Double: *(suddenly looking very sad) No one...loves me. No one cares about me. Ohhh....I just want to curl up in a ball and die.*

Dorothy (P3): *There, there, don't be sad...*

The Audience: The Observer

Whereas in classic psychodrama the audience is comprised of other group members who are watching the action (and may be called upon to participate at any time as auxiliaries), in psolodrama the psoloist can take on the role of audience herself, speaking what observers might say if they were witnessing the scene at hand.

The audience may be an inner critic, a chorus of support, a bored theatergoer, a favorite mentor, a group of whispering townspeople, etc.

The audience can also simply voice what the protagonist might say if she herself were witnessing the psolodrama.

As with any role in the psolodrama, the protagonist can dialogue with the audience and interact with them—and even pull them into the action, if desired:

Witch's Double: *(suddenly looking very sad) No one...loves me. No one cares about me. Ohhh....I just want to curl up in a ball and die.*

Dorothy (P3): *There, there, don't be sad...*

(The psoloist sits off to one side and pretends to be munching popcorn.)

Audience: *Oh my God. Don't be so maudlin. She's the Wicked Witch for goodness sake. Kill her!*

Dorothy (P3): *But I can't. She's really just sad inside. Like we all are.*

Audience: *That's a load of BS. Throw a bucket of water on her!*

Protagonist (P1): *OK, if you're so tough, why don't you do it?*

(Psoloist reaches out and "grabs" the audience, miming pulling him up into the space.)

Audience: *Hey, get your mitts off of me! Well, OK, if you insist. Here's the water! (Mimes throwing water at the witch.)*

Wicked Witch: *NOOOO! I'm melting...! (Melts to the ground.)*

(The psoloist slowly rolls to one side, curled up in a fetal position.)

Witch's Double: *Now I am at peace. At last I can rest. Thank you for releasing me from the hell I was in.*

Guidelines for Psolodrama

The guidelines which follow are designed to help the psoloist have as powerful an experience as possible doing psolodrama.

Like any rules in Insight Improvisation, these are designed to be broken. When in doubt, experiment and discover what works best for you.

Enter Empty

Unlike traditional psychodrama, in which the protagonist states beforehand what issue or theme she would like to work on, in psolodrama the psoloist puts her current issues and problems aside, enters the space, and begins to follow her body, trusting what comes up through her movement, sensations, emotions, inner imagery, and the roles and scenes that emerge.

In the same way that one does not do authentic movement “about” something, the psoloist does not declare the theme of her psolodrama beforehand. Invariably, what emerges organically is more interesting than, and often several layers beneath, the psoloist’s presenting issue.

Go for the Heart—Trust It

The psoloist aims for the heart of the matter—he does not avoid, delay, or dance around the issue, or censor his impulses, but instead dives in and completely embodies the images, feelings, roles, and themes arising, fully and authentically, truthfully and honestly, following the developing scene wherever it takes him, with courage and the spirit of exploration.

To do this requires trust: trusting the safety of the container, including the confidentiality and unconditional support of the witness; trusting oneself, to hold all that is arising, even what is painful; and trusting the process, that following it will lead somewhere that is useful, instructive, possibly cathartic, even healing.

One corollary of this guideline: if a new role is mentioned in a scene, embody that role. For example, if the psoloist is talking about his mother, the most powerful thing he can do in that moment is to become his mother, and speak as her. In this way, “talking about” someone is transformed into action, and even an offhand mention of a role or character can lead to a central scene or story arc of the psolodrama.

(Resistance in psolodrama—essentially, a lack of trust—can occur for a variety of reasons. See the chapter “Troubleshooting Psolodrama” for approaches to working with resistance.)

Follow Intuition—Let Go of Logic

At any time, the psoloist can return to stillness, silence, and authentic movement, or can shift roles or scenes. No distinction is made between fact, fantasy, past, present, or future—psolodrama can mingle them all. The psoloist can jump in location and time, even shift to what seems like a completely different story and set of characters. What began as monster or villain may emerge as protagonist.

The psoloist consciously avoids doing her “good ideas” but instead draws inspiration from what her body is experiencing in each moment, as well as from inner imagery and “gut” feel or intuition. There is no need to explain shifts or jumps—witness and psoloist can discuss them afterwards.

Let Go of Performing

Whenever he found himself pushing any harder than what was actually happening, he'd stop and return to neutral. — Ruth Zaporah on Min Tanaka, Butoh performer (workshop lecture, May, 2004)

Psolodrama is not a performance, but a personal process—the psoloist is there to explore his own growing edges. The witness will get what she gets. The psoloist's eyes can be closed throughout, which can help him break free of the impulse to perform for the witness.

That said, for many actors (and other performers), the joy of acting is a positive force, and can contribute passion and energy to psolodrama.

However, if the psoloist notices he is making choices meant to entertain, please, or impress the witness, or if he finds that he is pushing too hard, controlling or overthinking the psolodrama rather than letting it happen, he can return to his meditative self, listen deeply to the body, and follow what the body wants to do. Returning to stillness or authentic movement can be an antidote to “Performance Mind.”

Ask the Director

If the psoloist feels lost or confused, she can always enter the role of director, and provide supportive coaching to herself. Questions from the director, such as “how do you feel right now?” or “what do you need?” often help clarify where the psoloist needs to go next.

If the director cannot help, the psoloist can always return to stillness and awareness of breath, then authentic movement, and then the entryway practices—shared

vipassana, role stream, and scene stream. This essentially clears the slate, allowing the psoloist a fresh start and a chance to discover what's next.

Ask for Coaching if Needed

If the psoloist feels a need for additional support, he can ask the witness, either before or during the psolodrama, to be his coach. The witness should only provide coaching if requested by the psoloist—it can be disruptive to the psoloist if the witness speaks without being invited to. (*See the chapter “Coaching Psolodrama” for best practices when coaching others.*)

Enjoy It!

Psolodrama is meant to be enjoyable. How often do we get to create our own spontaneous one-person show—a show that can be about whatever we like, where we get to fulfill our deepest dreams, or say things we have never said aloud before? How often do we get to go on a journey into our own psyche, exploring all the dark corners, shadows, areas of shame, and habitual mindsets that have limited us in life? And how often do we get to do this in front of a dedicated, supportive witness, who is there just to help us?

If you follow the joy of your experience, follow your passion, you cannot go wrong in psolodrama—discover what intrigues you and follow it.

References

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Additional Reading

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http://www.insightimprov.org/Resources_files/psolodrama_in_brief.pdf

Psolodrama Examples

We are all born mad. Some remain so.

— Estragon, Act 2, *Waiting for Godot*

Psolodrama can play out in many ways, and one way to illustrate some of its possibilities is to provide a few full-length examples. These show a sense of the arc of a typical psolodrama and portray several of the techniques, roles, and types of stories that can arise. The three examples in this chapter come from actual psolodramas experienced in peer and individual practice (examples from clinical practice appear in Part IV of this book, the chapter “Working with Individuals”). Details have been changed to protect anonymity, and edits have been made to focus on the essence of each psolodrama.

One downside to providing examples is that a newcomer may think “this is what psolodrama is.” Psolodrama is an expansive form that allows for the diverse styles and approaches of all who practice it. As a one-person improvisation, it tends to bring out what is unique in each individual, providing the witness and/or therapist a powerful experience of the soloist’s inner world. When reading these examples, know that your own psolodramas will likely be very different.

The examples in this chapter feature multiple characters, including the more specialized psychodramatic roles such as the director and the double. However, it is equally possible to experience powerful psolodramas featuring only one character, or a single auxiliary ego in dialogue with the protagonist. Similarly, although the examples in this chapter each portray one fairly coherent story or dramatic arc, one can also have a psolodrama comprised of unrelated scenes, in which the psoloist returns to stillness or authentic movement between scenes, and from listening to the body discovers new roles and a new story. Often, when sharing with the witness afterward, what seemed unrelated during the psolodrama may upon reflection form a coherent through-line, or portray a set of related themes.

Throughout this chapter, and for the remainder of this book, when a new character appears we will use notation to indicate what psychodramatic role it is, if the role is clear (please see the previous chapter for more on the five psychodramatic roles):

Types of Protagonist

(p1)—Present-Day Self
(p2)—Past/Future/Transformed Self
(p3)—The Hero/Heroine

Types of Auxiliary Ego

(aux)—Other characters in the drama
Special cases:
Director—The Inner Guide
Double—The Truth-teller
Audience—The Observer

In a typical psolodrama, the psoloist begins with authentic movement, then shares aloud what she is noticing (shared vipassana), then enters roles and dialogues (role stream

and scene stream), and then begins to develop an emerging conflict or theme, with the help of the psychodramatic roles (psolodrama). Experienced psoloists often skip one or more of these stages, moving from authentic movement fairly rapidly into psolodrama. Where evident, these stages are noted in the examples below.

When playing different roles, the psoloist typically shifts slightly or moves to an entirely different location in the space, as well as takes on a different posture, stance, etc., appropriate to the new role. (For the role of the double, the psoloist typically takes a step backward to represent her inner self and inner feelings.) For brevity, the examples below omit descriptions of these typical movements. Physical/vocal action is described in italics.

Finally, some of the examples below are followed by excerpts from the sharing process between psoloist and witness, and all are followed by commentary. The commentary is aimed not at psychological interpretation but rather at discussing psolodrama as a technique, e.g., how the drama evolved from the psoloist's awareness, movement, improvisation, etc. (For examples of how a therapist can use interpretation as a clinical tool when working with psolodrama, see Part IV, "Working with Individuals.")

Psolodrama Example #1: The Lone Hunter and the Sun King

(Authentic movement: the psoloist begins in child's pose, with forehead resting on the floor and body folded. He rests there, breathing.)

(Shared vipassana—speaking aloud:)

Protagonist (p1): Sinking into the carpet. Dull head. Layers of dullness. Tension in left hip.

(Rolling over onto back.)

Cool air coming in through mouth. Feeling the arch of my back. Tingling of lower back on the floor. Butt. Scratching skin. Rubbing. A thought about self-care, and a wave, a little edge of sadness. Rubbing sternum. Rubbing heart. Who cares for me. Hearing the wind outside. Hearing a train coming. Rough face. Rough whiskers.

(Role stream:)

A wood man. A woodsman.

Woodsman (p3): Waking up on a cold morning in my shack. All alone. In the woods. Just me. I can do anything I want today. It's just me. It's me. No dog. No people. No family. No nothing. It's just me. By myself out here. Nah. Cold day. Cold day, but I've got my gun. And I've got my knife. Got my coat. Mmm. Gotta get outa bed. Go and hunt—something—to eat.

(Scene stream:)

Protagonist: Better than a bagel!

Woodsman: Who the fuck are you?

Protagonist: I'm present-day Walter. And a little bit in the mood for a toasted bagel, with margarine and cream cheese, maybe a slice of cheese. Lettuce, tomato. Could be good.

(Psolodrama:)

Woodsman: You're just a pampered fuck, aren't you? Do you know how to live? You just lead this kind of sheltered, pampered, boxed-in life. Every moment scheduled. You don't know anything about living. You're just all in your fucking head.

Protagonist: Well, you can say that but I'm responsible. I earn money, I have a family, I have a wife, I have three kids. Look at you. You're a waste product. You're just living for yourself. Only. You're just surviving. When you die no one will remember you, no one will care about you. What's the purpose of your life?

Woodsman: Ho-ho-ho! Yeah! You think that because you're responsible to wife and kids that you're worth something and I'm not. Nice. Nice. Fuck you. I'm present to my life. These four little walls. These woods. The stream. The mountains. The animals that I kill. I'm there for all of it. I see all of it. I feel all of it. I revel in the blood. And smell the blood. I cook the meat and the fat. I take it in. I don't need to justify my life. I don't need a reason for living. I am fucking alive. That's all that matters. Just living this moment is all that matters. This essence—it's essential—you've lost that completely. You're on the fucking treadmill. You don't know what the fuck you're doing. You just are vaguely worried about the future. I'm the future. I'm here now, where there is no future. Ha. Kill or be killed. It's very simple. This is what life is.

Protagonist: Very compelling. Very compelling you are. I admire your macho independent nature. But I gotta say you look really lonely to me. I mean I just get such joy out of my children. Cuddling my son. Seeing the three of them grow. Yeah. I feel very lucky. I don't feel boxed in. Sure I'm very scheduled. But I get to do amazing things. I love the things that I do. Not always. But do you always love the things that you do—do you love waking up in a cold shack? You know, life has ups and downs. But you know I'd rather be here, frankly, than where you are.

(From this point the Woodsman seems to shift more into an auxiliary ego role.)

Woodsman (aux): Would you really? Then why am I here in your fucking psolodrama huh? Why am I here? I'm here because I AM LIFE. Ah! And meat. Yes. I'm here because you're missing some essence in your gut. You're living too fucking an intellectualized life! In your fucking head. That's why I'm here—to shake you the fuck up! So you better get used to the idea. I'm gonna shake you up. I'm shaking you!—I'M SHAKING YOU! *(Shakes the protagonist with both hands.)*

Protagonist: DAH! Stop shaking me! Get your fuckin' hands off me. I'm fine with my life. Do I have to defend my fucking life to you? Jesus. God. I'm getting attacked on all sides.

Wife (aux): Walter! Yes, you need to go to bed early. But Walter you need to stay up late with *me*.

Child 1 (aux): Daddy daddy! Can you play with me? Can you read to me? Daddy!

- Child 2 (aux):** Daddy can you hug me? Can I hug and smooch you, Daddy?
- Child 3 (aux):** Daddy daddy we wanna come in. We wanna come in and be with you Daddy!
- Child 2:** Daddy daddy I wanna come in and be with you *now!* Margaret *no!!*
- Protagonist:** OK, everybody, whooooa! Wow. What a life. Mmmmm. Big beautiful life. Mmm. Smells like...a burning smell? Cooking rice? Interesting. Someone cooking rice next door? OK, never mind.
- Woodsman:** See that's it. That's it you fuck. You're ruled by fear. You're ruled by the interruptions of others. Do you know what it means to have an independent moment in your fucking life? Do you know what it means? I can feel my muscles. I can feel my struggle with another creature, to kill it. I can plunge my knife into the flesh of another creature and kill it. With you, if you touch your own hand you feel weak and you've hurt yourself.
- Protagonist:** Oh, God, this critique is amazing! Like, did I ask for you? Did I? Like where the fuck are you coming from? I...you know, you're making me say that I am happy. What if I want to say that I'm depressed?
- Double:** *(curled up on floor, head buried under arms)* I'm depressed. Oh, I'm so depressed! Oh God, oh I'm so depressed. Oh...ho...I admit defeat. I'm nothing. I'm worthless. I'm a crappy father. Husband. Crappy designer. Crappy spiritual leader. Crappy person. Crappy son. Crappy brother. I'm crap, crap. I'm a ball of reactivity and anger. I'm comparing myself all the time and coming up short. I've

not planned for my future. I've no time to get anything done. I'm failing everyone. I'm a crappy employee. I'm a crappy crap crap. I'm crap in all departments.

Protagonist: *(standing)* Director is this really true?

Director: Well how do you feel? How do you feel when you take it in?

Protagonist: Yeah. Yeah it resonates. This is my inner life, so much. There's just a huge amount of self-judgment, and a huge amount of not-self-acceptance. *(laughs)* Just complete non-self-acceptance! It's like every day, every moment, I cannot accept what I'm doing and how I'm doing it. And very few victories and triumphs it seems. Mostly just a downward spiral of crap.

Director: Hmm. So... If you could have anyone enter your psolodrama right now, who would it be?

Protagonist: *(claps)* I could have anyone enter... The Sun King. Mmmm.

(The psoloist moves to one end of the space and transforms into the Sun King. He stands upright, slowly lifting his arms, taking up more space. He begins to enter, very slowly, while making a sound of rushing air, a rumbling, approaching storm, increasing in volume. He begins to sing, very slowly. He sings all of his lines, in a style between Gregorian chant and opera.)

Sun King (aux): *Radiating sun, light and heat, wherever I stride.*

(Air sounds.)

I am the Sun King.

Filling the world with light and heat.

*Bringing clarity, wisdom and reason, as well as brotherly love.
 Bringing the goodness of parental love, spousal love and caring.
 I am the Sun King, the generator of life, growth.
 I am the Sun King.
 Landing on earth to spread warmth out to all creatures,
 All the peoples.
 What do you want to say to me?*

Protagonist:

Oh, Sun King, *(chuckling sadly)* there's a lot of shadow in my life. I judge myself every moment. A lot of fear! And a lot of making myself wrong. A lot of mistakes and beating myself for the mistakes. *(Hits himself with his fists.)* Sun King, what am I doing wrong? Why has my spiritual practice not helped me?!? Why has growing up not helped me? Why am I still the same neurotic idiot that I was 20, 30, a million years ago? What—what is this?

Sun King:

*Yes. Life on earth has light and shadow.
 You can choose to dwell in the shadow,
 And not experience my warmth, light, and heat.
 You can choose to hide from me,
 Curl up on yourself underneath a stone.
 You can choose to burrow into holes and run away from me.
 But I will say, don't do it (claps) don't do it.
 Come back to the light.
 Don't hide yourself in the shadow of self-defeat and misery.
 Come back (claps) to the light, come back to the light of day.
 See what is good in yourself and others, reach for the light,
 Reach for the warmth, connection is all that we have:
 Energy.
 You can waste lots of energy by folding onto yourself like that.*

*There is no use—instead create, and love.
Spread light, and warmth,
You can be a Sun King.*

Protagonist:

I hear you. I can recognize when I'm folding in on myself. When I'm hiding in shadows and in burrows. Driving myself insane with shadow thoughts and questions. Can I just be honest with everyone? Can I just communicate love and caring? Can I admit to my mistakes, be honest and move on? Can I communicate with Mary, and Patricia, and Linda, and everyone in my life that I'm feeling something incomplete with—clear it, and move on with strength, and love, honesty and joy. Can I do that? Hmmm.
(laughs) Question: how do I clear with this shadow of comparison: Islam, Christianity, Barbara, Dennis... All these people and approaches that I compare myself with, life approaches, philosophical approaches, how do I clear that, Sun King?

Sun King:

*Life on earth is hard.
It can feel like a pile of ants and bugs,
Crawling on top of one another
To reach the summit.
Don't buy into such nonsense.
A single mite can walk out into the sun,
Absorb my light and heat,
And fill with joy and pleasure of being alive!
Do not buy into the rat race, the rat heap,
The clawing, the striving.
Let GO!
There are a million billion billion trillion creatures
On this small planet and each has a flame,*

*From the sun, from the stars.
 Each flame is a torch, and each torch is a star, and
 Each star is exploding with LIFE!
 Create, creativity, passion, excitement,
 Building and loving
 Contributing, lifting ALL UP!
 Do not worry, do not compare.
 To compare is fear—
 (Growing quieter:)
 And fear is shadow
 And the shadows will pull you down.
 Don't let them.*

Protagonist: I want to bring back this guy at the beginning. And I want to say to this guy: I love you. I love you and appreciate you. And all your violence. Your impulses to kill. I love you. I'm so glad that you're alive, I'm so glad that you're in me. I embrace you (*claps*) man to man. (*Embraces the Woodsmen, hard.*) UH! To feel strength and strength. YES BROTHER! (*Claps his back, hard.*) UH! YES!

Woodsmen: Thank you brother for recognizing me! Thank you brother for recognizing *me*. I see that you are a man. I may not understand your life but I see you can stand up and be a man. Give me your hand. CUT IT! (*Cuts with knife.*)

Protagonist: AAH!! GOD THAT hurts. OK, great. (*Clapping hands several times.*) Thank you. Mm. Thank you so much. Thank you so much. I will keep this wound to remember you by. I want you to stay with me. I'm gonna cut your hand too. (*Does it.*)

Woodsman: BUH—DUH!! All right! Hand to hand! Let's do it—blood brothers.
(*They clasp cut hands.*)

Protagonist: Here is to loving and acknowledging our strength, our inner warrior, the capacity for violence and killing, putting it to good use, harnessing this passion in our lives. Yes: harnessing this passion in my life. This passion to kill. This passion to love. All the passions—harnessing them, to be happy, to be passionate, to love my family, to love everyone. Thank you. Thank you. Mmmm.

Excerpts from the Sharing Process

Psoloist: When I played the Woodsman, it felt analogous to meditation. What if this sense in meditation of being alone was extended to all of life? If I were just alone—really alone—in nature, what would I be like? What would I have to be, or become? Something about that character is so freeing—no expectations of anyone else on him, can live completely authentically. And I just so reveled in that. Interesting when he became a kind of critic for me, the protagonist.

It felt very odd to reverse roles and become me. Whenever I became me and spoke in my voice I kept thinking, I'm so in my head, effeminate, speaking like an intellectual. It's a little bit like when black comedians do an impression of a white guy, that's how I felt when I was becoming present-day Walter compared to the Woodsman. I felt like this intellectualized person justifying himself and it felt quite hollow. Sometimes I got some good points in—as it went on I felt less hollow. But there was definitely a feeling of “who is the protagonist here?” If I'm feeling more “real” as the mountain man in the shack, is he really the protagonist and present day Walter is an apparition...?

This loops to the end of the psolodrama when they become blood brothers. I merged with him, basically—loving him and taking in all the good aspects of who he is. I love that ending, integrating this split off part, this very masculine self. A masculine self who is using anger in a constructive way rather than the crappy ways it can leak out on a daily or weekly basis in my life. Little petty family frustrations or work frustrations. Anger leaks out, in an uncomfortable, indirect way—not a helpful way.

Whereas the Woodsman can take and channel his aggression and strength into killing, for food. Something about it seems so right on and clean. His world is kill or be killed. And so, any anger he's got is just immediately channeled into appropriate aggression, violence, killing, and in his reality that's great.

So, one thing I'm taking from that is, if I'm merging with him: can I find appropriate channels/outlets for my strength, masculinity, aggression? One answer is drama therapy: I end up playing these kinds of characters—a drug-addled oversexed musician, this Woodsman, a pig in the mud—many different characters that represent all of these masculine parts—that in modern life have to be heavily edited out, it feels, or it seems. I have fewer outlets than most because, for whatever reason, I'm not out there engaging in sports. I'm not working that out on the basketball court or paddling on a river. Parenthetically, it would be very helpful to do more sports, so I can be in better shape and channel some of that good strength, aggression, and energy into those activities.

Witness: I wanted to bring up this other character of the Sun King—his singing, shedding light and heat everywhere with reason and love, all the good things that were emanating from him. It was quite a remarkable dialogue, when you asked the Sun King,

how do you deal with these patterns in your life. It seems you got a pretty good answer, which is to recognize these as shadows—shadow states—and don't indulge in them but come out of the shadow. This image of competition on earth and all these bugs piled up in a heap to reach the top, and realizing how ridiculous that is, that a bug can just crawl out onto the dirt, and be in the sun, and feel the joy.

Psoloist: With the Sun King, there's something about confronting a character who is just good. In the face of that much goodness, light, strength—a very different kind of strength, it's so interesting to hold him up next to the Woodsman. They are two faces of male strength—the Sun King saying “we can be a force for goodness” and the mountain man going “Fuck you all! I love my violence and aggression.” I can get something out of each of those. There was a beautiful sequence with the Sun King where I could reflect on “oh, where am I out of whack?” with various people in my life and can I clean that up. Because in the face of this much light and love there's no room for dilly-dallying and squirming around in the shadows—can I just say what's on my mind and move on. Open, honest communication, even by email.

Commentary

In this as in all psolodramas, the psoloist enters empty with no idea of what is to come. The subject of the psolodrama arises organically from the preliminaries: authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream. What emerges in these phases, seemingly haphazardly, merges into the forming psolodrama. During this process of emergence and merging, the psoloist is unsure of where he is going. As roles emerge and begin to speak, the psoloist is following the thread of what is emerging, doing his best to stay open to each unfolding role, while listening for inner impulse—his inner

desire to respond, change, move, find a new role, shift to a new scene, etc. The psoloist is “being moved” in the authentic movement sense, while fulfilling his “act hunger” in the psychodramatic sense.

We also see in this example something else common to psolodrama in general, the emergence of archetypal roles—here exemplified by the Woodsman and the Sun King. Such roles can be seen as unacknowledged parts of the self.

The Woodsman character develops from the psoloist’s physical position—lying on his back—as well as the sensation of feeling the rough stubble of his own unshaven face. The Woodsman embodies a masculinity the psoloist cannot express in his daily life: reveling in aloneness, independence, hunting and killing, being close to nature, etc. Although initially the protagonist (p3), in dialogue with the present-day Walter (p1) the Woodsman becomes an auxiliary ego role, specifically, the antagonist, in this case a kind of inner critic.

When this inner critic pushes the protagonist to defend himself, the psoloist realizes that there is another voice inside and becomes the double, who can express the inner truths of depression, unhappiness, self-loathing, and hopelessness. Seeing this makes the protagonist seek out the director for advice, asking, “Director is this really true?”

The role of the director is to return the psoloist to action, ideally as rapidly as possible. Here, he does so by posing a question: “If you could have anyone enter your psolodrama right now, who would it be?” In that moment, the psoloist is facing toward the windows, the brightest source of light in the room. It is possible that the bright light in his eyes causes him to say “the sun” aloud; what causes him to add “king” is a mystery.

The Sun King moves in a slow and stately way, singing everything he says. Part of the power of psolodrama is that it is a physical and vocal form—the psoloist is not just speaking about the role, he is *becoming* the role; changing his physical state and expressing with his voice is causing him to feel and think in new ways. As he develops the role of Sun King, it is as if the psoloist is tapping into a higher wisdom, accessing his most wise, experienced, and generous self, or something beyond his “self.”

In the end, inspired by his interaction with the Sun King, the psoloist is moved to see the Woodsman again, to reclaim that split off, masculine part of himself, embracing and joining him as a brother. As is often the case in psolodrama, there is a progression from confronting a shadow figure, to becoming it—and thereby empathizing with it—and finally integrating it: a movement from anger or fear to greater understanding, openness, and ultimately, lovingkindness or *metta*.

Psolodrama Example #2: The Knife of Suffering and the Elfin Queen

(Authentic movement: the psoloist stands. Her body begins to shake.)

(Shared vipassana:)

Protagonist (p1): I drop down into myself.

(Collapsing toward the floor.)

This is not a happy place. I’m falling!

Slipping and sliding. Dark, spiraling tube. Pulled down—feet first.

(She grabs for the sides.)

I can't catch hold of anything!

Expelled out. Light. Air.

I'm naked. Vulnerable. Light hurts my eyes.

(Psolodrama. She crawls to a corner and cowers there.)

I don't want to be a grown up!

Fear.

A knife plunges into my center.

(She struggles to pull it out. With both hands and great effort, she extracts it.)

Knife (aux):

I am the knife of suffering!

I am giant. Like a sword, powerful.

But I am nothing without my victim.

(The knife begins to wither, its voice getting smaller.)

I'm shrinking.

Elfin Queen (p3): *(Standing, tall.)*

I am the elfin queen. I wear a gown. I am young, adolescent.

I am in a box. Open at the front. I minister to my subjects.

Where are my subjects?

Knife: *(small, a supplicant)*

My queen...please. Please take me back.

Elfin Queen: *(pauses)*

I don't want to return to the enmeshed relationship we had, Knife of Suffering.

But I also realize I cannot banish you.

Knife: *(cutting)*

I will pry you out of that box!

(The Queen emerges.)

Elfin Queen: I am older now, a woman. I am regal.

I feel the breezes, the air on my skin.

I am autonomous.

Knife, you can stay. I pulled you out of my heart the way Arthur pulled Excalibur from the stone. I cannot turn my back on you.

You can be my companion. Like a pet.

(The Knife becomes a Monkey.)

Monkey (aux): Ee-ee-ee!

(The Elfin Queen reaches down with her right hand and takes the monkey's hand.)

Elfin Queen: Energy tingling in my hand.

(She lets the monkey go.)

Energy rising up arm. Travelling across shoulders. Down to left hand.

(She brings her hands together.)

Ball of energy.

(She holds it, and then absorbs it into her belly.)

Excerpts from the Sharing Process

Psoloist: The initial slide and expulsion felt like birth. The Knife of Suffering felt to me like a victim stance I'm stepping away from, or growing out of. I noticed there

were stages: first, as the adolescent Elfin Queen, I was inside a box, unable to take my own power. Then, as an adult, I broke out of the box, able to take action. I became an adult queen, growing into authority and self-will. I realized that to turn my back on the Knife of Suffering would be to turn my back on part of myself—perhaps my own vulnerability. Whatever it is, better to befriend it, especially since it doesn't appear to have the power it once had.

It strikes me that the young elfin queen's box is that of innocence, and only suffering will allow her to grow up—will let her emerge as an adult. So the knife cuts her out of the box.

Commentary

The psoloist closes her eyes and begins to follow her body. Immediately, there is energy there, expressed as shaking. Progressing to shared vipassana, the psoloist speaks aloud what she is noticing: "I drop down into myself." This simultaneously describes a physical movement (the dropping down), a sensation (feeling the physical movement), an emotion or feeling (which could be relaxing, focusing in on her core/center, the dantian/hara), and an image, of going inside oneself.

As she collapses to the floor, the image transforms and takes on an emotional tone: "This is not a happy place. I'm falling!" The beginning of a psolodrama often parallels the start of a shamanic journey: the psoloist goes through a transition in which she leaves behind her normal day-to-day identity and reality, and enters a new role or state—the equivalent of the shamanic journeyer's entrance to the earth. As the psoloist focuses inward, opening to sensations, emotions, and inner imagery, entering this new state, present-day thoughts, cares, and worries fall away. In this psolodrama, the opening

image also echoes Alice's passage in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; an uncontrollable fall that opens the psoloist to a new reality. As the image develops—"slipping and sliding," "dark, spiraling tube," "pulled down—feet first," "expelled out, light, air," "I'm naked, vulnerable, light hurts my eyes"—it becomes a picture of birth, from the baby's viewpoint.

The psoloist improvises with the feeling of being a newborn, crawling into a corner to escape the vulnerability and light, and expresses a core theme of the emerging psolodrama: "I don't want to be a grown up!" Throughout the psolodrama, the psoloist stays open to her impulse to change and evolve in this protagonist role (later called the Elfin Queen), portraying her as "young, adolescent," and later as "older...a woman...regal." This attitude of openness—to impulse, to change, and specifically to allowing a role to learn, evolve, and grow over the course of a drama—is central to psolodrama.

It is also through openness to impulse that an auxiliary ego is introduced. The psoloist first feels fear of growing up, a fear which she embodies in the form of a knife plunging into her center. As she pulls the knife out, she *becomes* the knife, speaking as it. The knife announces its own name: "I am the knife of suffering!" As in classic psychodrama, role reversal is one of the most potent techniques in psolodrama. In this example, by reversing roles and becoming the knife, the psoloist opens up to learning about her suffering and empathizing with it. In addition, by embodying the suffering as a role (rather than just talking about it), she can dialogue with it and by doing so explore her changing relationship with it over time.

Because psolodrama is based in authentic movement, there is a physical and energetic self-awareness that is a very strong part of the process. The psoloist may frequently pause, as she allows herself to feel what is happening in her body. Playing a role in psolodrama can sometimes be less a verbal experience, or plot-driven experience, than a visceral sensing of energy and emotion. It is through her body that the psoloist feels a satisfying completion to this drama, allowing the energy from the auxiliary (the knife, now transformed into a monkey) to travel through her body, becoming a ball of energy that she absorbs into her belly. The arc of a psolodrama often has a physical or emotional logic that can transcend rational explanation. Here the final moment echoes the initial stab of fear by the knife into her center; what was previously suffering has been transformed into a feeling of completion or wholeness that the psoloist experiences viscerally.

Psolodrama Example #3: The Family Business

(Authentic movement: the psoloist sits on the floor and begins to lean to one side. He lies on the floor, then begins to roll from one side to the other, continuously moving.)

(Shared vipassana:)

Protagonist (p1): Tingling fingers. Breath. Relief. Move. Sit too fucking much.

(Psolodrama:)

Am I really an emotional whore? Do I enjoy being an emotional whore?

Lewd images. Clients crawling up my staircase to crawl into my vagina, to crawl into me. How many can I fit in there? Open legs. Come in—in through my vagina—into my heart—they take up residence there and sit there. Come into my womb room. Leave pointy objects outside. It's delicate in here. Come sit in my womb room and grow and I'll just be here. I want to give birth to all these fucking clients with their fucking umbilical cords in me!

Audience: You're so fucking passive! You really just sit there? C'mon, give me a break! Where's the father—where's Dad?

(walking as an old man, slightly bent over)

Dad (aux): I'm an old man. Dad is old. Dad falls down and breaks ribs. Walks with walker. Dad is clear consciousness, totally clear. And he's dying. I am Dad. My knees hurt and I can't sleep. I see clearly and I can't walk. I need an oxygen tank to breathe...my diaphragm doesn't work...

Audience: What do you have to say about all these clients sitting in his womb? About him trying to save the world? Some have seen him 15 years, some 20!

Protagonist: They're just not ready. The soul just takes a long time to grow...

Audience: Where is Dad in all this? What would he say?

Dad: If that's how you want to spend your time, OK. It's not a bad use of your time... Does it change or save the world? Clearly you've helped some people. Could be good, could be bad, I don't know...

The important thing is, did you do it beautifully? Was it elegant?
Did it sing?

It's the wrong question "did it save the world?" Fuck that question!

Protagonist: Finally someone is making some sense around here!

Dad: I'm not a guru. I'm 87. I may not be around much longer. But that's the question: Is it beautiful?

(To himself:) Fucking knees and walker. But without it I can't balance. So I need the walker. It will all go on the junk heap soon.

A question for the Buddha: what happens to your energy when you die? When your freakin' knees don't work anymore. When you're back in the ground. When you're shit!

Protagonist: I don't know the answer to that question. All I know is that people come up the stairs, to this womb. They come up the stairs with a bag of shit. And I say "what are you going to do about that shit?"

Client (aux): That's why I'm here! For you to tell me!

- Protagonist:** Let's take it out and look at it. Nice shit. Rotting, old socks, women's panties.
- Client:** I'm ashamed of my bag of shit. I made my boyfriend promise to throw it in the dumpster if I die. Look at this! Handcuffs, a whip, letters from my high-school teacher— yeah that's right, the one that I gave blow jobs to. My cooker from when I used to shoot up. And my dildo collection. Why the fuck did I bring it here to show you! What the fuck do you know about pain! You asshole—I never should have brought this stuff here. Why don't you take one of those dildos and stick it up your ass!
- Dad:** Rough guy, huh? Think you got to him? Think you connected? Did you find something beautiful there?
- Protagonist:** It took him more than 10 years to bring that bag in. I thought he was just depressed. And he was a hot shot in the financial district. Conclusion: I don't know shit. In a more humble way: I really don't know...
- Dad:** So how many years have you spent doing this?
- Protagonist:** 30 years.
- Dad:** You're still wet behind the ears. I did it for 65. Now I'm dying. So you entered the family business. Maybe it's deep and profound... Maybe it's just the most interesting way to pass your time...
- I've got a train to catch. Don't know if I'm coming back. Have a nice ride. It's been a nice ride with you.

Now, the question for me is, was it beautiful? Was this life beautiful? Was it a beautiful gesture? Sometimes it was, and sometimes it wasn't. Sometimes I was really awake in it, and sometimes not. Sometimes it was really clear and sometimes it was muddy as shit.

(To protagonist:) Did you have a good time? Being a womb for people?

I've got a train to catch. See you. Enjoy. I don't know what the next stop is on this train. Thank you for being my son this time around...

Conductor (aux): Tooooot! Tooooot! All aboard! Yeah you, with the walker and oxygen tank. We're going to the great beyond.

Dad: Goodbye.

Commentary

Early in this psolodrama, the soloist externalizes the critic and turns it into a role, the audience. The audience in psolodrama can be any voice observing the drama and commenting on it—it can also be a supportive voice. In this case, the psoloist uses the stance of the audience to get the critical voice out of his head and into the drama, allowing him to move beyond the critic and let the story emerge. As is often the case with the audience, and any auxiliary ego role, by allowing it to speak it provides the impetus for action, helping the psoloist take the next step in his drama. In this case, the audience/critic repeatedly asks for the father—“Where is Dad in all this?” This helps the

psoloist break out of monologue as protagonist and explore different points of view, including those of his father and of a client.

Final Thoughts

As we have seen in these examples, there are some features common to most psolodramas: the easy, natural mixing of fantasy and reality; the exploration of a core theme or problem; and the embodiment of an emotional state through imagery, role, and story.

Once someone is trained in psolodrama, the practice feels as natural as moving authentically. Entering a psolodrama can be like entering a warm, comfortable pool, where everything flows simply and intuitively.

As we shall see in the next chapter, there are a few sticking points that can hinder those new to the practice. With training and coaching, however, obstacles can be overcome, leading to an immensely satisfying and enriching practice.

Troubleshooting Psolodrama

showing their backs
then their fronts
falling maple leaves

— *Ryokan*

There is no “right way” to do psolodrama—everyone who tries the practice seems to find their own path. Those experienced in meditation, authentic movement, improvisation, psychodrama, etc., tend to use that experience as their guide, initially. Individuals also bring different habits and personal patterns into the practice.

In teaching psolodrama to many different kinds of people, I have found that there are certain common pitfalls to watch out for, particularly early in the practice. These should not be seen as absolute prohibitions, but rather little traps or habits that a beginning psoloist may tend to fall into. Ideally, they point to areas for experimentation and self-discovery.

Psolodrama Traps and Habits

- **Keeping it Inside:** doing a lot of thinking/feeling, but not much speaking, moving, or expressing
- **Monologuing:** speaking only as the protagonist; storytelling or free-associating as opposed to enacting
- **Getting Stuck:** feeling confused or lost, trapped in repeated patterns, or just not present
- **Feeling Unsafe:** not trusting the witness, or feeling overwhelmed by the content of the drama
- **Working from the Head, Not the Gut:** planning the psolodrama in advance; making choices from the head; intellectualizing rather than being in action; focusing on surface issues
- **Being Exclusively Concrete:** working only with real-life roles and day-to-day problems; avoiding metaphors, images, fantasies, archetypal roles, and existential issues
- **Randomly Improvising:** playing out a wide range of creative roles and stories without relating them to one's own life or to deeper emotional meaning
- **Worrying about the Witness:** censoring oneself to "look good" in front of the witness; performing/entertaining to not bore them
- **Judging Oneself or the Process:** criticizing oneself or having aversion to one's own psolodrama

Keeping It Inside

When I teach psolodrama for the first time to a group of people, and walk around the room watching the pairs (psoloists and witnesses) work, I often see several psoloists moving very little and/or being silent. There is nothing wrong with this: that person may be having a very deep, rich, moving experience. On the other hand, the psoloist who hardly moves or speaks will often report afterward that their psolodrama was basically

centered on one feeling, problem, or role, and that it did not change much during the process.

To experience the power of the psolodrama form fully, it is important to move, make sound, speak, and express. This is not about communicating to the witness: the rule is that the witness will get what she gets (and all can be discussed afterward in the sharing process). The trap to avoid is making the psolodrama experience purely internal—to get caught in repeated patterns of thinking and feeling, without taking advantage of the means to express them and move on to what is next, to discover something new.

By letting movement arise from sensations and feelings in the body (via authentic movement), by speaking one's thoughts and feelings aloud (in shared vipassana), by entering and embodying different roles (in the role stream), by exploring interactions between roles (in scene stream), and by cooking the emerging conflict/themes/issues (in the psolodrama itself), all of the things the psoloist tends to keep inside—including her deepest feelings, desires, fears, aspirations, unlived roles, etc.—are given a chance to express themselves, to be seen and heard, opening the way for catharsis, insight, and change.

Of course, not all psolodramas look—or sound—the same: a quiet psolodrama can still be profoundly moving. One friend of mine has a longing to be present to nature; I recall a psolodrama in which he stood in silence before a rocky cliff-face in the Grand Canyon, embracing the earth. Every now and then he reversed roles to become the rocky cliff and get in touch with how it might feel. Working in almost complete silence, he was moved to tears.

Monologuing

Another pitfall among new practitioners is to use psolodrama as an opportunity to deliver a monologue. The psoloist is sometimes an actor, improviser, or just an extroverted person who is experienced in delivering (sometimes quite entertainingly) monologues or stories about his life. There is nothing wrong with a monologue—it can be a useful, valid, and sometimes enlightening form of self-expression and exploration—but it is not a psolodrama.

In most cases, for psolodrama to work well, it needs to be a drama: there must be some kind of conflict or interaction between two or more forces—usually the protagonist and an auxiliary ego. The drama is not conveyed as a story as it would be in a monologue; it is played out, live, as it would be in real life, or onstage in a play, using the movement, sound, and language appropriate to each role (the difference in psolodrama is that the psoloist usually has his eyes closed). What is distinct from a monologue is that the psoloist actually shifts his voice and body to *become* the different roles—rather than just narrating or talking *about* the roles. A common sign of monologuing is the psoloist who is either not moving or just moving in his typical way, not physically entering distinct roles.

Psolodrama gets much of its power from psychodramatic role reversal—the psoloist becoming “the other,” not only speaking as but embodying the other role. Perhaps the main effect of this is empathy: if the psoloist is talking about his mother, it is invariably more powerful for him to become his mother, speak *as* his mother, and by doing so begin to empathize with her, enter her world, her feelings. Role reversal also allows the psoloist to switch back into the protagonist role again and respond to his

mother. It is through this process of becoming, empathizing, and interacting that something unexpected can happen. But if the psoloist remains in monologue—talking *about* his mother, complaining about her—he tends to reach the same conclusions as always, reinforcing old patterns.

New roles can arise in psolodrama a few different ways. The psoloist may listen to and follow the body as it enters a new role spontaneously (as in role stream). He may imagine he is interacting with someone or something and then reverse into that other role. Or he may, in the course of speaking, mention another role (e.g., notice he’s complaining about his mother), and then decide to stop monologuing and become the other role.

By becoming another role, letting it move and speak, the psoloist can learn what its messages are for him. Through interaction, dialogue, and conflict he may come to a new understanding of what that role means in his life.

Although taking on a role, reversing roles, and having roles dialogue and interact are some of the most powerful tools in psolodrama, there are exceptions, occasions when a monologue may be an equally powerful choice:

Monologuing as Auxiliary or Protagonist (P3): Exploring a New Role

Many times I’ve begun my progression into psolodrama, and discovered through the role stream a character so fascinating or powerful, that my intuition tells me to stick with that role, amplify it, and speak as it. One time it was a rotting tree trunk. Another time it was a “mud monster.” Or it could be a P3 protagonist—one time I became an aging rock star walking around New York City.

Now and then, doing this, I find there is no need to reverse roles—the experience of playing that role is so rich or moving, the wisdom of that role so valuable, there is no

need to do anything else. On other occasions, the protagonist (P1) enters the scene at the very end, to have a brief interaction with that role, sometimes just to honor and thank them for their wisdom—to acknowledge the value of that role in my life.

Monologuing as Protagonist or Double: Integrating Information or Feelings

A monologue can often be an important part of a psolodrama. For example, the protagonist may experience a strong conflict with an auxiliary ego, and come to some new resolution, a place that not only feels new but somewhat unclear or unsettled. He dialogues with the director, who asks “How do you feel right now?” The answer may be more than a sentence or two: it may be a monologue, exploring all of his feelings in that moment, digging more deeply into the meaning of what has just happened. Sometimes the double is invited to speak, if the protagonist cannot yet express all of the feelings for himself. In this way, the psoloist can use a monologue as a tool much like a psychodrama director would, to help express the range of feelings he is experiencing.

Getting Stuck

Even those experienced with psolodrama can get stuck. The pitfall is not knowing how (or not really trying different ways) to get unstuck.

Being stuck can happen in several different ways:

Feeling confused/lost—unclear about the meaning of the psolodrama so far and how it relates to one’s own life. The psolodrama may feel random, chaotic, dream-like, or nonsensical.

Feeling trapped in one's issue/problem—e.g., repeating the same thing over and over; feeling depressed or frustrated.

Feeling not present—disconnected from the psolodrama itself, possibly distracted, drowsy, uncomfortable, or embarrassed/shy—or just feeling like “I don't want to do this!” (also known as resistance).

From a drama therapy/psychotherapy perspective, all of these ways of getting stuck (and, in fact, most of the pitfalls discussed in this chapter) are defenses used by the psyche to avoid dealing with a core issue—which the self may find too threatening to confront honestly and explore. Usually, by working slowly, gently, patiently, and consistently—and by using the tools psolodrama provides—almost any personal issue or pattern can be explored. (The exception: memories that are so traumatic, or patterns of thought or behavior that are so disturbing, that professional intervention is called for. For this reason, psolodrama is not recommended for those suffering serious trauma, depression, anxiety, or other mental illness or disorder.)

When stuck in these ways, the psoloist basically has three choices: To persist in his current feeling and behavior until the time is up, usually resulting in a dissatisfying experience; to break out and end the psolodrama prematurely, also usually dissatisfying (unless the psolodrama has been so emotionally upsetting that there is a real need to end it); or to take skillful action—clearly the preferred option! But what does skillful action look like when one is stuck in psolodrama?

First comes the **awareness—I am stuck!**

Next comes the ability to **speak this aloud**: “I’m stuck. Boy, am I stuck!!”

Then there is a **choice**:

To work with different roles, or

To return to the body and to movement.

Working with Different Roles

Taking the first path, it is useful to see if some of the psychodramatic roles, particularly the double or director, can help. A skillful psoloist can dialogue with the director (or monologue as the double) to dig deeper into the truth of what’s happening right now, as in the following example:

Protagonist (p1): I am really stuck. I have no idea what I’m doing right now.
Hmmm...OK, I’ll ask the Director. Director, what should I do?

(The psoloist reverses roles—shifting his body to enter the role of director—and then takes a moment to breathe, settle, and feel that role fully...)

Director: (pause)...Well, how do you actually feel right now?

(As the dialogue continues, the psoloist repeatedly shifts his physical stance to become the roles of protagonist and director.)

Protagonist: I feel stuck. I began this psolodrama and no roles are coming to me. I feel blank and uncomfortable. This just isn't working.

Director: Any other feelings?

Protagonist: (pausing)...yes...I feel sad.

Director: About...?

Protagonist: (long pause)...hmmm...I don't really want to say this...I'm sad about my mother's illness.

Director: OK...why don't you become your mother?

Protagonist: Ugccch!...I was afraid you'd say that.....OK, here goes...

(The psoloist slowly shifts to a new position, beginning to feel what it feels like to be his mother. He moans softly in pain.)

Mother (aux): Ohhh....I cannot take this pain anymore.

Protagonist (p2): Mom, I'm trying to help you...

By dialoguing with the director, and exploring the deeper truth about one's feelings, it is possible to break free from a stuck place and return to action. The scene that follows may be difficult and painful, possibly leading to tears—but also to new insights

into the psoloist's assumptions and habits concerning his relationship with his mother, and perhaps greater awareness of his feelings toward illness and the dying process.

Returning to the Body and to Movement

Another avenue for getting unstuck—and an important one to use if talking is not helping—is to let the problem go (as much as possible), and simply return to an awareness of the body, and to authentic movement.

Psolodrama is based in *vipassana* meditation and authentic movement—two practices that can be healing and transformative in themselves. There is nothing wrong with the psoloist getting out on the floor and discovering in the process that what he really needs to do is simply, silently move—or even to be perfectly still and meditate. Psolodrama is not a performance; the psoloist's time is for himself alone, not to entertain the witness. Afterward, the psoloist can discuss what came up in his movement or meditation.

Often, if the psoloist can fully relax into stillness or movement, letting go of any need to make something happen, he will be surprised to find an image arise out of nowhere, leading him quite naturally to a character, scene, or story. Or he may feel moved to speak aloud, reentering shared *vipassana*. Or he may, through the movement, discover a role/character and enter role stream and then scene stream.

Ultimately, there are no rules in psolodrama: the psoloist may find that his shared *vipassana* *is* his psolodrama—that that form gives him maximum freedom to express and explore.

Finally, when really stuck, the psoloist can always turn to the witness and ask for her coaching. Sometimes an outside eye can see an opportunity (e.g. for entering a role,

or putting an idea into action) that the psoloist has completely missed (see the subsequent chapter, “Coaching Psolodrama”).

Feeling Unsafe

Now and then when doing psolodrama, the psoloist may find himself censoring what he is doing or shutting down, noticing that for some reason he does not feel safe in the process.

Feeling Unsafe with One’s Witness

Sometimes this is due to his feelings about the witness. If he is working with a new witness, someone he does not know well, it may be natural for him to do some amount of censoring—he does not yet know how they will react to his psolodrama. In other cases, he may be aware that a witness is uncomfortable with certain kinds of content or certain topics (e.g., of a violent or sexual nature).

One needs to trust a witness and building trust takes time. A skillful witness can accelerate this process of trust-building. (See the chapters “Witnessing Psolodrama” and “The Psolodrama Sharing Process.”)

In addition, the psoloist will tend to find, over time, that he naturally gravitates toward peers who are unafraid to witness or confront in their own psolodramas a very wide range of difficult, existential human issues—and who bring a nonjudgmental, open attitude toward witnessing.

Feeling Unsafe in the Drama Itself

It is also possible to feel unsafe in the psolodrama due to the nature of the material arising. The psoloist may find herself (as the protagonist), in a scene dialoguing with an auxiliary ego she does not feel safe talking with—e.g., an abusive person from her past, an estranged family member, or even a scary fantasy character (a serial killer, monster, demon, witch, etc.). She may feel drawn to reenact a traumatic memory, but not feel safe enough to do so. Or the situation itself may make her feel unsafe: perhaps the story that is unfolding feels too violent, or sexual, or counter to her nature in some way.

There are several approaches to avoid getting stuck or shut down in these situations. The psoloist can, of course, stop her psolodrama at any time—she is in complete control. But she can also try the following:

Bring in the double, a role that can speak what she is really feeling/thinking but does not wish to say in this conversation. The double can monologue: “What I am *really* feeling right now is...” The double can also confront a scary auxiliary in a way the protagonist may not feel empowered to—e.g. to tell that abusive person “I HATE you!”

Bring in the director to support and guide her through the interaction. Sometimes just talking about a difficult scene can help the psoloist warm up to entering and enacting the scene.

Transform the situation. Alone, or with the help of the director, the psoloist can change the scenario in some way that would make it feel safer to enact, or safer to speak her truth. For example, she can imagine she’s watching the scene via streaming video from the other side of the planet. She can imagine the monster is in a cage, or is only two inches tall. She can imagine speaking to her ideal parent, rather than her actual, abusive

parent. Or she could imagine bringing another character into the scene to be her ally and help deal with the situation.

Return to mindful stillness or to movement. The psoloist can take a moment to return to stillness, with her eyes closed, returning to awareness of the breath and the body. Or, she can return to authentic movement, moving in silence or with sound. When she feels relaxed and centered enough, she can explore what happens if she returns to the uncomfortable scene. She can pause and get grounded as many times as she likes (similar to taking a vertical moment, a technique from Storytelling).

Let it go! The psoloist can remember that this is *her* psolodrama—she does not have to do anything she does not want to do. She can end the interaction that feels unsafe, go back into movement, and discover a new role and/or scene. She can also end her psolodrama at any time—just because the time limit is, say, 20 minutes, does not mean she needs to fill that time. After her psolodrama is over, she can share with her witness what she might have said if she had felt safe enough.

Working from the Head, Not the Gut

This is a significant trap in learning and practicing psolodrama, especially for those of us who have a tendency toward intellectualization, over-thinking, or advance planning.

Psolodrama is designed to be mysterious—the psoloist enters empty, letting go of present issues or plans, to discover the images, roles, and messages arising from his body, his gut, and his deeper emotions. Psolodrama is also designed to be surprising—the psoloist does not know what he will encounter on this journey. It is the mystery and

surprise of psolodrama that gives it much of its power. Entering empty is different from working with a therapist and saying “I’d like to talk about X today,” or working with a psychodramatist and saying “I’d think I’d like to do a psychodrama about Y.”

In psolodrama—as in its root practices *vipassana* meditation and authentic movement—the psoloist truly lets go of his agenda, creating space for something to emerge from his depths, from the depths of this moment. Essential to this approach is being present. From the beginning the psoloist releases into authentic movement, being present to the body and all the senses. If he is caught up in thoughts—“Why did my brother write me such an angry e-mail?”—he must notice he is doing that and come back to the body. True, his brother’s angry e-mail may pop up in his psolodrama later, but at this stage he needs to let day-to-day concerns go, to listen more deeply to what his body needs.

When he really does this, beginning to follow his body and not his mind, an almost alchemical change happens. He shifts from his day-to-day neurotic self (obsessively worrying, comparing, seeking approval, etc.) to a sudden experience of unity: mind, body, and intention all aligned; mind relaxed and open as it focuses on the tiniest physical sensation (tension in right thigh muscle, feeling of cheek on carpet); body relaxed as it is freed to follow its every impulse.

As he continues the process, the shared *vipassana* practice reinforces this present state, encouraging him to speak aloud what he is noticing. If distracting thoughts continue to intrude, by speaking them aloud he is able to “clear” them, and return to his body.

Continuing with authentic movement, shared *vipassana*, role stream, and scene stream, by staying very present he begins to notice other things besides bodily sensations:

emotions, images, roles, and scenes begin to arise from his movement. From there it is usually a simple step to enter the psolodrama itself.

However, for those new to the process, it can be very easy to overthink all of this, to not trust the messages of the body. There are several traps of this nature that can arise during the process:

Advance Planning

One friend of mine likes to call this “applied psolodrama”—choosing a topic in advance to do one’s psolodrama about, e.g. “I think I’ll do a psolodrama about my marriage today.” There is nothing wrong with this idea—one can certainly choose any topic to do a role-play, improvisation, or psychodrama about, and it can be a very rich and useful experience. But it is not really psolodrama. Here’s why:

Psolodrama is based in authentic movement, based in the wisdom of the body, the gut, the dantian or hara—and the messages, feelings, imagery, and roles stored there. If the psoloist decides in advance what to do her psolodrama about, she disables her ability to listen fully and deeply to what she *really* needs—what her conscious/rational mind may not be aware of. Choosing a topic in advance for one’s psolodrama is like choosing a topic in advance for one’s authentic movement.

There are times when a psoloist may meet with her partner to do psolodrama, and it is clear to one or both of them that there is something “up,” something really bugging her that she’d love to talk about or have a way to deal with. However, rather than plan the psolodrama in advance, it usually works best to share this issue in the check-in with her partner—to do some clearing—and to say “So, this issue may come up in some way in my psolodrama—we’ll see what happens!” In this way she is reminding herself to let go

and enter empty. If the issue is really important, it will find its own way into the process without her having to make a decision about that up front, and without any conscious intervention during the psolodrama.

Often when present-day issues do arise in psolodrama, they do so in dream-like metaphors and archetypal roles—the full implications of which the psoloist may not understand until she shares with her witness afterward. These metaphors and roles can point to new ways of seeing her problem, and thus shift her perspective completely. Such insights might not be available if she tried to tackle the issues directly with her rational mind.

Making Choices from the Head

One of the clearest examples of this pitfall can be seen when observing someone do the role stream exercise.

Normally, in the role stream, the psoloist begins with authentic movement, following the body, and a role/character arises from the flow of movement and sound spontaneously. The psoloist discovers what the body is already doing, and begins to focus or amplify that role as it emerges.

However, those new to the practice often do the following: the psoloist is moving authentically, and then suddenly changes his body position completely, and says: “now I’m the captain of a ship!” There is nothing wrong with this necessarily—the psoloist may have suddenly had a strong image occur in his movement (may have smelled a salty scent in the air, or have been rocked as if by a wave) and simply followed that image. But oftentimes when asked afterward what was happening, the psoloist admits that what he was actually doing was *trying to think* of a role, and then becoming that role.

This is a common habit, conditioned not only by the psoloist's past experiences doing improv ("think of a character"), but also by a cultural tendency to look to the head for creativity rather than the body. Actors and improvisers tend to value what's clever, funny, and unique, pushing to make the audience laugh or react—one aspect of Performance Mind (discussed in Part II of this book). The psoloist learns to censor his impulses, rejecting what feels mundane, unoriginal, boring, etc.

What's missing is listening—awareness of all the channels available—rather than tuning in exclusively to the wavelength of the rational, planning mind. As Scott Kelman said: "If you have a good idea, don't do it." By instead opening to the body, and to the flow of inner imagery it sparks, the psoloist can release the pressure to perform, to be "good," to have the right answer.

When the psoloist is fully present, there is no need to "think up" anything. Feeling the coolness of the floor against the side of his foot, he may have a sensation that reminds him of touching ice, and suddenly he is in a scene in winter, a young skater who has just fallen on a frozen pond. Or the coolness of the floor may feel like smooth metal—he lets the sensation fill him and becomes a robot, his metal parts moving and sliding against one another. Or, the sensation of foot against floor may be irritating; suddenly he is a baby woken from sleep in the middle of the night, crying for his parents.

When he is fully present, inspiration and creativity cease to be scarce—but instead flower at each point of contact with the world around him, and in each moment of awareness of his physical and emotional existence within it. He can be inspired by sensations (as with foot against floor), by feelings or emotions, by inner imagery, by a

role he is already inhabiting—the flow of possibilities when he is present are truly infinite.

Through practice, the psoloist develops a supportive inner-witness, and learns to stop censoring his impulses. If a role pops up that feels like a cliché —“I feel like a snake...uh oh...I’ve been a snake a zillion times”—rather than reject it the psoloist learns to go fully into the cliché. By inhabiting the snake fully, being fully present, he is likely to discover something new, and perhaps learn something about why he became a snake in the first place, about how it relates to him and his life.

Of course, there are different moods or states one can find oneself in when doing psolodrama. Sometimes one may feel “in the flow,” aligned with the body and senses, very present, and the process feels effortless. At other times, particularly if one is tense or troubled, the process can seem less natural or feel forced. It is on these latter occasions that the psoloist may feel he is making many (most, all!) of the decisions in the psolodrama from his head—nothing is feeling natural.

Wise dharma teachers say that when a meditation is difficult, that is when one really learns and progresses on the path. The same can be said of psolodrama: doing it when it feels tough is an important part of the learning process. A psoloist learns over time that if he sticks with a psolodrama that is feeling difficult, through persevering he usually emerges with something new and unexpected. And if he looks back at the process with his witness, some of the decisions he made “from his head” turn out to have a deeper meaning and connection to the process that he did not realize at the time.

Talking Heads

As mentioned earlier, psolodrama does not work well if it is not physical. It is fine to have a dialogue between, say, the protagonist and the director role (or audience, or double), but if this dialogue becomes the main event—if the psolodrama becomes an extended scene of someone talking to himself—it may not be reaching its full potential. The power of psolodrama lies in the very physical act of taking on new roles, moving as them, and experiencing them fully.

If stuck in this mode, the psoloist can be aware of the pattern, let that dialogue go, and return to authentic movement—getting in touch with the body—and role stream, inviting new characters into the drama.

Focusing on Surface Issues

As discussed in the next section, the exclusive use of concrete, real-life, day-to-day material in one's psolodrama is often a sign of operating from the head. More on this below.

Forcing an Ending

There can be a feeling, especially at the end of the psolodrama, of wanting to tie up loose ends, acknowledge or say goodbye to the various roles, create a satisfying—if not “happy”—ending. All of this is fine, if it is an authentic expression of the psoloist's desires, as opposed to some preconceived expectation of how a story “should” work.

Being Exclusively Concrete

As I teach psolodrama to new groups, I try to communicate, even physically demonstrate, the range of what is possible in the form. At an Insight Improv intensive in Calcutta, India, during a brief demonstration, a dialogue emerged between various appliances in my “inner kitchen:”

Oven (aux): (squatting down, making a monstrous face, growling) I am the oven—filled with fire and passion. I am bursting with heat, sometimes I cannot contain myself!!

Freezer (aux): (moving to new position, standing tall like a refrigerator, placid face, rigid body, higher pitched voice) I am the freezer—cold, controlled, rational, peaceful.

(As the dialogue continues, the psoloist changes position in the space, moving between the two roles, as they talk to one another...)

Oven: How can you stand there looking so blank? Don't you know you have to FEEL? Where is your heart?!?

Freezer: No: I must stay in control. I have to lead a workshop. I have work to do. Others depend on me. I must stay cold—or my contents might spoil.

Oven: Let it ROT, I say—what's the use of all that knowledge if you cannot express yourself!!

Protagonist (p1): (shifting to a third location) Guys, guys, whoa, hold on. Clearly, I need both of you—yes, I need to have a rational mind—people here need to feel safe, to trust the facilitator. But I also need to be in touch with my feelings, my passion. Without passion none of this would be any fun!

For those new to psolodrama, there is sometimes a tendency to work only with what is concrete: keeping to real-life, actual roles, usually from the present day—as opposed to working with fantasy figures, dream roles, metaphors, archetypes—or talking household appliances.

For example, a concrete psolodrama might center on the dialogue between the psoloist and her best friend. There is nothing wrong with this—there is no guideline in psolodrama that one must work with gods, rotting tree trunks, monsters, etc. The dialogue with the best friend may be extremely useful. It may be a chance to go back and redo the past—or to role rehearse a conversation the psoloist would like to have in the future.

What Moreno referred to as surplus reality—the “extra” reality that comprises our imagination—is the fundamental ingredient of all drama, including all psychodramas and psolodramas. Stanislavski referred to it as the “magic if.” Even the dialogue with the best friend is an imagined dialogue: when the psoloist becomes her best friend, she is imagining how her friend would react, what she might say—and, most importantly, the psoloist has a chance to empathize with her friend. This is useful, powerful, and is sometimes sufficient to produce the insight and catharsis potential in psolodrama.

However, the psoloist who habitually dramatizes only her most recent challenges or relationship dramas—basically role playing whatever she “walked in the door with”—

is missing the opportunity for deeper themes to arise. If this happens repeatedly, she is likely forgetting the guideline to enter empty, and may not be letting her body lead her to discover new roles in role stream and scene stream.

If one's psolodramas are only concrete, one does not experience the full potential of the form.

The Power of Archetypal Roles

There are layers of reality that lie underneath consensual, mundane reality. These layers appear in our dreams and daydreams, we can summon them intentionally through fantasizing, and we can channel them into story, drama, and art. Viewing these added layers through the lens of metaphor, we can acknowledge their meaning, translating it back in a useful way to our own “real” life.

As Jung pointed out, these added layers are rich in stories and roles, many of which are universal—from person-to-person and culture-to-culture—what he called archetypes. Archetypes are not accidental: they occur because certain themes and energies seem to need to be expressed and explored in the course of human life.

For example, there is a part of human nature that is concerned with power, and can express itself through such roles as king and queen, warrior, god—and conversely through the roles of peasant, beggar, disabled person, etc. Each theme can be expressed through a wide range of roles—one can explore “aggression,” for example, through the roles of wolf, monster, villain, and pirate, as well as conversely through the roles of victim, lamb, maiden, meditating monk, etc.

In psolodrama, when one taps into an archetypal role—really, any fantasy role—the idea of staying faithful to portraying “real life” can be released. Once this happens,

the psyche is free to create, and the emotions are free to express themselves. The psolodrama becomes an empty stage upon which any story can be played out. And all of these stories link back metaphorically to one's own life—links that can be explored during the psolodrama or in the sharing process.

Variation: The Complaining Selves

A different example of an exclusively concrete type of psolodrama is one in which the psoloist does not enter other roles, skipping role stream and scene stream, but instead speaks aloud the different voices in his head, different parts of himself, using the same body language and voice. These parts don't interact with one another, they just complain, so that nothing actually happens in his psolodrama. The issue here is partly one of sticking to what's concrete—day-to-day issues, previous complaints—but also monologuing and working from the head, not the body. The result is that the psoloist is stuck, repeating the same patterns of thought and speech that are his habit in daily life.

Realizing he is stuck, a helpful approach would be to stop speaking and return to authentic movement, and then to role stream, following the body as it leads him to become a distinct role, an unexpected auxiliary ego that he can fully inhabit, move as, speak as, and explore. This auxiliary can become the start of the next scene in his psolodrama.

Randomly Improvising

The most effective psolodramas are not only fantasy.

Another pitfall sometimes seen when observing newcomers to the practice: the psoloist is great at entering the process as a free improvisation, creating wild and strange roles and dream-like scenes with abandon, but she does not relate the process to her own life. She invents and creates, but does not truly listen, feel, and see the parallels to her personal experience. She lacks vulnerability.

Psolodramas are metaphors, laden with potential meaning and relevance. The purpose is not only creativity, but personal insight, catharsis, and, ideally, change. Sometimes the personal meaning of a psolodrama only emerges in sharing with the witness afterward. But the psoloist can also choose to explore this meaning during the process of the psolodrama, often with the help of the protagonist and director roles.

For example, the protagonist can ask a puzzling or strange auxiliary ego, “what are you doing in my psolodrama?” and let the auxiliary speak what it knows is its meaning or purpose there. Perhaps the auxiliary ego itself does not know the answer to that: the answer must be discovered through interacting with that role, through dialogue or even conflict.

Another approach is for the protagonist to explore meanings and interpretations in dialogue with the director. This can be valuable, if it does not become too much of an abstract intellectual conversation—the movement of any conversation with the director should always be toward returning the psoloist to action.

Ultimately, this is a paradox of psolodrama: on the one hand the psoloist actively seeks meaning and how the drama relates to her life; on the other, she actively lets go of judging her work while in progress, flowing with the mystery and wonder of it all,

trusting that in the sharing process afterward she can explore with her witness its meaning and relevance.

(From a clinical perspective, if the psoloist repeatedly engages in creative improvisation without exploring the meaning of her work, it may point to an underlying pattern or developmental limitation of the psoloist. Having the psoloist ask an auxiliary, “what are you doing in my psolodrama?” may be helpful, but if what’s going on is that the psoloist is avoiding making the psolodrama personal in the first place, intervention on the part of the therapist may be needed, or a recognition that psolodrama may not be the best approach to use at this point in the client’s process. *More on the clinical application of psolodrama appears in Part IV.*)

Worrying about the Witness

Another common pitfall in psolodrama, particularly when working with a new witness, is to worry about what the other person is thinking.

The psoloist may worry if the other is getting bored, in which case his tendency—especially if he is a performer—is to want to entertain her, by being dramatic or funny. Or, he may worry that his psolodrama is too strange and too personal for his witness—causing him to put limits on his psolodrama, and censor out personal thoughts, strong feelings, and unusual roles.

Of course, worrying about what the witness is thinking is entirely antithetical to the psolodrama process. A psolodrama exists to serve one person only: the psoloist. The witness is there only to support the psoloist; she is responsible for herself. Her role is to

remember to stay fully present and treat the process as a meditation, with the psoloist as the object of focus.

If the psoloist finds himself with a witness who cannot do that—for example, a witness who is yawning, sleepy, or seems bored with what he is doing—he may want to talk with her afterward about the witness role, or he may want to find himself a new witness!

A related guideline is that the witness will get what she gets. There is no need to explain anything to her, or clarify things (e.g. what a new role or character is), during the psolodrama. Everything can be discussed in the sharing process afterward.

Censoring

If the psoloist notices she is censoring herself, or trying to entertain the witness, probably the best approach is to notice she is doing it, stop, and return to being fully present to her psolodrama process.

Censoring may come from a hidden need to “play it safe” and “look good” in the witness’s eyes. If the psoloist is worried about divulging something too personal, she must keep in mind that we are all human, imperfect, and that we all have (messy!) personal lives. Being willing to be vulnerable is essential to the practice of psolodrama. If the psoloist feels it’s not possible to share certain things with her witness, she might consider finding someone else to work with, a witness she feels more comfortable expressing herself with.

Performing

The psoloist may notice that her “performer-self” can get very excited, and want to show off a bit. For example, as she gets further into a role, she may realize, “wow, what a great role!” and begin to amplify it physically, vocally, and emotionally. Often this enhances the psolodrama: the stronger her commitment to the roles are, the more she can “cook” the conflict/story, and the more likely a new path or discovery will emerge. At the same time, the purpose of psolodrama is not to entertain one’s witness, but to contribute to deeper self-understanding. So if her joy of performing is taking her deeper into her psolodrama, that’s great—but if she finds she is getting *too* carried away with performing, she may be neglecting how she feels personally, the meaning of the psolodrama and how it relates to her life.

Trying to entertain the witness is a double-edged sword. On the positive side, if the psoloist is entertaining her witness, she is probably entertaining herself too, meaning that her psolodrama may be filled with action, conflict, new roles, etc—it may also be funny, exciting, passionate, frightening, etc. On the other hand, if her focus is on performing, outward, not inward, if she has given away her center to the witness rather than really noticing what is happening inside herself, her own authentic feelings and impulses, she has lost the thread of her psolodrama. At that point the best thing to do is stop and return to stillness, with her eyes closed, and just notice simple things: her body, her breath, how she feels. This shift will usually lead to a deeper connection to authentic impulse, helping her discover what should happen next in her drama.

For those who find performing a strong habit (and, actually, for most people), working entirely with eyes closed is a useful approach. It keeps the focus on one’s own

body and imagination, and significantly cuts down on one's awareness of the witness.

Often, by the end of a deep psolodrama, a psoloist will have no idea where the witness is sitting—and will not care.

Judging Oneself or the Process

There are an infinite variety of ways to judge oneself in the psolodrama process. Sometimes when self-judging thoughts occur in the mind, the psoloist can easily disregard them as noise and refocus on what's happening. Other times the self-judgment is so strong that it becomes the focus. When that happens, it is best to either speak those thoughts aloud as the protagonist (P1), or give those thoughts as lines to another role or character.

Negative self-talk

Self-defeating thoughts can paralyze a psoloist:

"It's not very good: I've done this before."

"It's not very good: I'm not creative enough."

"It's not very good: I'm not dealing with a deep-enough issue."

"It's not very good: the issue is too deep and I'm too scared to explore it. What a wimp I am!"

"It's not very good: I'm not feeling anything."

"It's not very good: I'm just a sobbing mess."

"It's not very good: I have no idea what all this means."

“It’s not very good: I must look like an idiot doing this.”

“It’s not very good: I’m only playing one role.”

“It’s not very good: I’m playing too many roles/scenes and not settling on one.”

“It’s not very good: I had a much deeper experience last time.”

“It’s not very good: her psolodrama was much better than mine.”

Etc.

As in meditation, the psoloist ideally learns to cultivate acceptance of what is happening—not wish it were something else—and see the value in it. Over time practicing psolodrama, one learns to trust the process and disregard the voices of self-judgment and insecurity, knowing that psolodrama almost invariably turns out to be a rich and rewarding process, even if in the moment one may have no idea where it will end up or how it relates to one’s life.

But if the self-critique is too strong to disregard and move on, it’s usually helpful for the psoloist to speak it aloud. Doing so can take several forms.

In shared vipassana (or psolodrama), the psoloist can preface the thought with the word “thinking” to convey that the thought is just one of the many sense-doors he is aware of, e.g. “Thinking: ‘I have no idea where this is going.’” Speaking self-judgment aloud is often all that is needed to clear it, allowing the psoloist to move on to what’s next.

In psolodrama, it can be useful to express the thought through the voice of the protagonist (P1), usually speaking to the director, who can then respond with a helpful question, e.g. “And how does that make you feel?” (An even better, more open-ended question would be “And how do you feel right now?”)

The psoloist can also take a step backward and share the self-judgment as the double, a role used to convey the inner thoughts and truths of the protagonist. The self-judgment could serve as the opening line of a very honest monologue spoken by the double: “I have no idea where this is going. This reminds me that I’m getting older, losing the mental acuity I had just 10 years ago. I feel sad, worthless, helpless in the face of aging.”

The psoloist could give the line to the audience, who might say, for example, “Jeez, this psolodrama stinks. This guy seems to have no idea where this is going!” This then provides an opening for the protagonist to respond, and possibly argue the point, or invite the audience member to come up and do a better job if he or she can.

Finally, the psoloist can embody the thought in an auxiliary ego role. This could be a real-life person, such as the psoloist’s mother: “You have no idea where this is going! You never have a plan, no matter how much advice I’ve given you...!” Or it could be a fantasy character, such as an evil hypnotist (as portrayed by Vincent Price): “You have no idea where this is going....you are confused....you are growing sleepy....now you are completely in my control....Ha ha ha....!” The scene that then occurs between the auxiliary and the protagonist can springboard off the self-judging thought in an entirely new and interesting direction.

The role of “inner critic” can arise anytime in psolodrama, and can take several different forms: nagging family member, angel or devil on the shoulder, a “critic” in the audience, the demons in Milarepa’s cave. Dialoguing with the critic role can be a useful, powerful experience, not only allowing the psoloist to speak his truth in the face of another’s judgment, but also providing the opportunity to air his own self-judgment (as

the critic) so he can take a careful look at how his habitual thought patterns—self-judgments, worries, fears, etc.—may be affecting him.

Director or Critic?

One trap to avoid is allowing the director to slip into the critic role:

Protagonist (p1): I'm confused. Director, do you understand what's happening?

"Director": This isn't much of a psolodrama, is it.

Protagonist: What do you mean?

"Director": Well, you keep fumbling around playing different roles, but you're not getting anywhere. It's boring.

By confusing the director and the inner critic, the psoloist robs himself of the resource of having a truly supportive inner witness or guide. However, it's never too late to try a different path:

Protagonist: Wait a minute—you're not my Director, you're my Inner Critic!

Inner Critic (aux): (In same physical position as Director but with a slightly different, more sarcastic voice.) Oh yeah? Are you sure?

Protagonist: I'm pretty sure. I'll ask my real Director. Director, what do you think is going on?

Director: (Finding a new physical position to sit, as if observing the action from a different point of view; taking a breath to relax and be

present.) Mmmm.... yes. Looks like you were talking with the Inner Critic all along. How do you feel right now?

Protagonist: I feel...I feel relieved. I feel ready. I want to do battle with the Inner Critic!

Closing Thoughts

There really is no wrong way to practice psolodrama: all of the aforementioned traps and habits are useful to encounter and learn to overcome. No moment is wasted if one is present and aware.

A helpful attitude to take is to be able to simultaneously see that all of the process—and none of it—is accidental. That is, there may be meaning in everything that happens in psolodrama—personal, deep, relevant meaning—and, at the same time, we can let go and not attach to any of it: it is just a dream.

And as we shall see in subsequent chapters, a good witness and a thorough sharing process can help defuse self-judgment and put one's psolodrama into context, allowing its meaning to become even more clear, to resonate, and to deepen.

Witnessing Psolodrama

The art of living... is neither careless drifting on the one hand nor fearful clinging to the past on the other. It consists in being sensitive to each moment, in regarding it as utterly new and unique, in having the mind open and wholly receptive.

— Alan Watts (1951, p. 95)

The role of the witness in psolodrama—modeled after the witness role in authentic movement—is unusual in drama therapy.

In most forms of drama therapy, there is a therapist who is an active participant, either directing the client, as in psychodrama, Landy's Role Method, Weiner's Rehearsals for Growth, and most other approaches, or improvising with the client, as in Johnson's Developmental Transformations.

Psolodrama is designed to be a peer practice as well as a clinical practice. So the witness may be a therapist, but can also be anyone the psoloist is comfortable working with—a friend, colleague, coach, etc.

In practicing psolodrama the psoloist plays many roles. But the witness, too, wears many hats: supporter, facilitator, friend, co-counselor, appreciative audience, and fellow meditator. The witness provides the supportive container within which the psoloist does his work.

To witness another person—to take responsibility for being present, to be a nonjudgmental container for their process, to be in service to them—is a rare and valuable thing. It is a great responsibility to witness another's psolodrama, and a great honor. The witness is given a window into the psoloist's life, his psyche, his greatest challenges and recurring themes. If the psoloist feels comfortable with the witness, he is able to go to places of uncensored vulnerability. He is also capable of flights of unexpected imagination, beauty, and raw emotion.

How the witness approaches her role, how present she can be, and how open she is to receiving whatever arises in the psoloist's work, helps determine the quality, depth, and impact of the experience for both.

(This chapter explores the act of witnessing itself. How the witness and psoloist share with one another after the psolodrama is discussed in the next chapter, "The Psolodrama Sharing Process." For additional information about witnessing, see the chapter "Authentic Movement" in Part I.)

Witnessing Psolodrama	
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Witnessing Psolodrama In Brief

The witness provides a supportive, nonjudgmental container for the work. He observes and keeps time. The witness maintains the container by practicing mindfulness—with the psoloist as the “object” of his meditation—and simultaneously noticing his own feelings and experience.

When time is up, the witness says “slowly, in your own time, bring your psolodrama to a close,” and then, once the psoloist is settled and ready, the witness asks the psoloist whether she would like to speak first. When it’s his turn to speak, the witness reflects back what he saw and heard during the psolodrama as accurately as possible, and may also share what personally resonates from his own life. His witnessing and sharing comes from an intention of *metta*—lovingkindness and appreciation for the other.

The Intention of the Witness: To Be in Service to the Psoloist

Although being a good audience is part of the witness role, being a witness is quite distinct from being an audience member. An audience expects to be entertained and engaged. The witness in psolodrama actively lets go of any expectations.

Instead, the mindset of the witness—both in observing and sharing—is *to be in service to the psoloist*. This means that although psolodrama in its basic form is a two-person process, its outcomes are focused on the psoloist's experience: the witness will get what he gets—which may be little, or may be quite a lot, as his perception and understanding grow with his experience witnessing.

As in authentic movement, witnessing, when done well, provides a model that helps the psoloist develop his own supportive and nonjudgmental *inner* witness.

Being in service to the other may feel more natural for some when the roles are truly distinct, e.g., if the witness is a drama therapist and the psoloist her client. However, when the two are peers who are taking turns doing psolodrama and witnessing, there is a noticeable shift in focus and intention demanded by the role of witness.

One question that can help the witness clarify her role at every stage is:

“Am I serving the psoloist's process?”

If the witness notices, for example, that she is not fully present while witnessing, her intention of service can help her return to what is happening now. Or, in the sharing process, the witness may think of a personal story that echoes some aspect of the psolodrama. But before she tells that story aloud, she should ask herself: “Will sharing this story serve the psoloist's process?” (perhaps telling it briefly would, but at length

not). The witness needs to practice discernment. Her primary responsibility is to reflect back to the mover that he has been seen and heard for what he did.

Preparing the Safe Container

From the outset of their meeting, the witness looks for how he can help create a safe container for the psoloist's work, even before she starts her authentic movement. *(Several points below are described in greater detail in the chapter "Warming Up to Psolodrama.")*

The witness helps make sure there is a good **connection** between the two, by taking time for a thorough check-in and clearing process. This helps the psoloist warm-up and lets her know it is safe to share feelings and personal issues.

Especially if the two are new to one another, it is important to agree on **confidentiality**—that nothing personal will leave the room or be shared with others.

The witness also takes part in preparing the **physical space**, helping the psoloist clear away anything that might impede her movement, and asking her where she would prefer he sit.

The witness checks that all **devices** such as cell phones are silenced.

The witness clarifies the **timing** the psoloist would like, and if she would prefer bells or verbal signals.

If he likes to take **notes** as the witness, he can ask whether she is OK with that. (The psoloist might appreciate being given the written notes afterward to remind her of her psolodrama. But some psoloists may prefer the witness not do anything but observe during the psolodrama.)

Finally, the witness can ask if there is **anything else** she needs before starting—a drink of water, etc.

Using Skillful Means: Witness as Mediator

Knowing how to speak and reflect back to the psoloist in the sharing process afterward is no easy task and requires discipline, discernment, and practice. But an equal challenge in witnessing is to be fully present throughout the process, particularly when being still and silent, observing the psoloist in action.

It is helpful during the psolodrama (and, ultimately, throughout the entire witnessing process), **to see the role of witness as that of a mediator, where the psoloist is the object of the meditation.** As a mediator, the witness can work with herself moment-by-moment to be as present and receptive as possible, and thus be fully active.

Mindfulness: Returning to Awareness of the Other

As I settle in as witness, I notice the quality of my attention. Where is my mind?

As in a meditation on any object—such as the breath—I notice if my mind has wandered away from the object (in this case, the psoloist) and then gently bring it back to the object.

I also notice the quality of my attention to the object—am I present enough to notice the small details? Can I see the psoloist's breathing, notice the subtleties of her facial expression, what is happening with her feet, etc.?

If the psoloist is difficult to see or hear, do I need to move to a new position to take in every detail?

Later in the psolodrama, as words are added and roles appear, what has happened to my focus? Am I present to the unfolding story, or have these roles/images sparked thoughts/memories in my own mind that are taking me away from what is happening?

Like a cowboy bringing his wandering horse back and re-hitching it to the post, I bring my mind back to the present moment—if necessary, over and over again!

Choicelessness: Openness and Acceptance of All that is Arising

Openness to the Six Sense Doors

As a vipassana meditator, I consciously and choicelessly open to all the channels of awareness.

Not only do I proactively bring an intention of interest and focus to my senses (as well as the mind), but I also let those sense stimuli “choose me” moment to moment—rather than I (my conscious mind or intention) choosing what specific object or channel to focus on.

The channels of sight and sound are most obvious—to see and hear what the psoloist is doing. But what are my other body sensations telling me? For example, is my own body tensing during a certain part of the drama? Am I breathing faster? In psychotherapy terms, this is noticing the somatic countertransference: how are my feelings about what the psoloist is doing being communicated through my own body?

The sixth sense door, that of thought, is also open and available. Can I notice my thoughts during the psolodrama without being swept away by them? Can I notice thoughts of comparing myself with the

psoloist, judging the psoloist, judging myself, etc., without identifying with those thoughts? Am I myself experiencing images or fantasies as the psolodrama unfolds—can I note them, and then bring my attention back to the action at hand?

Acceptance: Non-judgment

Like a good meditator, I receive everything happening without judgment, opening my mind and heart with an attitude of acceptance. I practice letting go in the moment, not attaching to anything, not defending myself from anything.

Perhaps something in the psolodrama is triggering me. It could be a scene that echoes a traumatic moment in my own life. It could be content that I find offensive or unpleasant. It could be a role that frightens or angers me. It could be attitudes or beliefs of the psoloist, being expressed through the psolodrama, that I disagree with or judge. Perhaps I find myself comparing myself with the psoloist—and making a negative comparison. Perhaps I feel bored by the psolodrama: there's not enough action. Or the psoloist just doesn't seem to be doing it "right."

Can I be the kind of witness—both for myself as well as for the psoloist—that can hold anything and everything with equanimity, and not push anything away?

As a meditator/witness, I notice my thoughts and feelings—see them swim by in the stream of awareness like fish flitting past—but I do not grab on and attach to any of them. Perhaps inadvertently one of these fish has grabbed hold of me! I notice I am caught up in an unpleasant (or too pleasant!) thought/feeling and I am no longer present and available. Can I disentangle from this grasping or aversion and return to an attitude of openness?

I return my focus to my own body, my own breath, for an instant, to relax and remind myself of my meditator stance—and as soon as I can bring my attention back to the psolodrama.

Ultimately, I must remember, all these thoughts and judgments do not actually exist—they are just phenomena of my mind. This is what minds tend to do: generate thoughts, judgments, likes and dislikes, all day long. If I can see them as essentially meaningless, not to be identified with, I can be truly open and available for my partner.

Lovingkindness: Opening One's Heart to the Other

As I sit and observe the psoloist in action, can I relax and open my heart to him? Can I send him lovingkindness, wishing for him to have a wonderful, joyous experience in his psolodrama?

As he goes deeper into the process, exploring his personal demons and shadows, can I allow myself to empathize, allowing my own body and emotions to fill with his conflict, anger, shame, or grief? Even if the psolodrama feels alien to me, different from my own life experience, can I ask myself: what if I were in the same situation—how would I feel?

As I send the psoloist metta, can I also take joy in his success, as his story leads to a personal breakthrough—a moving moment of release, a new insight? Can I let go of my competitive, comparing mind (which may be busy asking: When is it my turn? Will my psolodrama be as good? Why can't I have a psolodrama like that? Etc.)?

I remind myself that we two, and all beings, are ultimately equal—all living, aging, and dying—and that my purpose is simply to remain present, open, calm, and listening, with equanimity.

“Witnessing For”

As in authentic movement, witnessing in psolodrama is a truly multidimensional experience. There are many ways to experience the psoloist’s work, and the more of these I can open up to, the richer my own experience can be, and the better I can be of service to the psoloist—particularly when it comes time to share with him.

As mentioned in Part I, the chapter on authentic movement, contemplative dance teacher Alton Wasson refers to the “chest of many drawers”—kinds of awareness that lay dormant, unopened, in our own body, heart, and imagination. As I witness the psoloist’s movement, I may choose to open the drawer of physical position, noting specifically the psoloist’s posture, the curl of his fingers, the placement of his feet. Or I might open the drawer of empathy, allowing myself to tune in to the emotional state of the psoloist, and let myself feel what he might be feeling.

These different ways of seeing the psoloist can also be likened to different lenses, metaphorical eyeglasses that allow me to see different things—some are colored in a certain way, some zoom in to fine detail, some have x-ray vision, some use fisheye lenses to see the big picture. For example, I may choose to look through the lens of rhythm, noticing the pattern and speed of movement or speech. Or I may look through the lens of “story,” noticing how the narrative of the psolodrama is constructed, and how interactions between different characters shape the plot.

These drawers or lenses are something we use everyday, whether we are conscious of them or not. For example, in conversation with a friend I may choose to “listen for” something specific—listen for my own emotional resonance with what she is saying, listen for what she cares most deeply about, “listen” for what her body language

is telling me. As a psolodrama witness, I can similarly “witness for” many things. What follows is a breakdown of some of the more important aspects of the psolodrama to witness. This list can also serve as a guide to the many aspects of the psolodrama that the psoloist’s own *inner* witness may be aware of during the action phase.

First are those concrete aspects that can be observed directly and to some extent, objectively:

Physical position. Includes shape, stance, posture, facial expression, still gesture, contact with floor or self, straight versus curved, levels (high/low), etc.

Movement. Awareness of speed, direction, rhythm, changing form, gesture, posture, motion of certain parts of the body (while others remain still), quality of movement (gentle, sharp, etc.), subtle movement (breath, vibration), changing facial expression, use of the space, etc.

Sound. Listening for pitch, volume, rhythm, timbre, clarity (or its lack), accent, breath, sound versus speech, gibberish, the distinct voices of different roles, song/melody, pauses/silences. Also noticing sounds of objects in contact with the psoloist: creak of floorboards, pounding on wall, etc. Also opening to indoor and outdoor sounds that may affect or interact with the psolodrama (e.g., a thunderclap, sounds of crickets, traffic noise).

Other elements to “witness for” are more subjective—meaning that the witness may perceive something very differently from how the psoloist experiences it:

Emotion. Noticing what the psoloist’s feelings seem to be; how they are expressed (through a facial expression, a tear, a yell, a joyous dance, etc.); what may have caused or triggered different emotions; and what overall emotional mood or energy is conveyed by the psolodrama.

Image. Early in the progression, before words are added (in the authentic movement phase), the witness may perceive a number of images arising and passing away—including some that the psoloist is unaware of. As the psolodrama evolves, more concrete pictures may be painted by the psoloist’s position, gestures, movement through space, as well as her use of sounds and words. Images can evoke activities (swimming, pulling on a rope, dancing in a ballet), elements of nature (a flower growing, snow falling, a rotting log, a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis), locations (a room with smooth walls, the depths of the ocean, the back seat of a car, a dark cave), unusual situations (a nuclear explosion, walking on the moon, being pregnant), fantasies (touching the sky, fighting a dragon, transforming into an alien)—anything imaginable that can be depicted physically and/or aurally.

Role. On the more objective side, the awareness of how a character is expressed physically and through sound and words. On the subjective side, the perception of the human (or non-human) attributes of a role (e.g., the age of the role, its gender, nationality, race, personality/character, sexuality, goals/hopes/fears/desires, etc.); the type of role (real, imagined, mythological or archetypal, familial, etc.); the likely psychodramatic classification of the role (protagonist, auxiliary ego, double, director, audience—or

unclear); the nature of the relationship between the role and the psoloist herself; and any change, transformation, conflict, story, or emotional arc involving that role. (For more on the range and variety of potential roles, see Robert Landy's taxonomy of roles—1993, pp.163-243.)

Story. Noticing whether the psolodrama is comprised of one scene/story, a series of related scenes forming one coherent story, a series of loosely related or unrelated scenes/stories—or the lack of a clear story/progression, or constant change. For each scene or story, awareness of the structure (e.g. beginning–middle–end, exposition–climax–resolution, vertical take-off, cliff-hanger ending, etc.); the characters involved in the story and what function each serves; the passage of time during the story, when in time it takes place, and the time relative to other scenes (e.g., is the psolodrama in chronological order); the conflict at the heart of the story (if there is one); the emotional journey of the story; and the meanings, messages, themes, or morals of the story.

Metaphor. Awareness of the psoloist's use of metaphor on the level of language (“my anger is a volcano!”), image (creating the volcano through body language and sound), role (becoming and speaking as the “Volcano of Anger”), story (a tale of a volcano ready to burst), and meaning/interpretation (how the image/role/story of the volcano parallels some theme, person, event, or cognitive/behavioral pattern in the psoloist's life).

Interpretation. Noticing links and parallels between the content of the psolodrama and the psoloist's life, as well as potential messages or lessons the psolodrama may have for the psoloist, the witness, or for others. Note that it is important for the witness to notice his own interpretive thinking—and to avoid attaching to those

thoughts as “real” or “important.” One’s interpretations are just thoughts, and may or may not be useful for the psoloist to hear. Often, by letting go of the need to interpret, the witness can reopen to the present, becoming more aware of what the psoloist is actually doing moment-by-moment.

Countertransference. Although this term is usually used to denote the feelings (conscious or unconscious) of a psychotherapist in reaction to her client, in the witness-psoloist relationship it can be used to signify self-awareness on the part of the witness: noticing what effect the psoloist and psolodrama are having on the witness’s own physical, emotional, and mental state. This can include empathy with the psoloist (or a lack thereof); humor, laughter, being entertained; attraction or aversion to the psoloist/psolodrama; physical reactions (somatic countertransference) such as sleepiness/fatigue, discomfort, nausea, pain, etc. (perhaps caused by a dislike or avoidance of the content of the psolodrama or of the psoloist himself), or conversely warmth, comfort, sexual attraction, etc.; wishes for a particular outcome to the psolodrama; a desire to help (or harm) the psoloist—or to support (or disrupt) the psolodrama; a sense of comparison or competition with, or envy of, the psoloist/psolodrama (including feeling “one up” or “one down” in relation to the psoloist); and an awareness of how one’s perceptions of the psolodrama—including one’s interpretations on a metaphorical and psychological level—are colored by one’s own feelings in reaction to the psoloist or to the content of the psolodrama.

Gestalt. Finally, taking a mental “step back” from the psolodrama, noticing what impression it leaves as a whole: its impact (or lack of impact) on the dimensions of depth, emotion, and insight; whether it seems to open new doors for the psoloist or cover new

ground—or, instead, repeat previously established patterns or habits; how well the witness feels he can understand and personally relate (or not) to the journey of the psolodrama.

The lists above convey only some aspects of what the witness can be present to. There may be infinite ways of viewing a psolodrama, e.g. through an aesthetic/artistic lens, a political (e.g. feminist) lens, a psychopathological lens, a cultural anthropological lens, etc. The witness is limited only by his creativity, his ability to be present, and his openness to being moved by what is unfolding before him.

(For an approach to training as a witness in using these different elements, see the exercise Lenses of Awareness in the chapter “Authentic Movement.”)

Interaction During the Psolodrama

Now and then, during the process of witnessing the psoloist, the witness may be called upon to take a more active role.

Coaching the Psoloist

As described more fully in the subsequent chapter “Coaching Psolodrama,” the witness may at times be asked to provide coaching—e.g., when the psoloist feels lost, confused, stuck, or overwhelmed.

When working with a peer, the witness should never coach unless explicitly asked by the psoloist, before and/or during the psolodrama. Any coaching given should be very

brief and aimed at returning the psoloist to action, e.g. “become your mother,” or “try talking with your director.”

Note that in the client-therapist relationship, coaching may be the norm rather than the exception. Depending on the client’s preference and need—and especially early in the process of learning about psolodrama—the therapist may take a very active role, speaking up often to help encourage the psoloist or to focus on a particular role or scene. (*More on the therapist’s role appears in Part IV, the chapter “Working with Individuals.”*)

Caring for the Psoloist

When the psoloist is alone in the space he may feel so overcome by strong emotions—e.g., sadness, loneliness, alienation, depression, grief, rage—that it becomes difficult to continue.

Usually in these moments it is best for the witness to first wait in silence and simply hold the space, allowing the psoloist time to experience his feelings. Typically, the wave of strong emotion passes and the psoloist continues his psolodrama. Or he may decide he cannot continue, and would like to transition to the sharing process.

However, if the psoloist appears to be lost in his emotions, overwhelmed, or asking for help, the witness can ask gently whether it is OK to come sit with him to provide support. Quietly sitting near—and perhaps (first asking permission) holding the psoloist’s hand, or touching (not patting) his shoulder or back, etc.—can communicate caring and help the psoloist either continue to express the emotion he is experiencing, eventually resume the psolodrama, or transition into a sharing dialogue, whichever occurs naturally or feels most comfortable to the psoloist.

Other Aspects of Witnessing Psolodrama

Taking Notes

At times—particularly when I am in the role of therapist, observing a client doing psolodrama—I find it useful to have a pad at hand and jot notes about what I am noticing. As therapist, I sometimes take notes during a session, which I then review prior to the next session to refresh my memory of what occurred. Taking notes can sometimes help me stay present and focused, and in the sharing phase makes it easier to recall certain moments, roles, and key phrases or lines of dialogue.

However, I do not recommend taking notes when *learning* how to witness. In my own case, having practiced for many years, I am able to take notes while staying connected with the psoloist. But writing can steal one's focus, drawing the inexperienced witness's attention away from the subtle stream of detail and moment-by-moment changes in what the psoloist is doing. (In fact, I often see new witnesses in workshops, even without notes to distract, only listening to their psoloist, not watching them.) When teaching authentic movement and psolodrama to new groups, I like to introduce witnessing in its pure form—as a meditation, in which the psoloist is the object—with nothing (no pen and paper) coming in between the witness and the psoloist.

Later, as witnesses become more experienced, they may wish to try taking notes and see how this affects the experience for themselves and for their psoloist.

Moving: the Active Witness

It is fine for the witness to quietly change positions—e.g., to find a new place to sit or stand—while observing the psolodrama. This can help if, for example, the psoloist is facing away from the witness, or is difficult to hear.

Active witnessing (described earlier in the chapter on authentic movement) goes beyond merely shifting positions or points of view. When being an active witness to authentic movement, the witness—either from the sidelines or entering the space—uses her own physical movement to echo the body positions and movements of the mover. This can help the witness empathize with the mover, to better understand how a particular position, posture, stance, facial expression, or gesture feels. Active witnessing can also help the witness stay more alert—and therefore more present—to what is happening moment by moment.

For witnessing psolodrama, doing some subtle active witnessing from the sidelines (e.g., mimicking the psoloist’s facial expression or a certain gesture to feel how it feels) is fine. However, so as not to interfere with the psoloist’s process, the witness should remain silent and keep a sufficient distance from the psoloist so her movement is not perceived. It is not recommended to enter the space with the psoloist.

Overcoming Obstacles: Sleepiness, Restlessness, and Distractedness

As in meditation, witnessing requires skillfulness in dealing with the habits of the mind/body, such as sleepiness, restlessness, or a wandering mind. As mentioned above, taking notes, changing positions, and active witnessing from the sidelines can all help the witness wake up and refocus.

It is also helpful for the psoloist to remember his mission: to be in service to the psoloist. Knowing that he will be responsible for sharing afterward with the psoloist what he saw and heard can also motivate the witness to remain attentive.

When sleepy, the witness can simply stand up, or, alternatively, try sitting for a while with hands on head or arms sticking straight up in the air. Taking a few deep breaths (quietly!) can also help, as does a drink of water (or even better, tea). Note that it does *not* work well to just try to hang on and “get through it”—a drowsy witness can miss many details and does not provide a trustworthy container for the psoloist’s process.

If the witness is feeling restless—itching to move or take action—standing up can also help; he can even move quietly if needed, or try active witnessing from the sidelines. Channeling his energy into jotting notes may also work well.

For a wandering, distracted mind, it is important to remember the analogy to meditation: to notice the horse has wandered and re-tether it to the hitching post. This means the witness continually returns to the psoloist as the object of his meditation. The witness can challenge and refocus his mind by intentionally noticing different aspects of what the psoloist is doing—being aware of what he is “witnessing for,” the lenses or chest of drawers described earlier. For example, if he finds he tends to focus on the psoloist’s words, it may be helpful to notice what her body language is saying, or what exactly is differentiating the different roles being portrayed: is the psoloist shifting posture, changing the pitch of her voice, etc.? He can also briefly shift the focus to himself, noticing what effect the psolodrama is having on him physically and emotionally—and then return focus to the psoloist to find what in the psolodrama is causing him to feel that way. For a wandering mind a little subtle active witnessing—

mimicking the psoloist's gestures and facial expressions—can also help reconnect the witness to what the psoloist is doing.

Final Thoughts

Learning to be a good psolodrama witness is useful training for anyone, including therapists, counselors, coaches, facilitators, and leaders of all kinds. Being mindful, attentive, and nonjudgmental when observing another takes time to learn and can bear many fruits. One needs to learn how to be a meditator while interacting with another; to sit with what's arising, in oneself and the other, including difficult, personal material; to practice acceptance; to be supportive and nonjudgmental. It's an attitude and skillset that one can bring to one's work and also to one's personal and family life. It is a gift to those one loves and a way of relating to others on a daily basis, in whatever context one finds oneself in.

Finally, learning to witness is part of training to be a psoloist: how I witness another is also how I witness myself; learning to support another in a nonjudgmental way expands my ability to do that for myself.

Witnessing during the psolodrama is just one part of the witnessing role, and therefore only one way in which the witness is in service to the psoloist. The witness's responsibilities continue in the psolodrama sharing process, described in the next chapter. As we shall see, the same care and discernment discussed in this chapter applies to the sharing process.

References

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The Psolodrama Sharing Process

“It strikes me that Moreno found a key to the group when he asked for sharing from the heart.”

— Zerka Moreno (personal communication, February 21, 2008)

The purpose of the sharing process in psolodrama is to allow the psoloist to reflect on and explore her psolodrama more deeply, in dialogue with a supportive witness.

The sharing is, ideally, a spontaneous, warm, and rich conversation, in which each person can share his or her take on the psolodrama, the psoloist speaking from inside the experience, and the witness providing a valuable, outside point of view, reflecting back what he saw and heard with accuracy, empathy, and wisdom.

Oftentimes this conversation is so good, so valuable, that it may last as long or longer than the psolodrama. The psoloist can leave the entire interaction feeling fully self-expressed: her psolodrama and the sharing process have let her say everything she needs to say, and she feels deeply seen and heard by the witness. The witness can leave

with a feeling of peaceful satisfaction, having served the psoloist with presence, awareness, and lovingkindness, and having been witness to authentic, heart-opening work.

The Psolodrama Sharing Process	
<p><i>The Purpose of Sharing</i> Is Sharing Necessary?</p> <p>—</p> <p><i>Who Shares First?</i></p> <p>—</p> <p><i>The Psoloist Shares</i></p>	<p><i>The Witness Shares: 3 Kinds of Sharing</i></p> <p>I. Authentic Movement Reflection</p> <p>II. Psychodramatic Sharing</p> <p>III. Interpretation</p> <p>Another Kind of Sharing: Asking Questions</p>
<p><i>Acknowledging the Psoloist</i></p> <p>—</p> <p><i>Sharing as Meditation</i> Dealing with Hindrances</p> <p>—</p> <p><i>Taking Care with Language</i></p>	<p><i>Bridging Gaps</i> Between Psoloist and Witness</p> <p>—</p> <p><i>Sharing Do's and Don'ts</i></p> <p>—</p> <p><i>The Sum of Sharing's Parts</i></p>

The Purpose of Sharing

Sharing provides an opportunity to integrate the experience of the psolodrama, an experience that is often clear, meaningful, and moving, but can at other times feel mysterious, confusing, or overwhelming.

Is Sharing Necessary?

Sharing is optional: if the psoloist prefers *not* to share, that's fine. She may wish to take a few moments to journal, or just take a short break before whatever is next. For some, being verbal (or even listening to another) immediately after having a major cathartic release or profound insight may not work well. Psolodrama often feels like living in a dream or another reality—and it can take time to transition back to this reality. The psoloist needs to trust her instinct about what she really needs.

That said, for safety's sake it is *not* recommended to end a psolodrama session without some kind of sharing, final debrief, or “check-out.” Psolodrama can stir up strong emotions and potentially leave the psoloist in a fragile state. Do not let your peer-work partner or therapy client walk out the door without checking in with her first.

Who Shares First?

When the psolodrama ends, and psoloist and witness come together and sit facing one another, the witness begins by asking:

“Would you like to speak first, or shall I?”

This differs from the standard approach in authentic movement, in which the mover typically shares first, followed by the witness. That order makes sense for authentic movement, mainly because it can be difficult for the witness to understand what has happened by watching movement only. So, by hearing the mover's sharing first, the witness can better understand what the mover's movement was about for him and can therefore provide supportive—rather than surprising or jarring—reflection.

Psolodrama, in contrast, is usually verbal as well as physical, and the psoloist may enter the sharing phase feeling a strong need to stop talking and let the witness speak. In addition, it is often the case that some (sometimes most) of the content of the psolodrama is evident from the enactment of the psoloist, giving the witness greater ability to describe what she saw and heard without the psoloist first having to explain it.

Ideally, when the witness asks the question, “would you like to speak first or shall I?” the psoloist sits quietly for a moment to check in with himself: Would I like to share first? What would feel best? Sometimes the answer is that the psoloist may wish to say one or two things up front, then let the witness share, and then afterwards say more, spurred on by the witness’s reflection.

The Psoloist Shares

There are no rules for the psoloist’s sharing. The entire arc of psolodrama—including the sharing afterward—is designed to support the psoloist, to facilitate his self-discovery. When it comes time for him to share, anything he would like to say is encouraged.

The witness, meanwhile, listens intently, resisting any urge to interrupt.

Typically, the psoloist shares moments that stood out most for him and why they stood out, including the impact of particular images, roles, or scenes and why they resonated so strongly. His sharing may also focus on the emotions he experienced and what may have caused them. If the psoloist had an experience of catharsis, he may discuss why it happened and its effect on him.

The psoloist may also discuss how the psolodrama depicts individuals in his life, past or current events, or scenes illustrating potential futures. He may relate the psolodrama to dreams, fantasies, nightmares, worries, or desires he has had.

The psoloist may interpret the meaning of the psolodrama, the relevance or parallels between certain images, roles, or scenes—or the entire psolodrama—and the issues and challenges he is facing in his life. And finally, he may share messages, learnings, insights, or surprises he is taking from the psolodrama, new ways of seeing his challenges, and/or new actions he would like to take or habits or behaviors he would like to change.

The Witness Shares: Three Kinds of Sharing

Psolodrama, in combining authentic movement and psychodrama, invites the witness to respond in ways appropriate to each method: to reflect as the witness does after authentic movement, and to share as a group member does following a psychodrama.

There is a third type of response, interpretation, which can also be used—with care—depending on the situation. All three kinds of sharing are offered in a caring, non-judgmental way, with support of the psoloist being the primary intention.

I. Authentic Movement Reflection

This type of sharing is based on the lenses of awareness mentioned earlier (in the chapters on “Authentic Movement” and “Witnessing Psolodrama”). The witness reflects back as accurately as possible what she saw and heard: physical positions, movements, sounds, words. She can also share, acknowledging the subjective nature of her outside

perspective, the images and roles she was able to identify, the emotions she perceived in the psoloist, the plot of the “story” if there was one, etc.

(It is important to note that calling this type of sharing “Authentic Movement Reflection” is shorthand and not meant to represent what happens in authentic movement. In classic authentic movement practice, the witness may share all kinds of observations and feelings that go beyond merely mirroring what she saw and heard. We are using this term to succinctly distinguish this type of sharing from the other two kinds, described below.)

A detailed reflection can help the psoloist in many ways. It not only validates what he has done—he feels “seen”—but also can help him recover parts of the psolodramatic progression he may have forgotten, such as the initial roles that emerged in the role stream not incorporated into the psolodrama, and can prompt him to share more about those aspects of the experience.

Physical reflection. The witness is not limited to words when reflecting back the psolodrama—she can recall and try to recreate physical positions, movements, facial expressions, the voice and physicality of key roles, etc. It is both useful and affirming to the psoloist to receive a concrete and thorough reflection of what he did—the more detailed, the better—and physical/vocal demonstrations capture much more than words alone.

The witness can also, optionally, use present tense when speaking to bring the witnessing right into the moment being described.

II. Psychodramatic Sharing

Jacob Moreno once gave a demonstration of psychodrama before a group that included psychoanalysts and psychiatrists. Afterward, he opened the floor to questions and comments, and was horrified as the professionals began to analyze and dissect the protagonist psychologically. Moreno saw the young female patient become confused by the interpretations. He himself became upset and asked one of the psychiatrists, “Do you have children? What is your relationship to your daughter? Here we share our hearts, not our brains!” (Zerka Moreno as quoted in Horvatin & Schreiber, 2006, p. 22.)

Learning from this kind of experience, Moreno created a different approach to post-psychodrama processing. In the sharing circle, members of the group speak personally, sharing their own feelings, stories, and life experiences that relate to the journey of the protagonist. In this way, the protagonist does not feel alone in having shared personally; all members of the group are equally vulnerable.

In psolodrama, personal psychodramatic sharing is equally as important as reflecting back the form and content of the psolodrama. The witness can share from her own experience and feelings, acknowledging the subjective nature of this sharing (e.g., beginning a sentence with “For me...” or “What I felt while watching that scene was...”). If there is something in the psolodrama—an image, role, scene, even a movement or gesture—that parallels a moment from her life, she can share it (“That reminded me of something that happened to me when I was a child...”), making sure to keep it brief and relevant. She can also share what she is *feeling* in her life now (or at an earlier time), reflecting emotions she sensed in the psolodrama (e.g., “I could really relate to the anger I sensed in that role...”).

Psychodramatic sharing requires not only sensitivity and empathy, but also a commitment to being in service to the psoloist. There is a difference between sharing personal feelings or material from one's own life to support and benefit the psoloist, versus sharing for the sake of sharing or to serve oneself in some way. Two negative examples:

What Happened	Commentary
<p>The psoloist has just ended a psolodrama she clearly felt was beautiful and touching. The witness shares: "During your psolodrama, for some reason I began to feel ill—a little nauseated."</p>	<p><i>This is the witness's truth, but would probably seem to be a put-down to the psoloist and thus would not be serving her in this moment.</i></p>
<p>The psoloist, sharing first, talks about how a scene he enacted involving his girlfriend helped him empathize with her and love her more. The witness shares: "I kept thinking about my boyfriend during that scene, and how inauthentic he is sometimes."</p>	<p><i>Again, this is more about the witness than the psoloist—expressing a very different feeling—and is not being supportive of the psoloist or his experience.</i></p>

Here is a three-step process, originally suggested by Christopher Ellinger (Playback Theater director, psolodrama practitioner, and good friend), as a way to focus the witness's psychodramatic sharing on serving the psoloist:

1. **Share what moved you.** The witness begins by sharing what she appreciated and was touched by—expressing it in a specific and emotionally congruent way (using face, voice, and body language), rather than an abstract way. E.g., "I was so moved by your psolodrama.

The scenes where you confronted your various family members, and particularly their cutting off of communication, was heartbreaking.”

2. *Explore other feelings you had by asking the psoloist about his experience.* If the witness wishes to comment about other kinds of feelings she had, she can ask the psoloist how he felt, e.g., “I was feeling scared when you beat on your chest and screamed and I’m wondering what was going on for you...?” Her focus is more on the psoloist rather than on her own inner experience.
3. *Hold off on additional sharing unless the psoloist asks.* If the psoloist would like to hear more about the inner experience of the witness he can ask her.

However, there are those instances when the witness has had a personal life experience that strongly resonates with the psolodrama. If the witness feels it is appropriate and would be supportive to the psoloist to share her own experience—succinctly—and the psoloist agrees, doing so may add value to the psoloist’s reflection (even when noting how the experience may be different from the psoloist’s own experience) and increase the bond between psoloist and witness.

III. Interpretation

Interpretation is an explanation of the meaning of the psolodrama, how the elements in the drama may relate to one another (“general interpretation”), and how they might relate to the psoloist’s life and the challenges he is facing (“personal interpretation”).

Interpretation by its very nature is subjective and potentially a projection—the meaning the witness gleans from the psolodrama may be entirely different from another witness’s, or the psoloist’s.

Despite this, the witness’s interpretation can be very valuable to the psoloist. The witness might offer a parallel she is noticing between the psolodrama and a classic archetype, myth, or story. She might observe a recurring pattern within the psolodrama, or among a series of psolodramas she has witnessed with this psoloist. An interpretation can help affirm or shed light on the life path the psoloist sees himself being on—or simply affirm that the psolodrama itself had meaning and value (as opposed to being random improvisation). Sometimes, an interpretation offered by the witness gently points to a new way of seeing the psoloist’s issues, problems, thought or behavioral patterns—perhaps leading to an “Aha!” moment for the psoloist, a new insight.

Here is one example, from a psoloist-witness pair who had known each other for several years:

The psolodrama has two distinct scenes. The first is a reenactment of a dream in which members of the psoloist’s family are acting cruelly, threatening to write her out of the family’s will (jokingly offering her only “grandfather’s maid”), and presenting her with gifts of fine art while puffing up their own egos. In the second half of the psolodrama, the psoloist embodies two of her favorite kittens, debating with the audience and defending her love of cats as being based on their lack of a hidden agenda and expression of pure love, and has audience members enter the action and embody their own favorite animals.

In the sharing process afterward, the witness first reflects back the different scenes he saw, and some of the key details. Then he adds: “One thing that really struck me was a contrast I noticed between the two halves

of the psolodrama. In the first half, there's a family and an atmosphere of hidden agendas, the need to be very political—almost a feeling of malice.” The psoloist nods vigorously. “In the second half, the protagonist expresses a love of cats, and how they have no agenda, what you see is what you get, a feeling of pure love.” The psoloist agrees. “It occurred to me that these two parts of the psolodrama could not be more different—as if they fall on two extreme opposite ends of a spectrum. Which leads me to wonder: can growing up in this kind of family environment lead one to seek out the opposite, to want to spend more time with beings who have no agenda and are just loving and present?” The psoloist's face lights up and her eyes widen. She says: “Yes! That's really interesting.” She speaks further about the link she sees between the nature of her family of origin and her present day love of animals.

The interpretation offered by the witness in this case helps the psoloist make a connection for her that she was then able to elaborate on and explore, leading to further insight.

Interpretation poses challenges, however, that authentic movement reflection and psychodramatic sharing tend not to: first, that the psoloist may not want her psolodrama to be interpreted, and second, that the interpretation may be wrong (or at least, not useful for the psoloist).

As the story about Moreno and the psychiatrists illustrates, there is a basic problem with interpretation: rather than allow the psoloist to walk away from the experience with her own insights and conclusions, when the witness interprets he cannot help but insert his own agenda, desires, projections, etc.—and, if he's not careful, unconsciously pin them on the psoloist, rather than acknowledge them as being his own.

If he would like to share an interpretation, there are a few things it may be useful for the witness to be aware of first:

Intention. *Would I be offering the interpretation truly in service of the other, or am I really sharing it to serve myself—e.g., to get it off my chest, to assert my superiority over the other, to display my wisdom, to have fun or be clever, or to put the other person down in some way? Is my interpretation about the psoloist or is it really about me and my own life—and, if the latter, can I offer it that way, as personal psychodramatic sharing, rather than interpretation?*

Permission. *Is the psoloist interested in hearing an interpretation? And is the psoloist open to interpretive remarks from me? Particularly if we are new to one another, it is important that I ask; in the therapist-client relationship, the client may expect some interpretation.*

Appropriateness. *Will my interpretation be useful and appropriate to the sharing process? Is the timing right to share it? Is my interpretation at odds with what the psoloist has already shared—and if so, would my interpretation be received as a useful additional point of view, or as a contradiction?*

Approach. *How do I share this in a way that acknowledges my limited, subjective viewpoint? As witness, can I must cast myself not as the voice of wisdom and experience, but instead to hold the attitude that this is just one person's take on the meaning of the psolodrama, and that it may be completely wrong?*

Interpreting another's psolodrama should not be a heavy-handed affair. If the psoloist's response is "Thank you, Dr. Freud," the witness is doing something wrong.

How the witness uses language matters:

“The role of the old warrior represents your father.”

➔ *Interpretation is stated as fact, bluntly declaring “x = y.”*

“When I see the protagonist become an old warrior, there is something in the warrior’s voice that feels to me like the voice of a father figure.”

➔ *This version acknowledges the subjective nature of the observation, using subtly qualifying words and phrases (“something in the warrior’s voice”, “feels”) and first person language (“to me”). It also avoids labeling “your father” and uses the more general “father figure” (which can just as easily be referring to the witness’s father).*

Using subjective language is not a form of “spin;” it is important the witness understand, and acknowledge, that her interpretations have more to do with *her* than with the psoloist. By using subjective language, the witness takes responsibility for her projections. She begins to break the habit of projecting unconsciously, no longer seeing ideas that arise as “*the truth*,” but instead as *her truth*.

It is also important not to jump to conclusions. A psolodrama that looks like a clear-cut scene between the psoloist and his wife may in fact have more to do with the psoloist’s relationship with his sister, or his chronic fears of abandonment (or all of these things at once!). When in doubt, it is best to let the psoloist take the first steps into interpretation—it is not necessary for the witness to provide an interpretation at all.

That said, even an interpretation that feels “off” to the psoloist can be useful: by moving the psoloist to differ, it motivates him to express how he actually feels, sometimes initiating a deeper conversation about the meaning of the psolodrama. (This is

similar to doubling in psychodrama: in a way, it is impossible to do it “wrong”—inaccurate doubling, by forcing the protagonist to speak his truth, helps open up his real feelings, leading to new insights or authentic emotional expression.)

Perhaps the best approach to interpretation is to tread lightly. There are ways of speaking that are playful, exploratory, open, receptive, and unattached—a creative dialogue between psoloist and witness. For example, the witness can use general interpretation, linking the metaphors, images, and roles that arise within the psolodrama, making connections that the psoloist, who is still immersed in the drama, may be unaware of. The witness can do this in a way that does not presume anything about the psoloist’s life—avoiding personal interpretation—just playfully arranging elements that may point to potential meaning, and checking in with the psoloist to invite him to negate or build on those ideas.

Another Kind of Sharing: Asking Questions

Sharing after psolodrama may not be limited to authentic movement reflection, psychodramatic sharing, and interpretation. For example, it is possible for the witness to ask the psoloist questions. Questions can help the witness better understand what happened during the psolodrama, offer the psoloist a chance to further explore aspects that had energy for him, and also provide different approaches to reflecting on the psolodrama and its broader meaning.

Questions should be used with caution. Asking questions should only be in support of the psoloist and not to satisfy the witness’s curiosity. It’s also best not to start by asking questions: when the psoloist has just shared something deeply personal or meaningful and may be feeling vulnerable or raw, possibly the last thing he needs is a

question forcing him to speak and explain himself. Better to begin (after asking the psoloist whether he would like to speak first) with authentic movement reflection or empathic psychodramatic sharing, both of which give the psoloist something in return for his efforts. The witness can usually sense when the psoloist may then be open and ready for a question.

There are different kinds of questions. Small questions of clarification are usually fine—e.g. “Sorry, it was a little unclear to me: was that the audience or the director who spoke to the protagonist after the mother hung up the phone?” Later, toward the end of the sharing process, bigger questions can be asked in a sensitive way—e.g. “So how do you feel now?” or “What are you taking from this?”—*if* the witness feels they would be helpful to the psoloist and that he will be open to those kinds of questions.

Questions to avoid include “why” questions: “Why did your mother hang up the phone?” Probing is usually not appropriate: “Do you think your mother was angry at you?” (One exception to both of these rules is if the psoloist is the witness’s therapy client—then these types of questions might be used to help further the therapy process.)

Acknowledging the Psoloist

When her psolodrama is over, the psoloist can feel exposed, alone, and awash with powerful feelings from the experience. Sharing provides an opportunity for the witness to help reestablish the sense of a safe, supportive container. One of the most effective ways of doing this is to acknowledge the psoloist.

Skillful acknowledgement is a subtle energy that can imbue all of the witness’s comments, helping make the sharing process a gift to the psoloist. Enthusiastic, specific,

and authentic acknowledgment is an expression of *metta*—a way to embrace the psoloist with words, strengthen the supportive container, and help the psoloist feel safe enough to share more, and in greater depth.

Skillful acknowledgement is not empty flattery. It is both **specific** and **authentic**—the witness is precise about what he is acknowledging, *and* honestly expresses how he feels. If his acknowledgement is lacking either of these qualities, the psoloist will usually be able to tell. There is a difference between saying: “That was a great psolodrama,” versus “I was particularly struck by the interactions between you as protagonist and the director role—there was sensitivity and caring there.”

How one acknowledges the psoloist is as important as the content of the words. The witness may feel his acknowledgement is authentic, but if his facial expression is blank or his voice is flat, the incongruity may convey to the psoloist disingenuousness or disconnection.

It also helps to be spontaneous and use a variety of approaches—otherwise one’s acknowledgments may begin to feel repetitive and stale. Anything the witness noticed in one of the “witnessing for” categories (see the previous chapter, “Witnessing Psolodrama”) can be the object of an acknowledgement—e.g., the quality of the psoloist’s movement, the use of her voice, a particular image that stood out, the way she played a certain role or the dynamic interaction between two roles, the depth and resonance of the story, etc.

A more subtle, perhaps deeper, form of acknowledgement is for the witness to take on the imagery, language, and energy of the psolodrama in his reflection, to, in a

sense, *enter the poem of the psolodrama*. This can help the psoloist feel deeply heard and empathized with—the most powerful form of acknowledgement.

Finally, if approached skillfully, with sensitivity and an intention to support the psoloist, one cannot acknowledge too much or too often—it is rare to find someone who feels “over-acknowledged” in their life.

Sharing as Meditation

“Both psoloist and witness are entering a realm of presence to the imaginal that is, well, sacred.” — longtime psolodrama practitioner

As with the act of witnessing, sharing, too, is a kind of meditation. Each type of sharing has its own parallel in meditation:

Authentic movement reflection is in itself an act of mindfulness and concentration, the witness focusing in on and reproducing her memory of what she observed. This form of sharing also gives voice to *vipassana’s* choiceless openness to the senses, the witness drawing from her memory of what arose in each of the six sense doors as she observed the psolodrama.

Psychodramatic sharing is a direct expression of *metta*, the witness empathizing with the psoloist, speaking from the heart.

Interpretation is best if the witness understands that her ideas are just thoughts, not to be attached to.

The simple act of speaking and listening in dialogue can itself be a meditation, if approached with that intention. By slowing down and noticing what is happening *inside* during the conversation, both psoloist and witness can break free from habits of conversing and allow the sharing process to come from a deeper, more mindful place. Greg Kramer, the creator of Insight Dialogue (1999), teaches how to Pause, Relax, and Open—pausing to be mindful, relaxing when noticing one’s own reactivity, and re-opening to the other. By treating the sharing process as a meditation, the witness can be aware of her presence, and by doing so be of even greater service to the psoloist. She can choose to relax, slow down, listen more, let go of her preconceptions, and really hear the psoloist in a fresh, unfiltered way.

Dealing with Hindrances

Reloading. A famous management guru once said: “Americans don’t listen, they reload.” During the psoloist’s sharing, if the witness notices her mind planning a response, she can let that go and come back to what the psoloist is saying, which—along with remaining aware of her own bodily/emotional reactions—is the object of her meditation. She can allow her face to soften, and gently nod or make subtle guttural noises (“mmmm”),

“uh-huh”, “yes”) in response to what the psoloist is saying. When it is her turn to speak, she can take it slowly, with sensitivity, following her intuition, entering the stream of feeling, imagery, and story that the psoloist has already established.

Forgetting—and worrying about forgetting. Striving to remember everything, and straining to reproduce all of it, can make the witness tense and interfere with a relaxed, organic sharing. A better approach is for her to take a deep breath (releasing her bodily tension on a relaxed sigh of relief) and let go of the need to cover everything, trusting that she will recall what is most important. Then she can simply reflect back what stands out first, describing it slowly and in depth. This will often naturally lead to the next thing to say, or to the psoloist’s response. It is not necessary to say a lot as the witness—even very simple reflections can be invaluable to the psoloist. That said, if the psoloist is open to it, the witness can take notes during the psolodrama, to help her recall details during the sharing process.

Taking Care with Language

For the psoloist, how the witness uses language makes a significant difference in his experience of the psolodrama and the sharing process.

As mentioned earlier, using language that acknowledges the witness’s subjective point of view is skillful, for by its very nature the witness role is a subjective one. The witness cannot read the psoloist’s mind and know for certain how he experiences a particular feeling, image, or role—so, by necessity, much of what she has to share is just one point of view, and not the most important one (the psoloist’s experience is primary). In order to be of greatest service to the psoloist, the witness approaches the process with

self-awareness, avoiding unconscious projections of her own experience onto him and avoiding language that implies projections.

A few keys to “sharing with caring” as the witness:

Be careful at the start, particularly if you are the first to share. Do not assume anything.

Say “this is my experience of what I saw,” rather than “you did this.” A self-aware witness takes ownership of every interpretation, no matter how small.

Use “responsible subjectivity:” own the imperfect nature of the witness point of view, and check back with the psoloist for accuracy.

For example, to say “you yelled” or that a role “yelled” is an interpretation. A different approach is to describe the moment on a physical level, and take ownership of one’s own reaction to that moment: “When I heard the protagonist in what I interpreted to be yelling, I inferred him to be angry.” The witness can physically demonstrate the facial expression and body posture she saw when reflecting back this moment. She can then check back with the psoloist to learn if what she had perceived was true for him or not.

In the above example, it’s also worth noting the use of first and third person (“I” and “the protagonist”), intentionally omitting the second person (“you”). For some, it may feel artificial and stilted to not say “you”—after all, the psoloist is right there in front of you! In my experience, I use slightly different language depending on who I am with and the level of informality I have established in the process. But even with a peer I’ve known for years, I will still often say “the protagonist,” rather than “you,” partly to help

differentiate which role in the psolodrama I am referring to, but also to avoid laying on the psoloist an assumed identification with the role he played in that moment.

No matter how long you have known the psoloist, never make assumptions. The witness may think that a certain role she observed was the director, but it does not hurt to check in with her psoloist as she speaks. Instead of stating, “then the director asked ‘how do you feel?’,” it’s often better to ask “then you reversed into what I took to be the director role, who asked ‘how do you feel?’—was that the director?” She may be surprised to learn it was actually the role of the protagonist’s sister, appearing in the psolodrama to comfort him. By not making assumptions, and checking carefully with the psoloist, the witness can better understand and empathize with the psolodrama.

Bridging Gaps Between Psoloist and Witness

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of witnessing psolodrama is dealing with differences between the psoloist’s and witness’s perspectives—and knowing how to respond skillfully when they conflict:

Focus Gap. The psoloist had his awareness on his fingertips, while the witness saw a whole-body image of the psoloist lying in a fetal position. Or, the psoloist’s big takeaway was when Albert Einstein appeared as an auxiliary ego, whereas the witness was most struck by a dialogue between the roles of mother and father. In these examples, the witness brings a different point of view from which the psoloist could possibly benefit. On the other hand, if these observations are shared in a way that is disconnected from the psoloist’s experience, the psoloist may feel that the witness is not in synch with him, not really watching, or didn’t understand. **One Approach:** It is always best to begin, as the

witness, by acknowledging, describing, or commenting on what the psoloist has already shared about his psolodrama. She can then add details the psoloist may have overlooked, or bring in aspects of the psolodrama she appreciated that the psoloist may not have, as long as she does it in a supportive way that acknowledges her subjective point of view.

Emotion Gap. In psolodrama, the psoloist experiences his emotions first-hand, while the witness observes signs of these emotions from the outside, ideally empathizing with them. Meanwhile, the witness also has emotional reactions of her own. One gap that can arise is that the witness may not perceive or understand all of the emotions the psoloist is having. Second, the witness's own emotions may be different from and not necessarily supportive of the psoloist's. **One Approach:** As much as possible, if the witness is sensing emotional content she feels unsure about—or is dealing with her own strong emotional reaction—she should let the psoloist lead the sharing. If the psoloist prefers not to speak first, the witness can begin by reflecting back the more clear-cut aspects of movement, sound, speech, and role, etc. This will usually prompt the psoloist to share more about his inner experience.

Aversion Gap. The witness may find she is personally uncomfortable with some of the content of the psolodrama. It is tempting to speak about her discomfort during the sharing process. However, the psoloist may perceive her remarks as judgmental, perhaps causing him to judge his own process, or to question her ability to be an impartial, supportive witness. **One Approach:** A better way might be to wait until after the sharing process is complete—or even wait a day or two—before raising the issue with the psoloist (“Would it be OK to share with you something that came up for me during our psolodrama process?”). Or the witness may decide that it is best not to speak about her

negative reaction, but work with herself to accept that the psoloist's ideas, fantasies, beliefs, morals, etc., are different from her own.

Interpretation Gap. The psoloist and witness may have very different ideas about what happened in the psolodrama and its meaning. **One Approach:** The witness should let the psoloist lead the sharing, and in her own response stick to authentic movement reflection and psychodramatic sharing. If she does share her interpretation, it should be done in a way that underscores her limited, subjective point of view.

Expectation Gap. Sometimes the psoloist and witness have different needs or expectations about what each wants to get out of the experience. For example, the witness may feel bored, yearning for more action in the psolodrama, wanting to be entertained; meanwhile, the psoloist is doing some very subtle, careful, meditative work. **One Approach:** The witness needs to remember that she is there completely in service to the psoloist's process. This means she needs to readjust her own expectations to better fit what is happening, and bring her attention back to the details of what the psoloist is doing—treating witnessing as a meditation (see the prior chapter on witnessing). A key guideline of psolodrama is that the witness will get what she gets—this is not a play and the psoloist has no responsibility to entertain or even communicate clearly. In sharing, the witness seeks ways to reflect and affirm the psoloist's discoveries, and not let her own unmet expectations cloud the interaction.

Sharing Do's and Don'ts

In summary, here are some of the key things to do—and not do—as witness when sharing:

Sharing Do's	Sharing Don'ts
Enter with an intention to serve the psoloist and her process.	Enter with the attitude of an audience member, wanting to be entertained.
Pay close attention during the psolodrama so that your sharing will be detailed and accurate.	Allow distractions or drowsiness to steal your focus.
Begin by asking the psoloist: "Would you like to speak first, or shall I?"	Jump in and start sharing before the psoloist is ready.
Listen intently to the psoloist's sharing.	Interrupt the psoloist to add your observations or ask questions.
Focus on authentic movement reflection and psychodramatic sharing in your response. Add interpretation only if/when the psoloist is open to it.	Interpret the meaning or emotional content of the psolodrama before hearing the psoloist's take on it.
Be detailed, using your body and voice to demonstrate what you saw and heard the psoloist doing.	Sum it up in a few words.
Acknowledge the limited, subjective perspective of your sharing ("it seemed to me that...", "what I felt was...", etc.).	Speak as the expert, or contradict the psoloist's perceptions of the psolodrama.
Acknowledge the psoloist specifically, authentically, and enthusiastically.	React to the psolodrama with judgment, critique, apathy, or clinical distance.

The Sum of Sharing's Parts

As psoloist and witness get to know one another better, the boundaries between authentic movement reflection, psychodramatic sharing, and interpretation tend to melt. Sharing becomes a fluid conversation, a chance to look at the psolodrama from many angles, and engage in an honest—and sometimes profound—dialogue on the nature of life and death, happiness and suffering, morality, beliefs, family, work, relationships, etc.

This conversation is not only a reflection on the psolodrama process; it extends, amplifies, and deepens it by creating new opportunities for insight and growth for both witness and psoloist.

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Coaching Psolodrama

The story is told that there was once a young monk who found a chrysalis in the monastery garden. He sat to watch as the butterfly emerged. The butterfly seemed to struggle, getting halfway out. The monk decided to help the butterfly, and carefully cut open the chrysalis. The insect flopped onto the ground. The body was large and the wings small and shriveled. As the monk sat and watched, the butterfly died.

Biologists now know that in a butterfly's struggle from the chrysalis, fluid is forced out of its body and into its wings, stretching and opening them. A butterfly needs that struggle to mature. By "helping," trying to shortcut the process, the monk had robbed the insect of its chance to fly.

Psolodrama is designed to give the psoloist complete autonomy, relatively free from the influence of the peer witness or therapist.

But with this freedom comes responsibility: the psoloist is playwright, director, actor, and therapist all at the same time. Not only does psolodrama demand a good deal of spontaneity as an improviser, it also requires the psoloist to be present, focused, and not thrown off by doubt, fear, or confronting strong emotions.

Coaching can help.

Especially for someone new to psolodrama, a witness experienced in the practice and acting as a coach can provide simple and clear guidance, helping the psoloist refocus and return to action. By listening carefully and coaching only when requested, the witness/coach can strengthen the sense of safety and support necessary for the psoloist to explore deeply.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the principles of spare and effective coaching, as well as offer examples of where psoloists tend to get stuck and tips for the coach on how to respond.

Coaching Psolodrama	
<p><i>Coaching Psolodrama—in Brief</i></p> <p>—</p> <p><i>The Mission of the Coach</i> Short and Long-term Goals</p> <p>—</p> <p><i>Coaching Contexts</i> Peer Practice Individual Therapy Training Variation: Active Coaching</p>	<p><i>The Coaching Contract</i> Questions to Establish the Contract Coaching without a Contract</p> <p>—</p> <p><i>Coaching Examples</i></p> <p>—</p> <p><i>In Summary: Coaching Best Practices</i></p>

Coaching Psolodrama—in Brief

Coaching in psolodrama is an extension of the witness role. The witness only coaches if requested by the psoloist beforehand or during the psolodrama; this is called the *coaching contract* (described in greater detail, below).

When coaching, the witness typically remains seated, and is neither in physical nor eye contact with the psoloist (whose eyes generally are closed).

A good coach is succinct: she keeps her words to the absolute minimum required to be of help, so as not to unnecessarily disturb the psoloist's process. She intervenes as little as possible, offering coaching only when needed.

The coach typically does not ask questions, unless absolutely necessary, nor does she engage the psoloist in a dialogue.

When she offers coaching, it stems directly from what is already happening in the psolodrama, and does not introduce new ideas. For example, if the psoloist mentions his mother, it is helpful to say "become your mother;" but not helpful to suggest a new character or scene. (The Kelman rule—"if you have a good idea, don't do it"—applies to coaching psolodrama.)

The psoloist can choose to accept the coaching, or not—like the double in psychodrama, the coach is only offering a possibility, which the psoloist might actively disagree with, and choose a different path. This is not only okay; it can actually help the psoloist clarify what he wants.

The most important quality of the witness/coach is patience. Challenging though it may be, a good witness must often sit in the presence of the psoloist's struggle or stuck pattern, observing with mindfulness and *metta*, but not attempting to coach. Then, afterwards, in the sharing, she serves as a mirror, reflecting back what she saw, helping the psoloist see what he does in a new way. By *not* intervening during the psolodrama (even if she was given permission to do so by the psoloist), the witness allows the psoloist to struggle and grow, much like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis.

The Mission of the Coach

The purpose of the coach in psolodrama is to support the psoloist in whatever ways he needs. Ultimately, the coach is trying to eliminate her own job; to transfer her awareness to the psoloist, so that he can develop into his own best coach. After all, psolodrama is designed to be practiced *without* coaching—thus the embedded “solo” in the term.

When providing coaching, a good witness balances three desired outcomes, two immediate and one longer term. These three goals parallel those of a good psychodrama director, who must help the protagonist progress in the action moment-by-moment, shape a satisfying psychodrama as a whole, and keep a broader awareness of the client’s long-term therapeutic goals:

I. Immediate Goal: Return the Psoloist to Action. In most cases, the psoloist who seeks or needs coaching is lost, confused, stuck, trapped in a pattern, overwhelmed, or over-intellectualizing (see the chapter “Troubleshooting Psolodrama” for more on all of these pitfalls). What’s missing, nine times out of ten, is the ability to move forward, to embody roles and have them interact. A few words from the coach can help: what may be murky to the psoloist is often obvious from the outside perspective. Achieving this immediate goal also means the coaching is *brief*; returning to action does not mean engaging in a long dialogue with the psoloist.

II. Desired Outcomes for the Psolodrama: Insight and Catharsis. A good coach also maintains the broader perspective of where the psolodrama as a whole may go, and what the purpose is. For example, a psoloist on the edge of a cathartic release may not

need guidance to reverse roles (typical coaching for goal #1, above), but instead could probably use encouragement to stay with his feelings, and express them fully.

III. Overarching Objective for the Work: Empower the Psoloist. Finally, a good coach is always aware of the broader goals of doing psolodrama—to empower the psoloist to trust his own inner wisdom, to discover his own story without others’ guidance, to explore his own feelings (and, by extension his life and world) with courage and curiosity. In the process of learning and doing psolodrama, this overarching goal eventually supersedes the other two: a good coach can tell when the psoloist is ready to find his own way, without intervention—to let the butterfly fly.

Coaching Contexts

There are three different situations in which one may be called upon to coach, each of which requires a different orientation and approach:

Peer practice. When working with someone new to psolodrama, the witness may need to begin by teaching her the form and then offer to guide and/or coach during the process, until the psoloist feels she “gets it” and can proceed on her own. When a more experienced peer asks for coaching, the witness must remind himself that he is not her therapist, and keep his interventions to the minimum necessary to be useful.

Individual therapy. As a drama therapist, when *not* using psolodrama, I am constantly shifting roles: empathic listener, witness, and coach, as well as at times psychodrama director, auxiliary ego, and double. Clients who are ready to do psolodrama have already grown used to my directing/coaching other forms—leading meditations, structuring role plays, and facilitating other exercises, such as authentic movement,

shared *vipassana*, role stream, and scene stream. The client expectation is that I will continue to coach. At first, psolodrama with coaching feels like a natural extension of the monodramas (one-person psychodramas, directed by me) that the client is already doing. When I feel a client is ready, I introduce the idea of psolodrama as a truly solo, autonomous form, and, over the course of several sessions wean the psoloist from being coached. This change marks an important shift in the therapeutic process: the client, no longer dependent on the therapist for “what happens next,” continues to build the awareness and self-confidence to go on her own journeys, still held within the safety of the witnessing therapist’s presence—and still able to discuss with the therapist what happened, afterward. (*More on the use of psolodrama and Insight Improvisation in therapy appears in the chapter “Working with Individuals” in Part IV.*)

Training. It is not unusual for participants in Insight Improv training programs to encounter challenges when trying psolodrama for the first time. For this reason, when practicing psolodrama in dyads, witnesses are encouraged to offer support and coaching to their partners. The workshop facilitator may also coach when an individual is doing psolodrama before the entire group; however, as in peer work, it is key to clarify the coaching contract (see below) with them before they begin.

Variation: A More Active Coach

In either individual therapy or the workshop context, if the client or participant requires extra support, and if the therapist or workshop facilitator is an experienced psychodramatist or drama therapist, a different kind of coaching becomes possible: the coach can enter the space and work with the psoloist, asking the types of questions a

psychodrama director might, helping guide the psoloist to follow imagery and role into dialogue, conflict, etc., and using touch when appropriate to provide support. Once the psoloist is on track or back on track, the coach can return to her seated witnessing role, or she can remain standing to observe and be ready to step in once again. This more active form of coaching can be useful in several situations: if the psoloist is working very quietly, calling out coaching from the sidelines can feel intrusive, whereas coming nearer and whispering may be just right; for a psoloist feeling overwhelmed by strong emotions, active coaching provides added support; for a new psoloist working for the first time in front of a group, active coaching can help alleviate the sense of isolation and pressure to perform.

The Coaching Contract

Questions to Establish the Contract

When in doubt, particularly in a peer or workshop situation working with someone new, it always helps to ask the psoloist his preferences for being coached, before he begins his psolodrama. Answers to these questions help establish the coaching contract:

- ⊙ Would you like me to provide coaching from outside if you get stuck?

If the answer is "yes:"

- ⊙ Would you like me to offer coaching spontaneously or wait for you to ask me?

And, for a more experienced psoloist who wants to be coached:

- ⊙ Anything in particular that tends to come up for you that you would like to be coached on?

Coaching Without a Contract

It almost goes without saying (but not quite!): ***Never coach someone who has not asked to be coached.*** It is a serious disruption of the psoloist-witness container to speak or try to coach during psolodrama without prior agreement.

That said, if coaching was not discussed before the psolodrama begins, and it becomes evident during the process that an inexperienced psoloist has become stuck, and does not know how to ask for coaching, the witness might venture to gently ask “would you like some support or coaching?”

However, it is not always clear when the psoloist is stuck versus exploring something in a different way. A psoloist who sits without speaking or playing any roles for a very long period of time, looking troubled and/or crying, may be stuck—or may simply be very present to his feelings. Tread carefully. And with an experienced psoloist, never coach without prior permission.

Coaching Examples

Good coaching is a spontaneous act, adapting itself to what is needed in the moment. No two psolodramas are the same, nor two psoloists. The examples which follow, therefore, are not exact recipes to be followed precisely, but rather representative situations in which coaching may be called for, accompanied by tips for what *might* work

in such situations. Nor is this an exhaustive list; one's first time coaching psolodrama may present a completely novel challenge.

Note that many of the examples below assume that the psoloist has given the witness license to coach without waiting for a request from the psoloist, something which is common in the therapy context but less common in peer practice or a workshop setting.

Some of the coaching interventions below may feel more appropriate for a trained drama therapist or psychodramatist than for a peer coach. In general, the witness should only coach in a way that she feels personally comfortable with, coaching the psoloist on things that she has experienced in psolodrama herself. If at any time the witness does not feel comfortable coaching, it is important to remember that simply witnessing—listening, observing, and holding the space for the psoloist in a nonjudgmental, compassionate way—is the most important contribution any witness can make.

Psoloist is moving, perhaps making sound, but not speaking words.

Coaching: "Speak aloud—use words."

Speaking aloud helps a shy or inexperienced psoloist get out of her head and break free of repetitive thought patterns. The voice also makes possible a dialogue between protagonist and auxiliary ego (as well as the other psychodramatic roles), and can be a powerful vehicle for accessing emotion.

Most psoloists benefit from starting their psolodramas with silent authentic movement, progressing to adding sound, words, roles, etc.—if the psoloist is not speaking early on, wait a few minutes more to see what unfolds.

Although there are experienced psoloists (e.g., those with a strong background in authentic movement, meditation, focusing, or similar disciplines) for whom a completely

wordless psolodrama can be very powerful, for those new to the form it is more typical that not speaking is a way of keeping one's thoughts/feelings inside, perhaps out of fear of exposing them to the witness, out of shyness, or just because they are not used to speaking their thoughts aloud with eyes closed.

Psoloist is speaking in a monologue, in the role of protagonist (P1) only.

Coaching: "Try reversing roles—become the auxiliary ego."

If an auxiliary ego role has yet to appear in the psolodrama, encourage the psoloist to return to authentic movement and then to role stream to discover the "other" role and become it. If necessary, guide the psoloist to create a dialogue between the protagonist and that auxiliary role.

(Note that if the psoloist is having trouble entering other—non-P1 protagonist—roles, or having trouble reversing roles, some training steps may have been missing, particularly empty chair, role stream, and scene stream.)

Psoloist, lost/confused, stops and asks for coaching—but has not yet accessed his own inner wisdom.

Coaching: "Become the director role."

If the psoloist is new to the form, ask "what would your inner therapist, your wise guide, say to you or ask you right now?" If the psoloist is still at a loss, remind him: "The director can ask a good question, such as 'how do you feel?' or 'what do you need right now?'"

Psoloist rushes by a potentially emotional moment in his psolodrama, perhaps even opening his eyes to self-distract.

Coaching: “Close your eyes once again; let yourself feel the feelings you are having.”

Encourage the psoloist to stay with the feelings, to experience them fully, to notice where the feelings are in his body, and to keep breathing and relaxing the body. If tears are there but being stifled, reassure the psoloist that it’s OK to cry—that crying is part of the process.

Tone of voice is important in coaching. When encouraging the psoloist to close his eyes and get in touch with his feelings, a gentle, soothing voice works best. A good coach can communicate empathy, caring, clarity, and a sense of possibility, all through vocal quality.

Psoloist is talking a lot, being clever, intellectualizing, or performing—but not letting her body/gut lead the way.

Coaching: “Return to authentic movement.”

This kind of coaching can be especially useful for someone new to authentic movement, someone who is used to performing for an audience, or someone who tends to be very verbal/intellectual, not in her body.

One indicator that something is amiss is that the spirit of authentic movement is absent from the psolodrama. For example, the psoloist’s eyes may be open, or it may become evident that she is making decisions not based on information from her body, but purely from her head.

If the psoloist is new to authentic movement or psolodrama, she may need additional guidance: “Let your eyes close. Return to stillness and silence for a moment.

Notice your body. Notice your breath. Notice how you feel right now. Relax—let go of any tension or holding you are noticing. Now begin to notice movement impulse—it may be something tiny, some small movement already happening in your body. Allow yourself to follow that movement. Let your body lead the way to what’s next in your psolodrama.”

Psoloist is overwhelmed by emotion or the content of the psolodrama, and cannot proceed.

Coaching: Find out what the psoloist needs.

If the psoloist is able to respond, find out whether he would like to continue his psolodrama or not, and provide guidance to help him do what he wants—e.g., to return to silent authentic movement, letting the content of the psolodrama go; to transition to a completely new and different scene of the psolodrama; or to end the psolodrama and come sit with you to discuss it.

If the psoloist is wracked with pain or grief, with a lot of tears, physical contact such as a steady hand on his shoulder or back can help—ask permission first if you are unsure whether this is OK. (Avoid unconsciously signaling that you want the psoloist to stop crying: e.g., patting the psoloist or offering tissues without being asked.)

If the psoloist does not respond to you, he may be dissociating—lost in the drama, not returning to the present moment. Dissociation of this type is rare, but can sometimes be a sign of a more serious problem. Have him open his eyes, make eye contact with you (physical contact, such as taking/squeezing hands, can also help) and gently guide him back to the here and now: “OK. The psolodrama is over. You’re back here in the room with me. Let’s just relax and breathe together for a moment. How are you doing?” It can

also be useful to offer a drink of water. (*As cautioned earlier in Part III, it is not recommended to practice psolodrama with someone lacking clear ego boundaries or who is in danger of dissociating, such as a patient suffering from schizophrenia or a dissociative disorder.*)

Psoloist is engaged in an extended dialogue with the director (or another role), and is missing cues to action; —or—

Psoloist has a desire to break free of her usual pattern, to be more creative in the psolodrama, but does not know how.

Coaching: “Become the ___” (whatever the protagonist just said).

Sometimes the psoloist gets *too* comfortable in a particular scene, and rather than move the action forward, begins to talk in circles, with little progress made. This is often out of a hidden resistance to—fear of—change, growth, discovering something new. Or, in a variation on the above, the psoloist expresses a *desire* to change, to break out of patterns, to be creative (or less concrete) in the psolodrama, but does not see how to do it.

Meanwhile, the psoloist’s language—particularly those words spoken by the protagonist—are filled with unconscious clues to what’s next, cues which could be acted on immediately using role reversal, to become a new character, emotion, idea, etc. Especially for an inexperienced psoloist, the coach is often in a better position to hear and reflect back those cues.

For example, the protagonist (P1) might be saying to the director:

“...which my mother always warned me was too dangerous. But I wanted to cross that street by myself.”

The coach could say:

“Become your mother.” —or—

“Become the danger.” —or—

“Become the busy street.” —or—

“It’s happening now: you’re crossing that street.”

Doing any of the above would help break the psoloist out of talk-mode and return her to action.

Psoloist has very low self-esteem, e.g., buying into abusive voices of critique from auxiliary roles of parent, sibling, boss, etc.; —or—

Psoloist mistakes the inner critic for the director role, and is locked in a sadomasochistic pattern; —or—

Psoloist is too shy/stuck to speak at all about her real issues, spending the psolodrama on seemingly trivial things.

Coaching: Wait until the sharing process to reflect back the pattern you noticed, doing so compassionately but honestly; in her next psolodrama, if the pattern repeats, invite in supportive voices (e.g., a favorite relative, teacher, etc., in the role of auxiliary ego or audience).

It can be tempting as the witness/coach, if given license by the psoloist, to immediately intervene if you perceive a pattern that appears stuck or dysfunctional.

But like the monk and the butterfly at the beginning of this chapter, if one interferes prematurely, the psoloist may never experience her own struggle deeply enough to find the inner resources to overcome it herself.

The witness must sit with his own discomfort and trust that the psoloist will find her own way.

If the pattern repeats itself in the *next* psolodrama—the psoloist is truly stuck or engaging in a kind of repetition compulsion (i.e., repeatedly reenacting a memory of abuse)—then it may be time to offer coaching. One approach is to help the psoloist find a different kind of auxiliary ego role, a supportive role that can help her feel safe enough to journey more deeply, or to fight back against the abuse. Encourage her to pick a favorite relative, teacher, or coach, or even her favorite famous or fictional character expressing wisdom, kindness, or protection (the Dalai Lama, Yoda from *Star Wars*, Nelson Mandela, Jesus, Buddha, etc.).

Of course, any supportive role is really a conduit for the psoloist to access her own inner wisdom. The supportive auxiliary serves as an ally in talking back to powerful voices of criticism or abuse. And it can also model a more compassionate director role and inner-witness.

In Summary: Coaching Best Practices

Coach only when asked by the psoloist. Clarify the coaching contract beforehand.

Be sensitive and have restraint. Notice when the psoloist needs to be exactly where he is. Practice witnessing as meditation, learning to sit with the discomfort of wanting to coach but knowing the psoloist needs to work through his own struggle.

Return the psoloist to action; help her turn words/concepts into auxiliary egos she can embody and dialogue with.

When needed, **help the psoloist return to the entryway phases of the psolodramatic progression**—authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and

scene stream—to return to bodily awareness, open to the senses, add the voice, discover new imagery and roles, and create dialogue.

Keep it brief. Avoid dialogue with the psoloist, complex instructions, questions, or anything that would pull the psoloist away from the reality of his psolodrama.

Avoid interpretation of the psolodrama, engaging in problem-solving, or offering brand new ideas to the psoloist; any coaching should be simple, concrete, and spring directly from what has already happened or something the psoloist has just said.

Balance short- and long-term goals. Return to action in the present moment, cultivating insight and catharsis in this psolodrama, *and* empower the psoloist to be her own coach in the long run.

Psolodrama Alone

A man can be himself only so long as he is alone, and if he does not love solitude, he will not love freedom, for it is only when he is alone that he is really free.

— *Arthur Schopenhauer*

Cautionary Note: Psolodrama is a practice designed for those who can hold and support their own emotional process. This chapter discusses using the psolodrama technique alone, unaccompanied by another person in the role of witness. For those suffering from trauma, depression, addiction, or other mental illness or disorder, it is **not** recommended to use psolodrama, or any other Insight Improvisation technique, alone.

Psolodrama Alone

Benefits of Solo Psolodrama

How to Work Alone

Overcoming Obstacles

Over the years while developing psolodrama as a form, I have at times wanted to do the inner work that psolodrama facilitates but have been without a partner to witness me. Such an occasion arose while I was living in Thailand in 2007, and I found myself separated from my community of peers in the Boston area. Finding alternative ways of tapping into my body and psyche—especially being able to work alone without a witness—was vital to my process of growth and sense of emotional, mental, and spiritual health.

My friend and colleague Christopher Ellinger (a great champion of personal growth and social change through the arts) first suggested that I do psolodrama “solo.” I had recently taught him the psolodrama form, and he spontaneously decided to experiment with it alone. My first reaction was “sounds interesting, but it cannot be nearly as rich or focused as when working with a witness.” But my later experience in working alone proved this statement false.

Earlier in my work as a theater artist, I had attempted to create solo pieces by myself, without the assistance of a director. Although these pieces were ultimately successful, the process of creation was difficult. When I was in the studio alone, I found

myself lacking focus and motivation while overtaken by self-judgment. When reacting to Christopher's suggestion, I assumed that doing psolodrama alone would be a similar experience. But by then, I had already sown the seeds that led me to proving this assumption to be wrong.

Firstly, I had developed Insight Improvisation and the psolodrama form which create a sound structure and a clear set of distinctions and thus provide a “conceptual container” within which to work by myself. Secondly, I had ventured much more deeply into the practices of meditation and authentic movement, which helped me develop greater patience, mindfulness, and increased self-awareness and, most important of all, a more supportive inner-witness. With these developments, I found that I no longer felt lost or internally criticized when alone in the studio.

I discovered to my surprise and delight that doing psolodrama alone is not only possible but can be deeply moving, rich, and satisfying. It is an opportunity for uncensored self-expression, and to discover, gain insight into, and reflect on one's own mental, emotional, and spiritual state.

Benefits of Solo Psolodrama

Before discussing the benefits of working alone, it is important to clarify that I am *not* suggesting that doing psolodrama by oneself is superior to working with a partner—or with a therapist. There is no substitute for having a supportive witness, particularly one who can observe keenly and reflect back with empathy and wisdom. For those new to psolodrama, it is strongly recommended to begin by working with a trusted witness, before attempting to do psolodrama alone. In early stages, the development of one's

nonjudgmental inner witness occurs when it is modeled by an empathic external witness. Over time, working with an experienced witness can be transformative in deepening one's practice.

However, solo psolodrama has certain advantages.

One of the benefits of working alone is greater freedom. I have experienced a total freedom to express myself—to express the fullness of my feelings, my truth, in a completely uncensored way. Even before the best-trained nonjudgmental witness, I can feel guarded at times. Alone, that censorship disappears.

One example of this greater freedom is in the expression of emotion. Just as when working with a partner, psolodrama alone provides a space for catharsis. When working with a partner, it can be supportive and affirming to be witnessed having a cathartic emotional moment. Experiencing one's strong feelings in the presence of a witness can help develop qualities of vulnerability and openness with others. For some, the supportive presence of a witness helps provides a safe container in which they can fully express their feelings. But for others, being witnessed while getting emotional can feel *too* vulnerable, and can get in the way of a complete emotional release. Working solo, the psoloist can find herself crying in response to deep emotional realizations about her past and present, her family of origin, and her relationships with others. Because she is alone, she can simply be present to the feelings, without the added layer of awareness that someone else is watching her have those feelings. She can also learn that if she touches deep feelings when by herself, she can be OK—it does not need to be a “nervous breakdown” or a way to indulge in self-pity.

The added freedom of working alone goes beyond tears. Anything one might ordinarily censor when working with a partner is free to come up. This can include emotions such as anger, fear, or embarrassment; self-judgments voiced by a critic role (e.g., things I so dislike about myself that I'm too embarrassed to share them with another person); grandiose roles and situations (e.g., I may worry I'll come across as conceited in the witness's eyes if during my psolodrama I receive an affirming message from God or the Buddha); or anything that I fear will appear or sound too silly, strange, sexual, violent, rude, gross, etc.

Of course, each "advantage" of solo work also signifies an area of potential growth when working with a partner. For example, if I can learn to look silly in front of another person, or expose a part of myself that I am ashamed of, this is one further step in owning my own shadow and normalizing/socializing the split off parts of me. Doing psolodrama alone *and* with others can help me discover what I am suppressing, where I'm not being fully authentic and self-expressed.

Working with a partner, the witness can have a subtle influence on the content or process of one's psolodrama. Sometimes just knowing my witness likes a certain thing or has a certain way of being may unconsciously cause me to bend in that direction. Practicing psolodrama alone, I get to put my social self aside, the part of me that tries to please or be sensitive to others, and instead explore what is really going on inside myself, what is truly authentic for me.

I have also experienced a greater freedom as a witness. When sharing from the witness's cushion after a solo psolodrama (more about this below), I can feel free to interpret the meaning of what happened, knowing that I cannot make a mistake and

thereby offend the other—there is no other to offend! In witnessing myself, I have more intimate knowledge of the psoloist, his history, his emotional state, and his needs, than is usually the case.

Then, of course, there are the logistical advantages of working unaccompanied: with no partner there is no need to schedule with someone else, agree where to work, deal with the other person being late, etc. There is no need to agree on what warm-up to do; the psoloist can simply follow her impulse. She also has complete freedom of timing and form: if a solo psolodrama is feeling very rich but not yet complete, she can decide in the moment to keep going for as long as she pleases—whereas if time is limited with a partner, running over may not be possible or can feel awkward (she may have to interrupt the flow to communicate with her partner regarding timing) and can reduce the amount of time there is to reflect on the experience.

As with partner psolodrama, doing psolodrama alone has opened doorways to new insights into my life challenges, patterns, and stuck places, helping me find new ways to grow and change. Working alone, psolodrama becomes a type of embodied self-coaching—a way for me to draw on my own wisdom and guidance (the wisdom and guidance of the infinite community of roles within me), while also helping me dig deeper for the core truths underneath the challenges I am facing.

Finally, I have experienced in solo work another kind of freedom, one that artists working alone in the studio have drawn upon for inspiration: a greater openness to the unexpected. Once, after doing a moving solo psolodrama, I was about to enter the sharing phase when I received a phone call from my significant other (I had neglected to turn off the phone!). So, instead of sharing with my “witness” (myself in witness role), I found

myself sharing with my partner what had happened. Her reaction was beautifully supportive, and helped reinforce what I had discovered in the psolodrama.

How to Work Alone

Cautionary Note: It is strongly recommend to anyone wishing to try psolodrama alone that they first get a firm grounding working with another person— ideally, an experienced, supportive witness. If one has never practiced these forms, especially authentic movement, it is important to develop one's own inner witness within the container provided by the nonjudgmental, perceptive witnessing of another. Also, practicing the progression of authentic movement into shared vipassana, role stream, scene stream, and then psolodrama—becoming confident in that progression with the help of a partner—strengthens skills which can be applied when working alone.

Preparation is important; each person needs to discover his or her own ritual for working alone. When working with a partner, it is helpful to check-in and warm-up together. Working alone, I usually begin my practice by changing into movement clothes, clearing the space, setting up tools such as timing and recording devices, turning off telephones, etc.

A space that feels supportive to the practice is crucial. One needs privacy to raise one's voice, sufficient space to move, comfortable temperature and lighting. (All of

this becomes more important when working alone, as there is no other person to help create the sense of containment: it's just the psoloist and the space!) It is not necessary to have a lot of space: a bedroom or home office can often be sufficient.

A good warm-up not only helps one become relaxed and present, but also gets one's voice, body, energy, and creativity engaged. Personally, I enjoy preceding solo psolodrama with a little sitting meditation. More expressive activities such as yoga, dance, and improvisational singing can help free up one's instrument and ready it for playing a variety of roles. However, if one is pressed for time, the opening stages of the practice, authentic movement and shared vipassana, can serve as a warm-up.

A smartphone or other device can provide timing and potentially audio (or video) recording. For those still learning the “entryway” progression—authentic movement, shared vipassana, etc.—a more advanced timer app (such as a meditation timer) can help by providing alarms every two to three minutes for the opening stages, and then sound a two-minute warning prior to ending. Recording the psolodrama can help provide a little bit of the containing quality of an external witness; knowing that I am “on” now and being watched (or at least listened to) can lessen the likelihood my mind will wander, or that I will choose to stop and break out of the action.

Just Do It! In most ways, doing psolodrama alone is no different than with a witness. The psoloist allows her awareness to enter her body, and begins to follow her body as it moves. She begins to speak aloud what she is noticing coming through the six sense doors. She then notices what role or character this body position, movement, image, or vocal quality reminds her of, and becomes that role, moving, sounding, and speaking as it. She allows other roles to emerge, inviting interactions between roles. And she

accesses the various psychodramatic roles—protagonist, auxiliary ego, double, director, and audience—as she “cooks” the scenes to explore the emerging theme, conflict, or issue.

When she is done with her psolodrama, either reaching a natural ending or bringing her psolodrama to an end when the timer goes off, she can put some closure on the process in a few different ways, e.g. with silent meditation, journaling, drawing, etc..

My favorite thing to do after a solo psolodrama is to have a **sharing dialogue between the witness and the psoloist**. I find this to be a wonderful part of the process to preserve when working alone. After a solo psolodrama, I set up two cushions, one for the psoloist and one for the witness. I first sit on the witness cushion, and ask the psoloist (yes: I talk to the other, empty, cushion!) if he would like to speak first. Then I reverse roles, sitting on the psoloist’s cushion, and take a moment to really think/feel—do I have something I wish to say? Usually I do, and begin to reflect on the experience of the psolodrama, what were the most meaningful parts to me personally. When I feel finished speaking, I reverse roles again, sitting on the witness cushion. Here I allow myself to take the perspective of an outside eye: what if I were a good coach or drama therapist who had just witnessed this psolodrama—knowing Joel, what would I say to him that would be useful and supportive? Taking this perspective, I speak about what moved me, reflecting on parts of the process the psoloist may have omitted in his sharing, as well as discussing the meaning of various images and interactions. This can often lead to a dialogue with the psoloist, in which I find myself reversing roles several times. In a sense, the witness role is another manifestation of the director or double—each of these roles holds aspects of the supportive witness.

Although witnessing oneself can be quite satisfying, it is also powerful to later on share one's psolodrama experiences and insights with an actual other person, such as a close friend, partner, therapist, etc. Doing so is a bit like sharing a dream, or like discussing the personal insights from one's meditation practice. Having the other's affirmation and input can be encouraging, and can also help put challenges or struggles in perspective.

Overcoming Obstacles

One of the challenges when doing partner psolodrama (especially for those of us with theater backgrounds) is to understand that one is *not performing*. It can be very tempting, with the witness present as a live "audience member" watching attentively, to seek to entertain or engage the other.

The need to perform, and the desire for an audience, also presents a challenge when working alone. As an actor, attempting to perform my one-man show alone in a studio years ago felt strange and dissatisfying. Doing psolodrama by myself, I find it helps to close my eyes, tune into the body, and follow it into the world of imagination and role. As I sound and speak aloud, it is not to communicate with an audience, but rather to help me focus on the present moment, and to express feelings, thoughts, and create interactions between roles.

Distractions can bedevil the solo practitioner, both inner and outer ones. It can help to find as quiet and private a space to work in as possible, where one cannot be interrupted. But even then the unexpected is inevitable. Before beginning, one should make a commitment to complete the session, even if interrupted or distracted.

Inner distractions are worse—I may enter the authentic movement phase only to find that three minutes of thinking have gone by (planning, worrying...) and I have completely missed my own movement! Again, it must be the commitment of the psoloist to notice when this happens and simply return to being present, as in any good meditation, and continue with whatever next phase is in the process. It is important not to get caught up in judging oneself about the mind wandering—some days I am more focused than others, this is natural. If extraneous thinking is getting out of hand, it can be helpful to channel it into the process, by speaking those thoughts—this works especially well in the shared vipassana phase and is also easily incorporated into role stream, scene stream, and psolodrama. Also, having a timer with multiple bells for the different phases is great for bringing one back from mental wandering.

For the reasons mentioned above, the silent authentic movement phase may prove especially challenging for some when working alone. If so, try skipping this step, and do a longer shared vipassana.

If speaking aloud when alone proves difficult, it is important to diagnose why—does the psoloist feel shy (e.g., that someone will overhear), or feel that it is just strange to be “speaking to herself?” The psoloist might try whispering to start with to see if that feels easier. For myself, I find that working in a space where I can be as loud as I like is important—my best psolodramas are ones in which the range of expressiveness is wide: I need to be able to shout and sing and do whatever moves me in the moment. I also find that keeping eyes closed makes moving and speaking more natural—I can really place myself imaginatively in the scene.

For some, the biggest obstacle to doing psolodrama alone will be the lack of the container normally provided by the outside witness. Without this container, the psoloist may feel overwhelmed by his emotions, stuck in his issues or in repeated patterns, or caught in his head. If this is the case, it is important to be patient with oneself, and to draw upon all the tools of psolodrama: the ability to return to stillness and bodily awareness; to re-enter authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, or scene stream; or to call upon the director role, the double, or other supportive roles (such as a favorite mentor or wise figure).

If one feels overwhelmed, it is also possible to end the psolodrama and have a conversation with the “witness” (oneself on the other cushion), reviewing what transpired and finding the value in it.

However, if these obstacles prove too great, one must also be sensitive to when doing psolodrama alone is *not* appropriate—to realize when having the support of a friend or therapist is needed. Solo psolodrama is not for everyone: it takes experience in the psolodrama form (as well as in such foundational forms as meditation, authentic movement, and psychodrama); a supportive, nonjudgmental inner witness; as well as having clear ego boundaries and a positive, constructive outlook on one’s life.

As the warning at the beginning of this chapter says, please do not attempt psolodrama alone if you are suffering from depression, trauma, addiction, or other mental illness or disorder. These “obstacles” are not meant to be surmounted or ignored, but instead honored and treated with care.

Final Thoughts

Psolodrama, practiced alone, is a pure expression of what Insight Improvisation was created for: to be a personal path of growth and freedom. As in meditation, the insights gained when doing solo psolodrama are the psoloist's own discoveries, made naturally in the rhythm of her development as a human being.

I love doing psolodrama with a partner, and have gained so much from all the wonderful witnesses I have worked with. And I also find that there is a feeling of freedom when doing psolodrama alone that surprises me each time I practice. I hope that others, too, will have a chance to experience the power of this form.

Further Exploration with Psolodrama

The creative is the place where no one else has ever been....You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition....What you'll discover will be wonderful. What you'll discover will be yourself.

— Alan Alda (1980)

The focus of Part III of this book has been on psolodrama as a peer practice. Part IV will explore the application of Insight Improv—including psolodrama—in other contexts, such as how it can be used by therapists working with clients, and how it can be taught in workshop settings. This final chapter of Part III describes other aspects of psolodrama: how it compares with other practices, how it can be made even more powerful through singing, and how it can be captured and reflected on through journaling. At the end I add a few additional thoughts about its use as a peer practice.

Further Exploration with Psolodrama

Compare and Contrast: Psolodrama and...

Meditation • Authentic Movement • Psychodrama

Other Forms of Drama Therapy:

Self-Rev • Five Phases • Role Theory/Technique • DvT

Other Forms of Therapy:

Analysis/Dream Interpretation • Focusing • Co-counseling • IFS • DBT

Additional Techniques

Sung Psolodrama • Journaling

Final Thoughts

Compare and Contrast: Psolodrama and...

“Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric.”

— Bertrand Russell (1951)

There is no doubt that psolodrama is a strange practice, when seen from the point of view of what already exists. It’s an odd form: the practitioner is encouraged to be his own therapist, to talk to himself, to play a variety of roles that are often arguing and even fighting with one another, all while keeping his eyes closed and moving about blindly.

Entering a roomful of people doing psolodrama—as one workshop participant observed—is like visiting a clinic for the mentally ill.

And yet, as hundreds of workshop participants and therapy clients have experienced, psolodrama works: it is a uniquely creative and empowering approach for exploring and expressing in a fully embodied and voiced way life challenges and themes that lie hidden beneath the surface of daily life.

Originally developed in 2003, psolodrama is a relatively new practice. Comparisons with more established personal growth and therapeutic practices provide some insight into how and why it works the way it does.

Meditation

As with all practices in Insight Improvisation, psolodrama can be seen as a kind of meditation. It is an embodied form of meditation, a journey into the depth of oneself that simultaneously engages all the parts of the self. There are several parallels between psolodrama and classic sitting meditation.

As in meditation, not only is there is an initial understanding required to do psolodrama, a grasp of the technique and underlying principles, but also a commitment to practice. Psolodrama is interesting to try once, but as in a meditation practice, one's experience deepens over time. With practice, the psoloist learns to let go, to follow bodily impulse, and to tap into deeper veins of unexplored truth. Ultimately the psoloist can let go of structure entirely, entering an open field of improvisation and self-discovery, without rules or constraints. Witnessing can also improve with practice, as the witness learns to be a stronger and more compassionate container for the psoloist's process.

Like meditation, the ultimate goal of psolodrama is greater freedom. By identifying buried issues and habitual patterns, embodying them and allowing them to speak, the psoloist can experience both intellectual insight and emotional understanding that can help free him of everyday stressors, break dysfunctional habits of thought and action, and achieve greater inner peace.

One example: in a psolodrama a few years ago, I enacted a scene in which I was carrying all the burdens in my life on my back—family, work, etc.—while singing in an operatic fashion about my suffering (this was a *sung psolodrama*—more on this below), and sinking to the ground. I was able to identify and express to my witness afterward a pattern about myself I noticed: a tendency to overdramatize issues and see myself as a victim of them. After that psolodrama, I began to notice those moments in my life, and say to myself, “no drama.” In those moments I had a greater ability to release anger, sadness, or jealousy and immediately return to the present moment. I had seen this pattern many times before in sitting meditation, but it was through psolodrama and sharing with the witness that the pattern became concrete and undeniable, something I knew I could change and needed to change.

Just as in sitting meditation, it takes courage in psolodrama to look deeply into oneself, to confront one’s own truth, to face inner demons and powerful habits, and to become aware of one’s attachment or identification with them or one’s aversion to or hatred of them. As in meditation, by confronting the truth, one can learn to relate to it differently, with acceptance and wisdom, rather than reactivity.

One difference between psolodrama and classic meditation is the presence of a supportive witness. Ideally, one would have such a supportive witness in one’s sitting

practice—someone to be there and help hold the space, as well as to discuss the meditation with afterward. (The parallel in meditation would be one’s teacher, but one cannot always be meditating with a teacher present.) A dialogue with a good witness can help the discoveries and insights from the psolodrama “stick” in a way that they do not always do in a daily sitting meditation practice. On the other hand, the presence of the witness in psolodrama can sometimes cause the psoloist to consciously or unconsciously censor his truthful exploration of vulnerable themes, such as aspects of his life he may be ashamed of or feel tender about. For experienced psoloists, practicing psolodrama without a witness can allow them to experience a fully uncensored psolodrama. (*See the chapter “Psolodrama Alone.”*)

Psolodrama is a fully embodied practice. Meditation is not—at least on the surface. One could argue that for experienced meditators, sitting meditation *is* fully embodied: the meditator is completely alive in her body, with awareness in the present, and is noticing everything—down to the slightest twitch of muscle, the tiniest sound from her intestines, the state of tension or relaxation of her jaw, the pace and depth of her breathing.

Ultimately, meditation and psolodrama are teaching two different ways of dealing with what is arising: meditation is teaching non-reactivity and acceptance; psolodrama is teaching authentic self-expression, enactment, improvisation, and play—and through these approaches to also find resolution and acceptance.

Authentic Movement

Psolodrama begins with authentic movement as a foundational practice, but adds several new elements: speaking aloud, playing roles, enacting scenes, awareness of the

five psychodramatic roles, and a goal—to “cook” the emerging issue, challenge, or theme in order to explore it and ultimately achieve insight, catharsis, greater awareness, and/or resolution. With all these new elements, the experience of doing psolodrama can be quite different from classic authentic movement, which tends to be a silent exploration of sensations, feelings, images, and/or memories arising from the body as one follows inner impulses.

Because psolodrama combines authentic movement and psychodrama, soloists with different styles can combine these two practices to varying degrees. I know one practitioner who tends to stick quite closely to authentic movement, but finds shifting roles very helpful and powerful as he finds himself in various scenes—he tends to move silently in each role while feeling his way carefully with his body. And I know another person who, within seconds of beginning her psolodrama, is already playing two roles, speaking as them, and enacting a dramatic conflict. This is not to say that the second psoloist is “inauthentic.” In fact, she, too, is listening very carefully to her body, and the roles she plays come directly from that bodily awareness, and an ability she has developed—through years of doing psolodrama—to connect with her gut impulse/feeling, almost instantaneously.

For anyone interested in learning psolodrama, I would strongly suggest getting a good grounding in authentic movement first. But it’s interesting to compare the two as practices:

Authentic movement tends to be a meditative practice, connecting one with the body, and inviting a complete sense of relaxation and letting go. There is no goal in authentic movement, except to exercise one’s inner listening while learning to be a

supportive and nonjudgmental witness for oneself. There can be a beautiful sense of spaciousness when practicing authentic movement. The practice allows the mover to tune in with her body, to experience an intelligence that resides throughout the body and not just in the head, and now and again to pass from moving to being moved. At the end of an authentic movement session, the mover often feels connected to something meaningful and/or emotional, and there is a feeling of mystery to it, as if one were moved by forces beyond language.

Psolodrama, in contrast, is a drama. There is a bit of an expectation, probably on the part of the psoloist and the witness, that something is going to *happen*. There is going to be an exploration; a story of some kind will emerge. In the background behind every psolodrama is a question: “What is this psolodrama about?” The result is that the psoloist tends not to feel the same sense of spaciousness and letting go found in authentic movement throughout his psolodrama. Those feelings are there—particularly at the outset as a launching pad for the later action—but are usually later overtaken by the qualities one finds in a good drama: a heightened sense of energy, stakes, potential, and passion.

Psychodrama

Psolodrama is a kind of one-person psychodrama—but an unusual kind.

In classic psychodrama, the protagonist states at the outset what she would like to work on, what her issue is. The director then acts as a facilitator of the protagonist’s drama, employing the group to play auxiliary egos, doubles, etc., and “cooking” the action, discovering where there is some emotional heat for the protagonist, helping guide the action toward a fulfilling transformation or resolution.

In psolodrama, however, the psoloist enters empty. She purposely puts aside the issues that are at the top of her mind, finds a comfortable starting position in the space, closes her eyes, and begins to follow her body. She trusts that something will emerge from the process, having faith that by starting with authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and/or scene stream, she will happen upon roles and invite dialogues and scenes that point to a life theme, issue, challenge, conflict, or deep-seated emotion. She notices what that theme is and begins to “cook” the action, listening to the body, embodying the roles more fully, heightening the conflict, in order to more deeply explore the heart of the issue.

The content of psychodramas and psolodramas also tends to be different. Although a psychodrama can be about anything, psychodramas on the whole tend to focus on present-day relationships (e.g. relationships with spouse, other family members, one’s boss, etc.) and how those link to past relationships (e.g. family of origin, especially parents, and childhood experiences). Psolodramas can and do include all of those elements, but there is a greater tendency toward roles and stories that are fantastical, metaphorical (and symbolic), and often quite unexpected to the psoloist. Psolodrama on the whole tends to be more dreamlike than classic psychodrama; a psolodrama has its own strange logic that were one to describe it to someone later might sound quite odd.

I have found that the practice of psolodrama can make one a more intuitive and flexible psychodrama director. In practicing psolodrama over the years, I have learned to listen to gut impulse, not only my own as a psychodrama director, but also to be more sensitive to the protagonist’s impulse, and how to say “yes” to it immediately. I have also learned to be open to the unexpected, to unusual or illogical roles and scenes, and to

allow the drama to go to unconventional and sometime mysterious places. I have learned to let go of advance planning, and to trust that if I follow the protagonist's instincts—where his gut is taking him—the result is invariably better.

One technique that I have lifted directly from psolodrama and used many times in psychodrama: if I hit a point when directing a psychodrama where it is unclear how to proceed, I will often have the protagonist close his eyes for a moment, and ask him to tune in to his body and follow it. “What does your body want to do...? Now, keeping your eyes closed, begin to follow your body.” In most instances, this leads to a new role or scene, or to greater clarity about a choice the protagonist needs to make. I may facilitate a few of these “mini-psolodramas” during a single psychodrama, if needed, to help the protagonist discover what happens next. A similar technique is to ask the protagonist to close his eyes and then say to him: “Take a moment to tune in to how you are feeling right now. Take your time. When you are ready, keeping your eyes closed, speak the feeling aloud.” This moment of inner listening can help deepen the psychodrama by reconnecting the protagonist to his own intuition, informing all that happens next in the drama.

Other Forms of Drama Therapy

As with psychodrama, most of the other mainstream types of drama therapy (Johnson & Emunah, 2009) differ from psolodrama in that the therapist is more directly involved, either as a director of the action, or in playing roles that interact with the client's. There are many advantages to having a more involved therapist, and when the therapist's guidance is needed in psolodrama, he or she can always provide coaching. However, one of the benefits of the “therapist-as-witness” in psolodrama is that one gets

to observe the client's body-mind at play, with minimal intervention. As one workshop participant observed, it's as if we're getting a "pure hit" of the psoloist's psyche.

Of the many drama therapy approaches, a few provide particularly insightful comparisons to psolodrama due to what they have in common with it.

Self-revelatory Theater. Psolodrama is a form of "self-rev," but it's a strange one. Psolodrama is a spontaneous self-revelatory performance, unwritten, unrehearsed, usually with eyes closed, and with a single audience member, the witness. But it does fulfill the central purpose of self-revelatory theater: to create a personal piece of theater that explores life themes with vulnerability, and by doing so transforms the performer's—and audience's—relationship to the those themes (Rubin, 2006).

As in classic self-rev, when doing psolodrama there can be a feeling of pride in performing a one-person autobiographical show. The psoloist can feel touched by her own artistic work and self-expression, and even more touched that it was heard and appreciated by a compassionate, understanding audience member—in psolodrama, the witness.

Also true of both psolodrama and self-rev is the thrill—and scariness—of the empty space, the bare stage. Like a writer facing a blank page or an artist with an empty canvas, the performer or psoloist does not know what he will create at the outset; the possibilities are infinite. This can be intimidating, which is why having a strong development process is so important. In self-rev there is a process of writing or improvising, rehearsing, and forming a polished performance over time. In psolodrama, the entryway practices form an organic pathway that helps reduce performance anxiety: by beginning with authentic movement and shared vipassana, the psoloist is immediately

tasked with paying attention to the present moment, noticing all that is arising through her various sense doors, and sharing it aloud. Brought into the present moment, there is less space for fear, self-judgment, and other tensions caused by performance-mind.

Psolodrama and self-rev are highly compatible forms; psolodrama is a perfect practice for discovering material that can later be used to form the basis of a one-person show. (See “*Further Exploration with Insight Improvisation*” in Part IV.)

Five-Phase Approach. Renee Emunah’s delineation of five phases (1994) in working with groups and individuals—from dramatic play through scene work, role play, and enactment to dramatic ritual—is similar to psolodrama’s five-step entryway progression from authentic movement and shared vipassana, through role stream and scene stream, and into psolodrama. A psolodrama can include all five of Emunah’s phases, or just a few, depending on several factors: the soloist’s level of experience, her comfort with the witness and ability to be vulnerable, and the nature of the material arising in her psolodrama. Ultimately, the practice of psolodrama becomes a dramatic ritual in itself: the soloist takes ownership of the process, no longer dependent on the therapist for facilitating her healing, but instead discovering her own path to healing.

Role Theory/Technique. Landy’s technique (2009) consists of helping clients identify roles—either roles they wish to play or roles that are a challenge for them to embody in their lives—and through a variety of techniques facilitate their entering into and enacting scenes with those roles. One parallel to psolodrama in Landy’s approach is his separating the figure of the “guide” from what he terms role (protagonist) and counter-role (auxiliary ego)—the guide being very similar to the director role in psolodrama.

Developmental Transformations. DvT (Johnson, 2009)—a technique in which therapist and client improvise and play together, often for the entire therapy session—is, on the surface, very different from psolodrama. But there are a few points of intersection. There is a direct parallel between the use of the witnessing circle in DvT and the witness role in psolodrama. Typically, however, a DvT therapist might remain in the witness role for a minute or two, whereas in psolodrama the witness stays in their role throughout the action (unless the psoloist requests coaching). The nature of the improvisation in DvT, in which roles can fluidly shift and evolve, is similar to Insight Improv's role stream and scene stream, and resembles the fluidity of psolodrama itself. Fundamentally, however, DvT and psolodrama are quite different to experience. Comparing them to sports, DvT is a bit more like tennis, in which the ball is constantly being volleyed back and forth between therapist and client. Psolodrama could be compared to solo running or rock-climbing, contemplative activities in which the athlete draws upon her own inner resources to find her way. But once the dramatic action begins in psolodrama, the psoloist can become his own tennis partner. Those accustomed to DvT, used to having another person to bounce off of when playing scenes, can be disoriented when trying psolodrama for the first time, finding it odd to be playing all the roles themselves. Those who stick with it, however, discover that in psolodrama they are able to listen deeply to inner impulse and discover what is arising from the body and inner imagery, in a way that can be difficult to achieve when improvising with another person.

Other Forms of Psychotherapy

Freudian Analysis. Psolodrama—and especially the shared vipassana phase that precedes it—could sound, to a casual observer, like the free association technique pioneered by Freud in analysis. But shared vipassana is different. Whereas in analysis one is simply asked to speak whatever one is thinking, to freely associate between thoughts, in shared vipassana the emphasis is not on thinking, but on opening to the body and the six sense doors, to notice what is coming in through those channels, as well as what emotions and inner imagery (and later, roles and scenes) those sensory objects are evoking. Shared vipassana is fully embodied—rather than lying on a sofa and thinking, the psoloist is following her body wherever it is leading her. Because of this, shared vipassana also tends to be more rooted in the present moment: the psoloist speaks aloud what is happening right now in her body and senses; in free association the patient often recounts past experiences at length. Another parallel between psolodrama and Freud’s work is the use of interpretation: the sharing process after psolodrama can feel similar to Freudian dream interpretation. Many who have tried psolodrama remark on its dream-like nature: a new role can appear out of nowhere, a new scene can seemingly have little to do with the last, and what makes logical sense during the psolodrama can upon reflection look odd. In the sharing process, in addition to the authentic-movement-style reflection and psychodramatic personal sharing, the psoloist and witness are able to examine the psolodrama as if it were a dream, using their interpretive abilities to discover meaning hidden in the psolodrama’s metaphors and symbols. Unlike Freud’s method, however, in which the point of the approach was to discover the “right” interpretation so as to unlock the solution to the patient’s issue (rather like Sherlock Holmes solving a case), in

psolodramatic sharing the witness deemphasizes interpretation in favor of authentic-movement-style reflection and psychodramatic sharing, allowing the psoloist to leave with her own experience intact, not dissected, interpreted, and “solved.”

Focusing. One can think of psolodrama as a translation of Gendlin’s Focusing (1978) to the drama therapy world. The psoloist is invited to become aware of her “felt sense,” but in psolodrama she not only articulates it verbally, she also “resonates” with it or “queries” it through movement, role, dialogue, and story.

Co-counseling. Psolodrama, when practiced by two peers or friends, is an embodied form of co-counseling. As in co-counseling (Heron, 1998), the role of the partner is to help facilitate the others’ experience, to encourage their self-expression and create a safe container for the expression of emotion. Whereas in co-counseling this support is active and happens through dialogue and various forms of intervention, in psolodrama the partner is primarily a silent witness who observes the psoloist (except in those cases where outside coaching is needed), and then engages in a sharing process afterward with them.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy. Like DBT (Linehan, 1993), Insight Improvisation is a therapeutic system that incorporates mindfulness with an experiential approach. DBT is closely related to Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy; its approach tends to be prescriptive, helping patients—it was originally used for those suffering from borderline personality disorder—identify dysfunctional patterns of thought and behavior and suggesting alternatives. Insight Improvisation and psolodrama are aimed more at normal neurotics; and rather than looking for what’s not working in a client’s thought/behavioral patterns,

psolodrama is inviting those patterns to be expressed fully through the body and voice and then played out in roles and scenes.

Internal Family Systems Therapy. As in psolodrama, IFS (Schwartz, 1997) invites the client to close his eyes and explore, mindfully, inner roles—in IFS these are called “parts”—and how they interact. There are many differences, however: in IFS the therapist is actively facilitating the client’s exploration moment-by-moment; the client is usually sitting fairly still, rather than moving, and is reporting on the parts, rather than playing them out. A more significant difference is that IFS has a way of categorizing the inner roles and the function each plays in the psyche, and is aiming for a particular outcome for how the parts interact—ultimately, how exiled parts can be reintegrated. Psolodrama, in contrast, is fully embodied, typically with no intervention from the therapist or witness (unless the psoloist needs or wants coaching) and no expectation about the types of inner voices the psoloist will discover, how they will interact, or how the story will end.

Additional Techniques

Sung Psolodrama

Sung psolodrama is, simply put, a psolodrama in which everything is sung: including shared vipassana, role stream, scene stream, and the entire psolodrama itself. The only part that is not sung is the sharing process afterward (but who knows...that may be possible to sing, too). All of the characters sing, not only the protagonist and auxiliary egos, but also the director, the double, and the audience.

Why sung psolodrama? Something unusual happens when the psoloist is not just speaking what a character is saying, but also singing it. Singing connects the psoloist with her deepest emotions. It provides a powerful additional channel to express feelings and meaning through pitch, timbre, rhythm, poetic or rhyming lyrics, etc.

Even if the psoloist cannot sing at all, just “aiming for singing” can produce strong results: what may come out is a rap, a chant, a rhythmic delivery, something atonal, or something unexpectedly beautiful.

In the same way that a musical can express things a straight play cannot, sung psolodrama opens a new dimension for psolodrama. Sung psolodrama is a spontaneous musical, and can contain all kinds of styles: rock, rap, opera, country—any style, even new styles, are possible, whatever serves the emerging scene and its unique qualities.

Sung psolodrama is an enjoyable, moving, and at times hilarious form of improvisation. It is simultaneously deeply personal and surprisingly entertaining. Of course, the psoloist is not trying to entertain anyone—but the witness can appreciate the effect of what the psoloist is doing vocally while also taking in the deeper meaning of the psolodrama.

How to do it. For those new to sung psolodrama, it is best to start with a series of improvisational singing warm-ups. The ones described in the earlier chapter entitled “Singing” (Part II) are perfect for this, including Chords, Jams, and One-liners. Otherwise, preparation for the psolodrama is the same as usual. The psoloist enters the space, closes his eyes, and begins to follow his body, moving authentically. When he shifts into shared vipassana, he sings, rather than speaks, what he is noticing, e.g.

♫ Cooooolnesssss of the aaaiirrrrrr... ♫

As he continues, he finds he can use the quality of his voice, the melody, and the rhythm, to help express how he is feeling and the nature of the inner imagery arising:

*♪ Out on the tundra. Blowing wind. Ice blue sky. I feel excited.
Energy! ♪*

Shifting to role stream, he notices what role or character this body position, movement, vocal quality, or image reminds him of, and enters that role, moving, sounding, and *singing* as that role:

*♪ I am an arctic weasel...white fur...active paws...darting
eyes...looking for prey. ♪*

In scene stream, the psoloist continues by discovering other roles, moving, sounding, and singing as them. As he creates dialogues, they are duets, with each role singing with its unique vocal quality, rhythm, etc.:

Bear: *♪ I'm a polar bear, lazing in the sun.*

Weasel: *♪ Heyyy buster! Are you trying to muscle onto my turf?*

Bear: *♪ I'm sleeeeeepy. Is someone squeaking at me?*

Weasel: *♪ I KNOW that you can hear me!*

Bear: *♪ Oh, it's you. You'd better run off now, or I may snack on your head...*

Weasel: *♪ You think you're so tough!*

In his psolodrama, the psoloist can call upon all of the psychodramatic roles—protagonist, director, double, and audience—but sings them rather than speaks them. At times this may resemble operatic recitative, the sung through portions of a musical, a rap freestyle battle, a country blues duet, etc.:

Protagonist (p1): *♪ Enough with the fighting! I can't hear myself think. It reminds me of my chiiiiildren.*

Child 1 (aux): *♪ Nah-nahhhh boo-boooo!!*

Child 2 (aux): *♪ Elijaahhhh!!!!!!*

(The psoloist curls into a ball.)

Double: *♪ I want to crawl awayyy.
Or run and hiiiiide.
I'm inadequate as a parent.
I have no priiiiiide!*

Director: *♪ What do you neeed right now?*

Protagonist: *♪ I neeedeed...*

(etc.)

Journaling

After the psolodrama—but before sharing—psoloist and witness can agree to take a few minutes to jot notes or journal about their experience, which can also include drawing, poetry, or any form of on-paper expression. Sharing the writing/drawing with

one another is then a natural first step to the psoloist-witness sharing dialogue, and adds a new channel for reflecting on what happened and its meaning.

The decision whether to journal depends on the time available and on the personal preferences of the participants. If there is a difference of opinion about whether to journal, the psoloist should have the final say. If the psoloist is journaling, it is suggested that the witness also journal—not only does this support the psoloist, but it also offers the witness a chance to capture memories of what she just saw and heard.

Ideally, whether to journal should be decided, along with timing, before the psolodrama begins. A range of five to ten minutes seems a comfortable length to set aside for journaling—experiment with what works best for you. Another approach is to set aside a certain amount of time for journaling plus sharing, and let the psoloist determine when to stop journaling. I have sometimes taken this approach when leading workshops in which pairs of participants are doing psolodrama together simultaneously—some protagonists really love to have the chance to journal immediately after their psolodrama, others want to share verbally with their partner right away. For those who like drawing, offering a variety of colorful pastels, markers, etc., adds to the expressive possibilities.

When journaling, some may wish to document what happened in the psolodrama. This can be a summary of the whole, a list of highlights or key insights, or an exploration of a particular theme, moment, conflict, or feeling, capturing its essence and then expanding on it through the writing. Another approach is to offer a creative response to the psolodrama—this can take the form of a poem or other spontaneous writing that springboards off elements of the psolodrama, creating something new in reaction to or in dialogue with the psolodrama's spirit and energy, perhaps incorporating specific images,

lines, roles, feelings, etc., from the psolodrama. Similarly, a drawing can be descriptive—documenting a particular physical position, role, image, scene, or emotion that arose during the psolodrama—or a creative response, such as a spontaneous drawing capturing one's feelings, or reflecting on the meaning of the psolodrama.

As psoloist and witness move from journaling to sharing, the psoloist may wish to keep his journal open, to add thoughts from the witness that he finds particularly useful or inspiring. Journaling provides something tangible to take away after the psolodrama experience—a reminder of the process, including significant roles and metaphors, feelings, and important insights. The witness may also choose to give his notes, poem, or drawing to the psoloist as a gift at the conclusion of the process, which the psoloist can tape into his journal so that both witness's and psoloist's points of view are preserved.

A Few Final Thoughts on Psolodrama

Psolodrama with a friend or peer is a connective practice: the post-psolodrama sharing conversation with one's partner can be quite vulnerable and touch honest feelings about one's life. This tends to build relationship and trust, enriching the peer practice even more over time.

Another benefit of peer practice is that there is no identified patient: by witnessing one another doing psolodrama, peers remain on equal footing, each vulnerable to the other, human, and flawed, while also having the opportunity to serve one another in the role of witness. The witness/psoloist arrangement helps provide a safe container within which each person can do good, deep, and vulnerable work.

Psolodrama invites a pure expression of what Moreno called “act hunger,” the desire to play out a particular role, scene, or story. There is often a feeling and realization after doing psolodrama, something like “wow—that felt really good—and I had no idea I had that in me—but it points to a powerful theme in my life.” Psolodrama performs an end-run around the cognitive, planning mind by accessing the deeper wisdom of the body, of “gut-feel,” and the mysteries of inner imagery and role, to discover the deeper desires and needs longing to be expressed.

Psolodrama fosters autonomy: the psoloist is, in a sense, training to be an effective therapist for herself through the process of learning to be present, to practice inner listening, to discover what is needed, and to work with it dynamically. The psoloist learns to tap into what is true about herself, calling herself on her own habits and patterns in a way a traditional therapist may sometimes feel hesitant to do.

One population that seems to especially enjoy and benefit from psolodrama is therapists. When a therapist practices psolodrama, she brings her own wisdom to bear on her personal issues, while also having the reflection and input of a wise friend, her peer witness. The sharing conversation becomes a little like supervision, but with the psoloist in the role of therapist *and* client. Drama therapists and psychodramatists tend to have a natural affinity for psolodrama as it lets them practice drama therapy on themselves. Talk therapists and counselors who have experienced psolodrama in workshops and one-to-one have expressed their joy to learn a form that lets them get in touch with their body and enact their feelings and issues—not just talk about those issues.

Psolodrama also works well in other countries. As a foreigner coming in and not knowing the culture, teaching psolodrama allows me to provide a container in which each

person can do work that is culturally appropriate and comfortable to them—it is a gentle method that allows people to reveal themselves at their own pace. I particularly enjoy offering psolodrama after teaching introductory drama therapy and psychodrama, as it gives participants the tools to go off and try drama therapy with a friend, peer, or someone they met in the workshop. For the same reason, it's a great form to offer in countries where "seeing a therapist" is stigmatized. And it's a natural fit for cultures where meditation is honored, as psolodrama has mindful awareness at its core. (*More on working with groups internationally appears in the chapter "Facilitating Workshops" in Part IV.*)

Psolodrama is a holistic practice in that it addresses and satisfies so many parts of the self: the performer/actor; the therapist/healer; the part that wants to "create" something; the part that wants to move and express with the voice; the escapist part that sometimes wants to be other people or beings; the part that wants to share and confide in someone else, longing to have a meaningful conversation about one's inner life, inner feelings.

My intention in sharing psolodrama is to make this experience available to everyone: the opportunity to listen deeply to the body; to express oneself fully, without inhibition; to discover the hidden images, roles, and stories buried in the psyche and bring them to life, in a fully embodied way; to explore a central theme or challenge in one's life; to have new insights into that issue and feel it, fully, to the point of emotional release; and finally, to share with a committed listener and friend, and to learn from their observations and their own related life experiences.



If you have read this far, it may be time to try it out. Get in the studio with a friend—all you really need is a living room with a little floor space to move—and give it a go. Have your friend guide you through the entryway practices, providing a brief reminder of each phase. As you enter and close your eyes, fully relax and abandon yourself to physical impulse, to what the body wants to do. If you approach the practice with that spirit—to relax, to open your awareness, to explore—you will be pleasantly surprised at what you find.

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Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense.

— *Rumi*

Part IV: Working

Insight Improv with Individuals and Groups

In short, may I offer both directly and indirectly all joy and benefit to all beings, my mothers, and may I myself secretly take on all of their hurt and suffering.

— *Geshe Langri Tangpa*

Working with Individuals

Our mind becomes more spacious, more open, and happier as we move past our avoidance and denial to see what is true.

— Joseph Goldstein (1993, p. 12)

This chapter is for therapists—talk therapists, creative arts therapists, drama therapists, psychodramatists, and others—who have explored earlier parts of this book and wondered: “How do I actually apply this in my therapy practice?”

I have been using Insight Improvisation as a therapist and coach for more than 15 years. In that time, I have perceived an increasing desire and openness among clients for alternative ways of working that go beyond talk therapy, that offer creative approaches to their issues. And I have had many conversations with fellow clinicians about their desire to try new techniques, to break free of habit, and to keep their practice fresh.

Insight Improvisation has several qualities that can complement an existing therapy practice. It is physical, creative, improvisational, and fun. At the same time, it draws upon meditation and deep listening to the body and emotions, and thus creates a

beautiful container for mindful exploration. Insight Improv—and psolodrama in particular—is designed to empower the client to make his own discoveries and allows the clinician to serve as witness and guide.

The purpose of this chapter is to help you as a clinician incorporate Insight Improvisation into the work that you do.

Working with Individuals	
<p><i>Why Insight Improvisation in Individual Therapy?</i></p> <p>—</p> <p><i>Client Fit and Contraindications</i></p> <p>—</p> <p><i>Modalities</i></p> <p>Talk Therapy</p> <p>Drama Therapy</p> <p>Meditation</p> <p>Coaching</p> <p>Other Approaches</p> <p>—</p> <p><i>Logistics</i></p>	<p><i>Introducing Insight Improv in Individual Therapy</i></p> <p>First Session</p> <p>Early Sessions</p> <p>Ongoing Therapy</p> <p>Working Remotely</p> <p>Working Internationally: Sample Sessions</p> <p>—</p> <p><i>Case Examples</i></p> <p>Dealing with Anger</p> <p>Freeing Oneself</p> <p>—</p> <p><i>Final Thoughts</i></p>

Why Insight Improvisation in Individual Therapy?

As has been described elsewhere (e.g., van der Kolk as cited in Hudgins, 2000, p. 230), experiential approaches are often most effective in therapy. They can bypass the rationalizing, intellectualizing, defended mind and make a direct connection to the client's subconscious, memories, emotions, habits, secrets, deeper motivations, hopes and

dreams, traumas, unexamined beliefs. Some of the most powerful experiential techniques connect directly with the body, through movement or touch. Getting beneath the words—or putting aside words entirely—can help us find the truth.

Insight Improvisation shares these strengths with several other forms of drama therapy and creative arts therapy. Clients enjoy practicing Insight Improvisation, and often cite it as one of the most powerful parts of a therapy session. It allows them to break out of their habitual thinking-mind, get into the body, relax, and be present to different channels of information—senses, emotions, inner imagery and roles.

But what's unique about Insight Improv?

Appealing to a range of personal styles/preferences. The combination of mindfulness/meditation with drama therapy provides two complementary forms of treatment that together are effective for a range of issues; mindfulness appealing to the inner/introverted/contemplative side of the client, and drama therapy unleashing their expressive, playful, creative side.

Oriented toward self-discovery and ownership. Once the client understands how to practice the form (psolodrama, preceded by the entryway practices—authentic movement through scene stream), the therapist's role is primarily as a witness in Insight Improvisation. Clients generally take greater ownership of answers they find themselves, and Insight Improv is designed to create the conditions for those insights to emerge organically, from the client's own improvisations. Insight Improv helps clients tap into their own inner wisdom, imagination, and creativity.

Helpful for times when the therapist is at a loss. Psolodrama (and the entryway progression) can be taught to a client and then be applied at any time in the course of

therapy. It is particularly useful for those times when there isn't a specific issue the client wishes to focus on or for when it is unclear how to work on a given issue: rather than leave the session feeling it was not as powerful as usual, the client will often end such a session having made a meaningful connection to their body, feelings, and authentic impulses. Having gone on a memorable journey in their psolodrama, they may also leave feeling more self-expressed, open, creative—and possibly, through the sharing dialogue with the therapist—having gained a valuable new insight.

Practicing and instilling new “Being Mind” habits. My drama therapy colleague and friend Dan Wiener recently wrote to me:

Cultivating “Being Mind” is quite a struggle for most of us, since the world is pulling/training us to live predominantly in “Performance Mind.” This leads me to the questions, “How successful are you in getting psychotherapy clients to enter Being Mind?” and “What time and effort is typically required to attain that state, even temporarily?”

I agree that personally making the shift from Performance Mind to Being Mind, as well as helping others do the same, can be challenging: modern life seems bent on conditioning us to *not* be present. Insight Improvisation techniques—from meditation and authentic movement to psolodrama, and just about every exercise in this book—are designed to help the client (and ourselves) strengthen the ability to return to the present moment, and let go a little bit of the grip of “performance mind” (the neurotic cycling of self-judgment and/or worry, combined with a need for others' approval). Insight Improv practices help cultivate a greater sense of equanimity, awareness, the joy of being in the moment, relating to the world in a way that feels more grounded and centered, yet with a more open heart. Using these techniques, I find that clients can enter states of Being

Mind quite readily, even in a second or third therapy session, without a great deal of effort or preparation. And with practice—such as a personal practice of meditation or psolodrama—clients are able to cultivate the ability to return to Being Mind more readily in their everyday lives.

Easy to incorporate. Insight Improv is easy to use and combine with standard talk therapy and creative arts therapy, as will be described in this chapter. It is simple to adapt and mold to fit the moment—for example, a psychodrama can easily transition into a psolodrama with very little additional prompting. And most structures in Insight Improv, including psolodrama, are designed for two roles—psoloist and witness—roles naturally suited to client and therapist.

Client Fit and Contraindications

What kinds of clients benefit most from Insight Improv, and particularly psolodrama?

In my own practice I tend to work most with “normal neurotics”—individuals who are functional, sometimes quite successful, but have issues they would like to address: life issues, emotional issues, relationship issues, work-related issues, habits of mind and/or body, etc. I find that adults fitting this description tend to get the most out of Insight Improvisation and psolodrama.

Those in the above group who may *especially* benefit from trying Insight Improv include meditators, performers (actors, dancers, those interested in improvisation), those who have experienced drama therapy or psychodrama and are seeking a deeper personal exploration, and those interested in body-oriented (somatic) approaches.

Certain clients would *not* benefit as much and might actually be harmed with the careless application of these approaches. As described in Part III of this book, there are some who may find certain Insight Improv techniques, especially psolodrama, too unstructured, confusing, or even triggering or retraumatizing. I would include in this group children (and adults) who are not developmentally ready for this type of work, those who have a mental illness (e.g. schizophrenia or similar illnesses) or personality disorder, or those with a history of addiction or severe trauma. A general rule of thumb is that anyone taught psolodrama should have the ability to hold and support their own emotional process; if the therapist has doubts but wishes to proceed, he is advised to use caution, go slowly, and provide lots of structure and coaching throughout.

Modalities

In my private therapy practice, I use Insight Improv to foster growth and change in my clients by combining four different modalities: talk, drama therapy (including Insight Improvisation), meditation, and coaching.

My practice is eclectic. I fit what I do to the needs of whomever I'm with, meaning there are also a few things I do that do not fit neatly into those four buckets. So I've added a fifth category, below, under the heading of "additional approaches".

Talk therapy

Early in the therapy process, talk is the initial form of intake, for learning about a client's past, family of origin, relationships, career, etc., as well as their goals for therapy.

I use talk therapy in subsequent client sessions to check-in, learn about a client's needs—their presenting problems—and explore issues more deeply through inquiry and dialogue. I will often ask a client for their “headlines,” the top items they would like to cover in the session, which could include latest news, issues they are facing, or requests to work on a particular challenge using experiential approaches such as drama therapy.

When using talk therapy my intention is to be a fully present, empathic, and supportive listener. I also draw from a broader toolkit of talk therapy approaches, including cognitive-behavioral concepts and exercises.

Drama therapy

I use two main forms of drama therapy in my practice: psychodrama and Insight Improvisation/psolodrama—the latter including the entryway practices of authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream. In addition, over the years, I have on occasion used other kinds of drama therapy with clients, including ritual theater, self-revelatory performance, the Embodied Psyche Technique, and Developmental Transformations (Johnson & Emunah, 2009).

I use drama therapy for many reasons.

Drama therapy helps the therapist perform a more thorough intake. The depth of information shared from even a simple psychodrama—e.g., the client talking to his father—is almost always greater than what is shared through talk alone.

Drama therapy breaks free of one of the limitations of talk therapy, which is that for some issues, talking can lead to a client retreading the same ground, because they are simply sharing the thinking about the issue they have already done, and smart clients usually have thought about all of the expected angles on their problem. Drama therapy

accesses the body and the imagination, and can offer up unexpectedly powerful insights as well as emotional connections that thinking and talking cannot. For this reason, drama therapy is my main tool for helping break a client out of her habitual approach to an issue.

Although it can be a little scary to try something new—introducing drama therapy can elicit resistance in some clients—drama therapy is an experiential approach that lifts the act of therapy from something mundane to something exciting, dynamic, special, even sacred. Clients spend their lives talking—often talking with others about their issues. Having a different approach, an entirely different channel to enter and work with issues, helps differentiate the therapy experience.

Meditation

Over the years, I have taught many therapy clients (as well as life coaching and executive coaching clients) meditation, for a variety of reasons. Some clients are experiencing stress and need some form of relaxation to restore calm and balance in their lives. Other clients are noticing that their behavior is reactive, and need training that can help them maintain equanimity, and build the capacity for nonreactivity, in the face of challenging circumstances, anger, fear, etc. Others turn to meditation to learn to be more present, in the face of external distractions or chaos, or internal distractions such as a scattered mind. Others seek a deeper journey in their life, one in which they can explore who they are with a different kind of awareness—to know themselves more fully, so that they can better understand life, death, and their relationships with others.

Because my own meditation background is mainly in the Theravada Buddhist approach—I have been a daily practitioner since 1997—I tend to teach the three kinds of

awareness (as well as the three corresponding meditation practices), described in Part I of this book: mindfulness/*samadhi* (meditation on the breath—*anapanasati*—being a typical example); choicelessness/*vipassana*; and lovingkindness/*metta* practice.

For clients who find sitting meditation too challenging, or who need another approach, I also recommend walking meditation, sometimes the slow method of walking often used in Theravada practice, sometimes a more natural walking pace accompanied by gathas as suggested by Thich Nhat Hanh (from the Vietnamese Zen tradition).

I freely borrow from other traditions in the work I do with clients, and have been inspired by Tibetan teachers such as Sogyal Rinpoche (*The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*—especially his teaching on “good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end,” 1993)—and the Dalai Lama.

Meditation tends to show up a few different ways in my practice. First, for a client who is new to meditation, for whom I think it would be helpful, and who is open to trying it, I will introduce the idea, and lead them in a very short meditation, usually focused on breathing. If the interest and need are there, over time I might introduce and do short versions of other types of meditation, such as *vipassana* and *metta*.

For the same client I will often assign meditation as homework (more about homework, below, in the section on coaching). This will usually consist of a short daily practice of meditation, e.g., waking up in the morning, rolling up one’s bed pillow, sitting on it, and doing (initially) 5 minutes of meditation on the breath. Over time this can grow into a more substantial practice; eventually the client may do 20-45 minutes of meditation daily, including *samadhi*, *vipassana*, and *metta*.

I also occasionally use meditation to help a client upset by strong emotions. Once a client who was normally fairly even-keeled arrived in our session speaking a great deal and at high speed about the tremendous anxieties she was facing in her life. After she'd shared for a while—we had been walking outside together (more on this below)—I suggested we sit in meditation together. As we sat in silence on a bench, with eyes closed, she began to cry and release the pent up feelings that she'd been trying to hold back. After the meditation, our conversation changed, and she was able to engage in a more productive dialogue about what could help her return to equanimity in her life and to address the various factors that were causing her anxiety.

For clients more experienced in meditation, there are occasions where we do a longer meditation together during our session. In one recent session a client wanted to explore a certain pattern of thinking, an inner phenomenon he had been struggling with. He and I meditated together for nearly an hour (as part of a two-hour session), checking in periodically about what he was noticing.

(See "Meditation," the first chapter of this book, for more information and detailed meditation instructions.)

Coaching

Although coaching and talk therapy overlap—many talk therapists also coach their clients, and many coaches spend some part of their client sessions doing what appears to be talk therapy—I like to think of coaching as distinct from talk therapy.

One way to distinguish the two—this is a gross generality and not always true—is that therapy tends to be oriented toward the past, aimed at discovering the roots of an issue (e.g. in childhood) as a way to work on it, whereas coaching tends to be more

future-oriented, helping a client establish a vision and clear goals and working toward achieving those goals. One could also say that a therapist tends to work with those who are dysfunctional in some way, to help them become more functional, whereas a coach tends to work with those who function well, to help them achieve extraordinary performance.

Coaching appears in several forms in my therapy practice. One way is that I often assign homework to clients, providing practical ways for them to work toward their goals in between sessions. The homework is something we develop mutually—in fact, if I sense the need for homework I will usually ask the client what homework she would assign to herself. We both write the homework down, and I will usually bring it up near the beginning of the subsequent session, to see how she did. Homework can help address a wide range of needs and take many different forms. A few examples: starting (or reviving) a regular practice of meditation; writing a letter (and, usually, not sending it) to an estranged love one, one's boss, etc.; creating a list (e.g., “what I want in a partner”); taking practical steps in a job search such as creating a resume and contacting potential employers; having an important conversation with a significant other; having fun—e.g. going dancing, doing something outdoors; having sex in a new way with one's partner (e.g., letting go of the goal of orgasm and treating sex as a meditation or improvisation); beginning or reviving a regular exercise routine.

Often just having a third party, the coach, be aware of one's goals and homework can help the client stick to those goals and follow through. One example, from the case of my client Jake (see below), was how he began to meditate regularly at home and in his truck, as a way to counteract his habit of having angry tantrums. What began as a simple

homework assignment took root as a new behavior and habit, and made a profound difference in Jake's life.

Coaching appears in other ways in the therapy process. Early in the process I ask for the client's goals for the work, their desired outcomes—and often check back with these to see if we are on track and really progressing toward those goals. And I frequently use coaching approaches such as endorsing, challenging, and messaging to inspire clients or help them see something in a new way.

Other Approaches

What has helped me the most as a therapist, both to serve my clients' needs as well as to keep my own practice of therapy fresh and alive, is to stay flexible and to listen for clients' authentic impulses. Years ago, a client asked if we could take a walk together as part of our session. It worked so well that I now often walk with clients, through local parks or around a nearby pond. Walking side-by-side while talking, for some clients, feels more natural and easy than sitting face-to-face, and the element of exercise and changing scenery adds beneficial stimulation that keeps both client and therapist fully engaged. Being side-by-side rather than facing one another, we feel a bit more like a team or like friends, "just chatting"—taking some of the feeling of pressure or intensity out of the therapy process. Because I typically walk outdoors with clients in the warmer months, when the need or desire to do some drama therapy or meditation strikes, we do it outdoors. I have sat in meditation with clients on benches, large rocks, and by bodies of water; we have also practiced psychodrama and psolodrama next to baseball fields, on grassy hillsides, and under large trees (taking care to choose locations out of earshot of others).

As a creative arts therapist—specializing in drama therapy—I remain open to all uses of the arts in therapy. For clients who love visual arts, I encourage them to make and bring in their pieces. One client who loved collage would often show me her work. We would discuss her latest collages and frequently do drama therapy about a particular piece. She would improvise and bring to life the various elements of the collage—e.g., a photo of a woman, a stick figure of a child, a painting of a doorway, and the relationship among the three. By playing the roles appearing in the collage, my client would more deeply understand and explore what she’d created in the collage and its meaning, and she used the improvisation as a springboard to exploring larger life themes she was facing. Other clients have shared with me poems and songs they have written, and we have worked with those through drama therapy as well.

Logistics

Although Insight Improv can be used in a brief session—including the kind of 45-60 minute sample session described further below (see the section “Working Internationally: Standalone Sample Sessions”)—I encourage clients to reserve 90 minutes for a typical therapy session. This allows a more thorough check-in and airing of issues before proceeding into drama therapy work, and generous time at the end to reflect on the drama therapy and to discuss next steps or homework. For clinicians who are restricted to 50-60 minutes per session, it is still possible to use psolodrama; one just needs to be more disciplined about limiting the initial check-in time. Here is sample timing for a short session and a longer session:

Typical Timing for a Therapy Session Incorporating Psolodrama

50-minute session

Check-in/ Headlines/Talk Therapy 15 min	Authentic Movement 3 min	Shared Vipassana 2 min	Role Stream 2 min	Scene Stream 2 min	Psolodrama 11 min	Sharing 10 min	Final Thoughts/ Next Steps 5 min
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90-minute session

Check-in/ Headlines 10 min	Talk Therapy/Session Planning 20 min	*Authentic Movement 3 min	Shared Vipassana 3 min	Role Stream 3 min	Scene Stream 3 min	Psolodrama 16 min	Sharing 20 min	Final Thoughts/ Next Steps 12 min
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**It is possible to add 5-10 minutes of sitting meditation before authentic movement, by shortening other parts of the session.*

Space is important for drama therapy: the client needs an unobstructed clean floor or carpet to move on; 2m x 3m (6 square meters) is a reasonable minimum, larger is better. It is helpful to have cushions available to sit on for meditation, or as props in psychodrama. (Psolodrama, with its roots in authentic movement, tends not to use props—it is entirely a product of the imagination and the psoloist's body in the space.)

Sound proofing and/or use of white noise outside the space is also important, as psolodrama and other exercises invite and encourage full vocal projection. It is equally the case that even small sounds from outside the space can disrupt a quiet meditation or a client's silent authentic movement. Phones should be silenced.

Introducing Insight Improvisation in Individual Therapy

First session

At the beginning of the therapy process, the client is sometimes just trying to make up his mind whether to work with the therapist. So in addition to asking a variety of intake questions, I also try to do some introductory form of drama therapy, usually a brief psychodrama, during the very first session in order to give the client an idea of how we might work together.

Sometimes this might come directly out of something the client has shared. For example, if the client is talking about his fraught relationship with his mother, I might say: “Let’s try something. Here are two chairs. Let’s say you are sitting in one and your mother is in the other. What would you like to say to her? What would you say if you could be completely honest?” From this beginning, I would direct a small psychodrama in which the client plays all the roles: himself, his mother, the doubles of each of them, and any other characters who may appear.

Another similar exercise I often do in a first session or early in the therapy process is something I call **couples therapy** or **family therapy**. After talking for a while, I might ask the client if she would like to try an experiential exercise, to get a better sense of how we might work together. If she says yes, I would say: “I want you to imagine that you could bring someone into our therapy session, anyone you like. We could think of this as couples therapy or as family therapy. You will play both yourself and the other person. I will play the therapist. If you could bring anyone into our session, who would it

be?” We then set up two chairs for the “clients,” and I both direct the action and play myself as the therapist.

Both of the above approaches are very simple to set up and enter into for the client, but can lead to powerful psychodramatic scenes. For a client new to drama therapy, they will often leave the session inspired by how quickly they could go into deep material, and interested to keep working in this way.

Following the initial session, I usually schedule a two-hour intake session with the client, just to listen to them and understand their background and issues in greater depth.

Early sessions

Introducing Meditation

Parallel to introducing drama therapy, for those clients who need it, I will introduce the idea of meditation early in the therapy process.

Over the course of a few sessions, I teach the client *samadhi*, *vipassana*, and sometimes *metta* practice (as described above, and in greater depth in the chapter on meditation in Part I). We do short meditations in the session, and I assign homework to instill a regular practice.

I have a short written handout on meditation that I share with clients (Gluck, 2015—see “References,” below, for a link to this freely available PDF). On rare occasions a client has asked me to record a guided meditation so they can play it back while they meditate.

Introducing Psolodrama

For a client who is ready—who has become or is already experienced with drama therapy and meditation—a next step is to teach them psolodrama.

I typically do this by introducing the entryway process over a series of sessions: authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream. Because each of these practices is a therapeutic methodology in itself, I use each as the central activity of the session, teaching the client how to do it, and then engaging in a sharing process afterward, linking the client's discoveries during the practice to our therapeutic goals.

Once the client has become proficient in the full progression through scene stream, I will often show them a written “Psolodrama in Brief” handout (Gluck, 2011—freely available online; see References below), and discuss the remaining ingredients of psolodrama, including the intention of psolodrama and other guidelines, as well as the five psychodramatic roles.

Typically I will coach the client in their initial psolodramas until they are feeling ready to do it on their own. (*See the chapter “Coaching Psolodrama” for more on the techniques involved.*)

Ongoing therapy

Depending on the client, ongoing therapy can look different and present unique challenges. In the therapist role I find myself balancing several needs: to continue working toward the client's goals; to create a steady, comfortable, safe space for the client to return to, to express themselves fully, and to continue their journey; while also keeping the process fresh and gently stretching/challenging the client.

With the majority of my clients, sessions tend to follow this progression:

1. **Check-in/Headlines.** Can include an EQ check-in (how the client is feeling today), clearing (saying whatever they need to say to be fully present), and headlines (top items they would like to share, discuss, and potentially work on in the session).
2. **Talk therapy/Session Planning.** The client shares the story behind each headline, and we discuss. My focus is mainly to listen, understand, and empathize, now and then asking questions or reflecting back what I am hearing. Once the client feels they have shared sufficiently, we usually make a plan for the rest of the session, often a choice between doing a psychodrama on a particular issue, or seeing what arises in a psolodrama. Sometimes the client requests something different, e.g. to talk further about a particular issue, to use other coaching or therapy techniques, to go deeper into meditation, etc.
3. **Psolodrama, psychodrama, or other active experiential work.** This may springboard directly off of something the client says or a moment of emotion arising in his conversation. Or it may be a distinct part of the session: the client, having shared enough verbally, may say “now what?” or specifically request drama therapy. This part of the session could also include meditation or other experiential activities from drama or creative arts therapy. If what the client is doing or saying does not suggest a particular approach I will often ask them to choose between psolodrama and psychodrama: “Is there a particular issue you would like to work on,

with me guiding you [psychodrama], or would you like to begin with authentic movement and see what arises [psolodrama]?”

4. **Sharing.** We discuss the experiential work. I will often ask: “Would you like to speak first or shall I?” and let the client choose. When it is my turn to speak, I draw from the three types of reflection described in the chapter “*Witnessing Psolodrama*” in Part III: authentic movement reflection, psychodramatic sharing, and interpretation.
5. **Final Thoughts/ Next Steps.** As our ending time is approaching, we will usually discuss whether it makes sense to set any homework for our next session, action steps the client would like to take out in the world, based on what we’d worked on in the session. I also ask the client if he has any final thoughts or questions, or any feedback for me on how the session went. Before the client leaves, we schedule our next session and handle payment.

Working Remotely

I have several clients in other states in the US, as well as in other countries, who regularly work with me remotely, usually via Skype. I have found that psolodrama lends itself well to working this way: I can be a bit more of a witness, intervening/coaching less than I would in a psychodrama, allowing the client to follow their own process.

It helps to have first met and worked together in person, to establish a strong bond of trust, as well as to teach the entryway practices and psolodrama itself. And initially working remotely I may need to offer more coaching and support: at the beginning it can

feel strange for a client to be somewhere in his own home, talking to a face on a screen, and then closing his eyes and beginning to move authentically while knowing the therapist is watching via the computer's camera. But once the client becomes used to it, the technology melts away, and we are simply soloist and witness engaged in the process together within the strong container of mindfulness we are both creating. I have seen many times that remote work can be as powerful as an in-person session.

Working Internationally: Standalone Sample Sessions

When teaching Insight Improvisation workshops, especially overseas, I like to offer individual Insight Improvisation therapy sessions during off hours, so that interested workshop participants can experience this type of one-to-one therapy firsthand, as well as better understand how Insight Improv can be incorporated into an existing therapy practice. In some countries and cultures, the use of psychotherapy is stigmatized; sample sessions offer a way to demystify and normalize therapy.

Despite being short (45-60 minutes) and standalone—or possibly because of it—these sessions are often quite effective; clients in sample sessions are capable of going deep in very little time. There may be other reasons for this. These clients are also workshop participants and have built a degree of trust with me by being my student. Also, as a foreigner, I may be seen as someone they can safely open up to without repercussions or feeling judged.

These standalone sample sessions have three parts: intake, active work, and wrap-up.

Intake. I usually begin by inviting the client to do a little check-in and clearing and to state what they would like to work on. This alone may provide enough information for us to proceed into active work, or it may be necessary for me to ask questions and dig a little deeper in order to understand how the client has tried to approach the problem or issue before.

Active work may begin as psychodrama, spring-boarding directly off something the client has said. I may suggest she speak directly *to* the person she has been talking about and then reverse roles and play that person. More elaborate psychodramas are also possible. If there is a third party present, such as a translator, I may sometimes ask that person to play an auxiliary ego role.

If the client has learned some Insight Improvisation, or has expressed a desire to try it, I can guide them through the entryway process (authentic movement through scene stream) and into psolodrama and provide space for them to improvise between instructions. Now and then I may offer coaching, such as when an opportunity to dialogue with or embody an auxiliary role may be missed. Although I tend to think of psolodrama as a fairly advanced technique, requiring some prior training or experience, I have seen in sample sessions clients entirely new to psolodrama use it to explore their presenting problem or to reveal and express a deeper set of truths.

A third possibility is to begin with psychodrama but seamlessly transition into psolodrama—see the second case example, below, for an illustration of this approach.

Wrap up in a sample session provides a brief opportunity for the client to share their experience, for the therapist to reflect on the work, and for the client to ask any final questions he has. I make sure to ask the client for his feedback on the session and how

they are feeling about it, not only for my own learning but also to make sure the client is leaving feeling calm and grounded rather than stirred up and vulnerable. Questions like: “Is there anything else that you need before we end our session?” can also be helpful.

Case Examples

Dealing with Anger—Use of Meditation and Drama Therapy

Jake, an airport truck driver in his mid-20’s, originally came to me complaining of uncontrolled anger, sudden bursts of rage, and physical tantrums in which he was damaging physical property (including his truck) and threatening other people. Jake came across as a “tough-guy,” working class, but there was also something boyish and a little mischievous about him.

In our very first session together we did a little drama therapy. By using the “couples/family therapy” technique described above, I invited Jake to pick someone he would like to bring in to therapy, and he picked his sister. Playing both roles, he had a moving conversation with her about feeling alienated from her, and their differing takes on their relationship with their father, who had been physically and verbally abusive and violent when they were younger. Jake cried a bit as he connected with his estranged sister. Afterward, we discussed meditation, in which Jake expressed an interest.

Over the course of the next three or four sessions, I introduced two kinds of techniques to Jake.

First, I taught him a few types of meditation—*samadhi*, *vipassana*, and *metta*—both practicing in our session and giving him written instructions (and later, a guided audio recording) to help him meditate at home. Jake began to practice meditation daily.

Second, I taught Jake the entryway practices to psolodrama, including authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream. Jake took to these well, as they appealed to his creative, artistic side. (Jake shared that he was a singer/songwriter on the side, and also had an interest in acting.) Through using these techniques, scenes began to emerge: Jake on the beach as a teenager, sitting with a girl he really liked; Jake as a boy, having a tense car ride with his father. There were other roles as well that emerged through the role stream, including a snake hunting in the grass, and a tough boxer who was aggressive and intimidating.

Through a combination of talk and psolodrama in our sessions, Jake's story began to come out: as a boy, he had been physically abused by his father, whose typical greeting was to enter the house, pick Jake up, and throw him against a wall. Jake's father began to appear more in his psolodramas. In these improvisations, Jake's first impulse was to make peace with him. But then he would turn on his father and yell and curse at him, threatening his life.

A few months into our work together, Jake reported progress: he had begun using meditation outside of his morning sitting practice at home. When he noticed the urge for a tantrum, he would stop his truck, go in the back, and meditate.

Over time, Jake's psolodramas changed as well. He was able to play the role of his father, seeking forgiveness for what he'd done. Jake was able to cry as he reconciled

with his father. And in real life, Jake reported that he met with his father and was able to talk with him honestly in a way he hadn't before.

Within six months of working together, Jake reported real change. Instead of three uncontrolled tantrums per day, he reported going for an entire month with only one incident of anger, which he was more able to control.

Post-therapy, I spoke with Jake roughly two years later, and the changes had stuck. He had consistent control of his anger, and was still meditating regularly.

Comment. Can Jake's change be attributed solely to the use of Insight Improvisation—meditation, drama therapy, and psolodrama? It is a truism that the quality of the clinician-client relationship has the most impact in therapy, more than any particular therapeutic technique or approach. Jake and I had a great relationship, a strong client-therapist bond. But I would contend that our bond would not have been as strong—and Jake's interest in therapy might not have been maintained—had it not been for the dramatic techniques we used in-session and the meditation practices we gave him to use in his daily life. Psolodrama helped Jake make new personal discoveries regarding the bottled-up truths about his family, while meditation helped engrain in him new habits of peace and non-reactivity.

(I have previously written in greater detail about working with Jake; see "Mindfulness and Drama Therapy," 2013.)

Freeing Oneself—Use of Psolodrama in a Single Session

The purpose of this case example is to give a more detailed illustration of a single Insight Improvisation therapy session, including how a typical psolodrama works in such

a session. For this reason, the content of the session, and particularly the drama therapy portion, has been only minimally edited, to preserve the subtleties of the client's process.

Julie is a visual artist in her late thirties. She has a younger sister who is mentally ill—depressed, suicidal, and prone to periodic rage and acting out—and Julie suffers from a great deal of guilt, a constant feeling she is not doing enough. She also feels responsible to her parents, who are all but estranged from her sister; Julie has been the conduit of communication, which is wearying and depressing to her. She feels stuck in a family pattern she cannot get out of. Julie is also in a constant struggle to find sufficient paying work that feels meaningful to her.

Julie and I have worked together for several years, and she is experienced with meditation, improvisation, and the use of psychodrama and psolodrama in our sessions.

On this particular day she arrives in our session and says:

I'm doing fine, but I have news. I haven't been able to contact my sister. A few days ago she wrote to my parents. The email said "these are the ways I'm going to kill myself." She also wrote "I'd like to meet you, Dad, but I don't want to meet you, Mom."

I wonder if there's no end to this. I don't feel terrified or too emotionally involved. But my parents are freaking out.

Julie says she would like to use this session to investigate stressors in her life, which fall into three themes:

First, the lingering problems with her sister and her parents: how her parents keep changing their mind repeatedly about how to deal with her sister, their constant requests that Julie call her sister, and the fact that her sister doesn't pick up when she calls,

causing Julie to become angry. Julie says: “I have a repeating pattern of being a good daughter. I cannot get angry at my parents.” But she is extremely irritated with them.

Second, Julie speaks about her work:

There’s battle between me wanting to free myself and fly versus staying and committing to the work. I have to keep putting in effort. I have to keep creating something, keep thinking, making new art, getting it seen, getting money. I keep running, but it never stops. But I’m creating it myself. It’s a psychological thing. No boss—I’m the boss, employee, everything. It is SO tiring! Just telling you about it I feel tired. I can never stop.

And third, Julie has a feeling that in general she is losing her spark. She says:

I’m getting ugggghhh [makes a dead face]. Something is making me move very little. Why do I have a feeling like: “what does it really matter if I die now or later?” Where is passion or love or romance—the flame? I get this feeling of it really doesn’t matter when I die I don’t have any kids, if I die now, or if I die later. I don’t feel like “oh, I should not die” or “I should live”—I’m just losing my passion. I’m just thinking about death a little bit.

Summarizing, Julie says:

I am frustrated with myself. I think that I’m so trivial and small when not really communicating everything when I talk to people. I communicate more with you than with others. So much irritation around me. Many times I would like to scream.

I ask her whom she’d like to scream at.

“I’d scream at my parents,” she says.

“Both parents?” I ask.

She says, "I'd start with my mom."

Julie begins a psychodramatic dialogue with her mother. This is a structure we have used many times before, so she jumps right in:

Julie (p1): (yelling at Mom) WHY DO YOU ALWAYS ASK ME TO CALL HER?!?
 Many days ago you said "Don't do it!" Then after a few days, you called me to ask me to call her. This is nonsense, just going back and forth! Just take action. You spend all your time, all day, thinking about what to do...blah blah blah!! She's not contacting us because you're not contacting her, you sit and complain, and ask me to call her. Why are you not making the call yourself?!?

I suggest that Julie stand behind her chair and play the double, "What are the inner thoughts and feelings you are *not* saying to your mother?"

Double: I think you and my sister are the same. You're blaming each other. YOU are making yourself a hell, turning this situation into hell. When I see that you guys are the same, there's nothing I can do to help. I have to get away from the black hole...

Julie's tone has changed and her eyes are watering. I can tell she is touching a deeper emotion. I suggest she close her eyes and be present to the feeling. After a long pause, I invite her to follow her body, to trust where her instincts take her. Julie begins to transition into psolodrama, a form she is very familiar with. I cease outside guidance and create space for her to improvise and explore.

Julie (p1): Wide field...white clouds...blue sky...I feel like I can breathe deeper...(she does)...Want to breathe more...more breath in my

chest...I want to fly...(she begins to flap her arms slowly)...my shoulders are aching...feeling heavy...but I want to fly...my wings are kind of tight, heavy, but I want to hold them up...stretch...arrrrhhh....oohhhhhh....I haven't flown for a long time, my wings are so heavy....I don't know if I can fly...(breathing a lot)...oh, oh....I can't fly, my wings are too heavy...I'm just looking at the sky...It feels like the sky is just there, if I want I can fly, am I feeling heavy, or afraid? Just kind of there, watching.

As Julie continues, she clarifies the role she is in:

Peasant (p3): Ucchhh. It's too sunny, too much sunlight. I'm a peasant, too much work to do. Didn't even start and I have so much pain in my whole body. Look at this field—too much sun out there...when will it rain? Wish I could fly like that. Well I must work...Carry some water. Work work work. (Chopping) Must keep going...I don't know why. There's going to be no end. Haven't had a harvest for a long time—just kind of barren for a long time—what am I doing? Hasn't rained...must keep pouring water. Things are drying out. I guess this is the way it goes. I wanna sit. (Sits) Tiring. Uh! Sun is too strong! No drop of water. Somebody is walking over here...Hey, what are you doing over there?

Julie steps to one side, turns her body, bends over a little, and speaks in a different voice, becoming an old woman. (Throughout the remainder of the psolodrama she physically shifts between the roles of old woman and peasant.)

Old Woman (aux): What are you doing over *there*, sitting down there, are you tired?

Peasant: See there is a whole field out there. I haven't been harvesting for a long time. It's really tiring, so irritating. I don't know why I have to keep doing this.

Old woman: (laughing) Just like me when I was young...what I did...praying there would be rain, and that it would be great...that day never came...and I'm just old...don't have much to live for now.

Peasant: So what are you saying to me? That this is not worth it?

Old Woman: Ha ha ha! Now you just can't see anything else but that. You only look at the field, sun, no rain, digging dirt and carrying water—over and over. Turn your eyes around and see everything more wide.

Peasant: Ohhhh. Well...I don't know what else I can see...field here...sun....what else can I see? Is there more than this?

Old Woman: Well yes....there's more...but unfortunately I cannot tell you what it is...you have to find it out. Just don't regret your life until you become my age, and then look forward to death. You're still young, you can still look around...who knows, there's more magical things around.

Peasant: Well, you've done this before... so I can trust you I guess. I'll try.

Julie pauses, opens her eyes, and says "That's it." She adds:

*I can breathe better than before. I can feel the pattern I'm making.
It's two sides of me: one side keeps going, another older and wise is*

telling me to look around. I'm kind of happy with that. Actually, I'd like to continue.

She closes her eyes and continues her psolodrama.

Peasant: So you're saying there is more to this life? There's a tree there, a bird, the field, the sun—see? There's nothing more.

Old Woman: Ha ha ha! Well, that's the riddle of this life—I was fascinated and perplexed about this riddle. It makes no sense. What can you find more of, in this life? Sky, field, tree, bird, people, road. So what more is there? Well it took me a long time to really find out. I can't tell exactly what this life is all about, but the riddle is fascinating. Magical and wonderful about life: you can create what you want. If you set up to be a peasant—so boring. But life is how you make it. You don't have to be a peasant.

Peasant: What?! Are you out of your mind? If I don't do this work, I'll just be a beggar. This is the only thing I can do—all my life, years and years. Something I have to do every day. Can't really go play.

Old Woman: Well, I want to crack your head. If you don't crack your head yourself, and get stuck there, you will so regret it at the end of your life. I can be what I choose, that's the magic of life. Not the answer someone gives you, it's the answer *you* find. Be adventurous. That's what you find: there's more to this.

Peasant: Wow, really amazing—I feel more convinced now. If I can just be... more than what I am now. So did you find the answer? What did you do? What are you doing now?

Old Woman: Well, I am more myself. I am just feeling more, looking forward to day-to-day life. Just feeling more alive. When I look at things around me—sunset, sunlight, ocean, nature—or people—kids—I just feel more life to it. Things are more shining, alive in front of me, really amazing feeling.

Peasant: Maybe not something to do with my work...maybe something else. I want to be like you—more alive—it sounds wonderful. How can I be like you—alive? I feel dead now.

Old Woman: Ha ha ha! Well....I think you should play more. And look around more. Just don't do your peasant work, even for one day. Enjoy and play.

Peasant: You're telling me, just don't think of my work for one day? That I should—ok—that sounds a little bit scary. Not scary, but I haven't done it before. Maybe with you I can do it. Can I hang out with you? Can you take me...wherever?

Old Woman: OK! Sounds good! I'll take you around.

Julie: (referring to the two characters) So we go together... (she laughs)

Immediately after her psolodrama, Julie says:

I feel much better. I am both the old grandma and the peasant. My heart is getting warmer. I can feel the spirit of the grandma—wisdom. I feel more elated, more alive. Just realizing: this is a state of mind.

This was really wonderful. I was a little bit shy. I felt I don't have the answer. When you encouraged me to follow instinct and trust it, it opened up something—I started being myself. I really felt alive. Things are

kind of more beautiful to me, the fields, becoming more alive. I could see the stars—the sunset—nature was so beautiful. So I could translate that to the peasant—exactly like me—who can only see one thing. So funny! It's a state of mind.

At the end of our session, Julie sets some homework for herself:

I'd like to commit to doing things differently.

I want to remind myself that I am capable of feeling what I want to feel. I want to say to myself, when I wake up in the morning, be more attentive, feel more—bring more imagination, more creativity, in relation to my work. To not think my work is a boring thing I have to drag people to—but seeing it in the light of enjoying the dance. Dance is good. I need to dance into my work.

I tend to only do that when I'm feeling good. But when I'm bored, or have an "oh, work" attitude, or have a stomach ache, I forget my inner joy. So I can learn to dance with the problems that arise. And learn to dance with my work!

Comment. This example demonstrates how psolodrama can be used spontaneously in an individual session, once the client is familiar with the form. Julie's psolodrama is very simple, a single dialogue between a protagonist and an auxiliary ego role—no director, double, or audience roles appear. Also, in this case, there was no entryway progression, no authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, etc. That progression is very helpful when first teaching a client psolodrama, and is an excellent warm-up when doing psolodrama by itself. But once a client gets the idea, and the experience of psolodrama is in their bones—the ability to let go and follow the body,

inner imagery, and the roles that emerge—then psolodrama can easily springboard off of more traditional psychodrama, as in this case.

If, instead of transitioning into psolodrama, I continued leading Julie through a psychodrama, she may have been able to further express her anger toward her mother (something we had worked on in previous sessions through psychodrama and other means), and could have also reversed roles, allowing her to become her mother and empathize with her mother's struggles.

Why, then, make the transition to psolodrama early in the psychodramatic scene? By doing so I am inviting Julie to listen more deeply to herself, to her feelings and instincts, in a way that she cannot completely do if I am directing her in a psychodrama. Because psolodrama taps into the raw creativity of the client, it can become deeply satisfying to her in a very individual, unique way—not only is the client working on her own issues, she is also creating something, a play is emerging before her own eyes, and mine. Furthermore, because she made it herself, rather than be directed by me, there is a sense of ownership of the outcome and insights that feels noticeably different from psychodrama.

Finally, by allowing Julie to follow her own instincts, the results are unexpected, surprising, not what I would have chosen or expected, and ultimately exactly what she needed to free herself. It was fascinating to notice how, although we started the psychodrama with anger toward her mother (and both parents) regarding how they were handling the situation with her sister, what emerged in the psolodrama were deeper themes of burnout, dissatisfaction with Julie's work and life—existential issues of what it means to be fulfilled and how to live happily every day. My sense is that Julie was more

than a little burnt out dealing with her sister and parents, and the psolodrama helped her discover own truth: that she needs to focus on herself and her own happiness, and not give away her life to her parents' and sister's repeated crises.

Final Thoughts

There is still much to explore about the use of Insight Improvisation in individual therapy. Two brief examples:

Assessment. The solo nature of psolodrama and the entryway practices may make them particularly apt for assessing personality styles (or disorders). Psolodrama is a bit like an embodied Rorschach test; the therapist, as silent witness, exerts little conscious influence over the client's improvisation—what influence they have is largely a matter of projection on the client's part. The defenses that arise are mainly the result of the client confronting the structure of the exercise and his own habits and patterns as he moves, speaks, and improvises. The “Psolodrama Traps and Habits” table (in the chapter “Troubleshooting Psolodrama” in Part III) offers a breakdown of some of the typical defenses that arise. It is up to the clinician to interpret their implications beyond the psolodrama itself.

Developmental arc. The development of the client-therapist relationship in Insight Improvisation—a process that typically progresses from psychodrama to monodrama to coached psolodrama to psolodrama—parallels the stages of healthy child development in relation to its parent. This client-therapist process models and possibly helps repair a process that may have been missing or disrupted in the patient's childhood. A securely attached child is able to explore the world, knowing she has a loving parent

and a secure home to return to whenever needed. In Insight Improv, having the therapist as witness (and when needed, as coach) provides that secure home to return to; at the end of the psolodrama—after journeying into the unknown—the client returns, sits down, and reconnects with the therapist. And there is a further progression: in at least one instance in my own therapy practice, a client who became skilled in psolodrama in therapy went on to establish a new peer relationship in which she continued to practice psolodrama following termination of therapy—paralleling how securely attached children are perhaps better able to later form stable, intimate relationships with others.

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Facilitating Workshops

“When I [facilitate a] workshop, I clean myself, meditate. I plan something, but at the workshop I learn to let go. It is just a moment. Sometimes ‘I’ want to do something, but ‘No I’ tells me something. So what I do lately is listen and trust. I clear myself empty.”

— Sonoko Prow, Thailand

(personal communication, July 19, 2015)

Perhaps even more so than in individual work, the experience of teaching Insight Improvisation to groups can be profoundly moving and gratifying. After more than 17 years of teaching these programs world-wide, I continue to be surprised and moved by what’s possible: personal breakthroughs, penetrating insights, laughter, tears, mutual support and peer coaching, and self-discovery on every level. I feel tremendously lucky when I get to offer this work; as facilitator I have the privilege to help provide a safe environment for participants to reveal their most vulnerable and authentic selves to one another.

The purpose of the chapter is two-fold: first, to share what I know about the design, facilitation, and teaching of Insight Improvisation workshops; and second, to convey some of the experiences I’ve had teaching this work in the US and internationally.

This chapter is for those who've learned and practiced Insight Improvisation and would like to teach it to others, as well as for creative arts therapists, theater artists, workshop leaders, meditators, and others who would like to draw on their own unique mixture of skills and experience to design and lead workshops of their own, in their own countries and internationally.

Facilitating Workshops	
<p><i>Why Teach Insight Improvisation?</i></p> <p><i>Qualifications for Instructors</i></p> <p><i>Standard and Custom Programs</i></p> <p><i>Principles of Curriculum Design</i> Audience, Goal, & Benefit Conceptual, Experiential, and Emotional Arcs Empathy & Clarity The Importance of Warming Up</p>	<p><i>Principles of Facilitation</i> Being Prepared Living the Work The Relationship is Everything Creating the Safe Container Being an Effective Teacher Maximum Engagement, Participation & Connection</p> <p><i>Special Topics</i> Working with Strong Emotions & Resistance Teaching Internationally Being a Guest Teacher</p> <p><i>Additional Resources</i></p>

Why Teach Insight Improvisation?

If I had to choose one pursuit in life, I would travel the planet sleeping on sofas and teaching Insight Improv.

Why?

There's something about the conditions created in these workshops that allows participants to go to a deeply personal, and at the same time creative place. If run well and if the participants are open, what shines through in an Insight Improv workshop is participants' authenticity and vulnerability, their uniqueness, who they are at their best—body, voice, mind, emotions, imagination all aligned, open, and fully expressed.

From a broader perspective, I see time and again in these workshops the potential we all have to live lives more free of suffering—lives of joy, presence, meaning, and connection.

The level of mutual support in these programs is particularly inspiring. Over the course of the four-day “Life Drama” program, for example (described below in the section on Standard Programs), individuals can go from being strangers, to uninhibitedly playing and improvising together, to directing one another in psychodramas, to meditating and doing authentic movement together, to creatively and courageously exploring their truths in the presence of one another through psolodrama. It is awe-inspiring to sit at one end of a large hall in Bangkok or Beijing or Kolkata or Seoul and see 10 or 20 pairs of participants practicing psolodrama together, one person witnessing the other's spontaneous unfolding of their life—the witness observing with concentration and caring, the psoloist improvising with vulnerability and creative abandon.

It is important to say here that not every moment of every workshop is like this. A lot depends on the group, the facilitator, having a supportive environment, etc. And Insight Improvisation is not entirely unique in this way: there are many forms of drama therapy and creative arts therapy that invite a similar depth of creative exploration.

For me, it is the personal transformations individuals can undergo that are perhaps the most moving. In one program, in Thailand, a woman in her late thirties asked to speak with me after the first day. She was very quiet, and looked depressed and tired. She began to cry, saying that the workshop was bringing up for her the grief of losing a child (a miscarriage, the latest of several she'd had). At home, she felt unable to talk about it with her husband and mother-in-law, who both kept telling her to just get over it and move on. She hid her tears, and sometimes cried alone in a bedroom, so that her five-year old son would not know that she was sad; she felt ashamed and guilty that she might be negatively affecting him. Through our conversation, and then using the psychodrama exercises the following day, she was able to express herself more fully, allowing herself to feel and express her grief vocally and physically. She returned the second weekend feeling a bit better. And by the end of that weekend—having enacted her own psolodramas and witnessed others'—she had made a noticeable shift. She looked different—happy, confident, and at peace—and spoke to the group with gratitude about what the experience and their support had meant to her.

Qualifications for Instructors

A teacher of Insight Improvisation combines knowledge and experience with an intention and commitment to be of service, and is proficient in five main areas of expertise:

I. Hands-on understanding of Insight Improvisation concepts, practices, and exercises, including meditation and active meditation; theater and improvisation; and drama therapy, psychodrama, and psolodrama structures. This means not only reading

this book but more importantly taking these exercises “into the studio” with a friend/peer or small group to try out the variations, experiment, and explore; using them individually with clients if one is a therapist; and incorporating practices such as meditation, authentic movement, and “psolodrama alone” into one’s daily, weekly, and monthly schedule.

II. A depth of knowledge in meditation and experience teaching it. This includes actively learning and reading about meditation, listening to dharma talks, attending retreats, having one’s own daily sitting practice, etc. It is also helpful to gain experience teaching meditation in a variety of contexts, e.g. to children, seniors, prison inmates, etc. Personal understanding of meditative awareness—as well as the ability to model mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness—lends credibility to the facilitator’s teaching.

III. A background in theater/performance. Training and onstage experience in acting and its core skills—the expressive use of the body and voice; the importance of breathing and relaxation; the principles of improvisation; what it means to commit fully to making a gesture, delivering a line of text, pursuing an intention, playing a role, etc.—are all vital. In addition to classical theater training, experience with different forms of movement improvisation, improvisational singing, non-comedic forms of improvisation, self-revelatory theater, and experimental theater, is recommended, as is studying/training with a wide range of teachers and performing with different kinds of theater groups (scripted and improvisational).

IV. Drama therapy/psychodrama training. A background in drama therapy or psychodrama—or to be actively studying and practicing those techniques—is vital to being a good teacher of Insight Improv. Although one is not formally in the role of

“therapist” in an Insight Improvisation workshop, quite often one must draw upon therapeutic knowledge/experience, e.g. when conducting the empty chair exercise, leading a psychodrama, helping a workshop participant deal with overwhelming feelings in the course of doing an exercise, or answering challenging questions. This chapter offers some guidance with regard to handling challenging situations, but confidence and credibility come from training with many different teachers in a wide range of drama therapy and psychodrama techniques, and practicing those approaches both in workshop settings and with actual clients.

V. Experience as a facilitator. A background in experiential training with groups—e.g. understanding how to introduce a program and oneself, how to set the tone for a program as well as establish ground rules, how to conduct whole group as well as pair and small-group activities, best approaches when debriefing an exercise, how to manage questions, challenges, resistance, etc.—is all very helpful. This chapter describes a range of facilitation practices that have proven useful in Insight Improvisation programs; however, nothing beats actual experience: it helps to have attended many workshops and led many workshops before teaching Insight Improv.

(See “Additional Resources” at the end of this chapter, for more about training in these areas of expertise.)

Standard and Custom Programs

Although there isn’t a single way to deliver an Insight Improvisation workshop, over the years I have developed a set of standard curricula; these agendas can be found in “Appendix C: Sample Agendas for Group Work.” One can also design one’s own

programs using the concepts and exercises in this book to meet the needs of different populations, groups, and specific teams, or to combine Insight Improv with other types of experiential work.

Standard Programs

The first Insight Improvisation programs, which I offered to groups in 1999 in Cambridge and Charlemont, MA (the latter at Jean-Claude van Itallie's Shantigar workshop center), were focused on the intersection of theater and meditation, drawing on the exercises which can be found in Part II of this book. That workshop is now called **"Insight Improvisation: Freedom in Performance,"** typically a two- to three-day program, modules of which can also be delivered standalone or as a series of classes or workshops.

As I trained as a drama therapist, developing psolodrama as a practice, and beginning to teach it to others, my first attempts were to train others over a single weekend, which usually felt too rushed. What has evolved over time is a four-day program—entitled **"Life Drama"**—which can be led contiguously or over two weekends. **"Life Drama, Part I—An Introduction to Drama Therapy & Psychodrama,"** is just that—it does not contain any Insight Improvisation exercises, but lays the groundwork for what's to come by introducing fundamental concepts such as improvisational play, sociodrama, the empty chair, role reversal, the psychodramatic roles, the skills of the psychodrama director, the psychodramatic sharing process, and more. This is followed by **"Life Drama, Part II—Insight Improvisation: Psolodrama,"** a two-day program that introduces the three types of meditative awareness and corresponding types of meditation, the entryway practices including authentic

movement, the role of the witness and the sharing process, and psolodrama itself, as well as sung psolodrama.

Although some of the material in Part I of this book—including meditation, authentic movement, and shared vipassana—is included in the psolodrama program above, there is not enough time to cover these practices in depth. In addition, there are many more exercises in Part I of this book that are both fun and rewarding to explore. For that reason I have created a two-day program, **“Insight Improvisation: Meditation & Active Meditation,”** also described in Appendix C.

Custom Programs

Custom programs can be created using Insight Improvisation techniques and ideas to meet the special needs of different groups, teams, and special populations.

In December 2004, about five weeks before I was due to visit Bangkok for the first time, the Indian Ocean tsunami hit, killing many along the Andaman coast in southern Thailand, and leaving thousands displaced, homeless, and traumatized, including children and teens. When I arrived in Thailand, I tried to find some way to help and was asked by the Rajanukul Institute, Thailand’s largest children’s hospital, to teach a workshop on the use of experiential techniques for working with children after a disaster. I reached out to the drama therapy community as well as colleagues in Boston for input, and created a workshop for clinicians which combined information about PTSD, warm-ups and games, theater-based exercises such as storytelling, and ways of introducing meditation to kids. For the three-hour workshop, Rajanukul brought together mental health workers from throughout Bangkok—from NGO’s and hospitals—who would later be traveling to the tsunami region. Participants enjoyed the playful exercises

and had many questions about how to apply them. This experience inspired me to go to the tsunami region myself soon after, where a colleague and I used these techniques, as well as psychodrama and playback theater, with tsunami survivors. (For a more detailed recounting of this experience, see Gluck, 2012. More thoughts about using Insight Improvisation with children can be found in the final chapter of this book.)

Other potential audiences for custom programs include therapists, couples, leaders, and organizational teams, as well as populations suffering from specific thought/emotional/behavioral patterns, such as those with borderline personality disorder (BPD). One of my internships when studying to be a therapist was using psychodrama along with Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) to treat young people with BPD. Insight Improvisation might work well in this setting as it combines the teaching of mindfulness with psychodramatic tools.

Principles of Curriculum Design

When putting together an Insight Improv program or any experiential program, there are certain principles that when adhered to help create a design that is most effective for the individuals attending and for the group as a whole. These principles progress from the highest level view (“who is the audience and what do I want them to leave with?”), to designing the broad arc of the program, to the details of thinking about how each module and exercise will be introduced, led, and discussed.

(Much has been written about the importance and benefits of experiential training over lecture and passive learning. I will assume here the reader understands why one should lead workshops rather than deliver lectures on Insight Improv!)

Audience, Goal, and Benefit

As my colleague Pat Dougan likes to say, before any presentation or meeting we need to think about the Audience, the Goal, and the Benefit: who is coming, what are our objectives, and what will the audience take away?

Audience. Sometimes we know a great deal about the audience—it may be a particular team or a special population we’re designing the program for. Other times, as with a public open-enrollment program, we may know little or nothing in advance about the group. Good program design can help address this latter problem. One way is with pre-work: I can have my attendees answer a brief questionnaire about their background, why they’re attending, and what they hope to get out of the program. Alternatively, I can use techniques early in the workshop to get to know the group better. For example, with a large group, I typically begin “Life Drama, Part I” with sociometry, asking them to split into subgroups based on what their profession is, how they feel today, why they decided to come to the workshop, etc. To get a better sense of the experience level in the group, I may ask them to rate their depth of knowledge/experience in theater and in therapy, using spectrograms to give a visual sense of this in the room. To go a little deeper, I approach individuals during these exercises to briefly “interview” them with the whole group listening—to find out why they chose the particular group or spot on the spectrum that they did.

Goal. In “An Introduction to Drama Therapy & Psychodrama” (“Life Drama, Part I”), the main goal is to equip participants with the basic tools of drama therapy and psychodrama, so that by the end of the program they can actually direct a small psychodrama. A secondary goal is to plant seeds for “Insight Improvisation: Psolodrama”

(“Life Drama, Part II”). Participants in Part I learn about the psychodramatic roles, the shape of an effective psychodrama, and the skills of the director and thus are more readily able to grasp how psolodrama works when taking Part II. In Part II, the goal is to train participants in the practice of psolodrama and all its constituent skills. These include meditation and the types of meditative awareness, authentic movement and the entryway progression, use of the psychodramatic roles, the types of sharing that witnesses can engage in, etc. By the end they should feel confident in not only practicing psolodrama but also in being a witness for others. Ideally, many will leave the program able to go out and teach psolodrama to friends and peers and to practice with them.

Benefit. I think about the potential benefits to participants on a number of different levels. There is the innermost level of **personal development**: the participant can discover something new about themselves, have a new insight, express a truth about themselves they have never expressed before (either at all or never before with a group of people), learn to be less inhibited, and/or discover his own creative or expressive potential. In some cases, the personal development begun in the workshop can have a positive effect on the participant’s life, helping him open up to his family, consider leaving a job he is unhappy with, begin meditating regularly, etc. A second level of benefit is **knowledge**: participants leave with some understanding of the concepts taught in the program, the exercises, meditation practices, types of awareness, etc. And finally there is the benefit of **application** with others: how a participant can take the ideas and exercises from the program and apply them with individuals and groups. Not only may therapists, teachers, and coaches gain this benefit, but also anyone who wants to teach a

friend or family member or get together with another participant and practice these techniques.

Conceptual, Experiential, and Emotional Arcs

The arc of a program can be visualized as three intertwined threads:

- (1) **The concepts** introduced
- (2) **The experiential activities** that help illuminate those ideas and apply them concretely
- (3) **The mental/physical/emotional journey** of participants as they encounter those concepts and experiences

There are several principles associated with designing an effective and satisfying program arc:

Developmental Progression. Exercises and ideas progress from basic to sophisticated, e.g., from warm-ups and improv games to exercises that require not only autonomy but also leadership, such as directing one's own small group in a psychodrama. In the full "Life Drama" program the ultimate aim is to have the participant take greater ownership of their developmental journey—in a sense they are progressing toward being their own therapist, having insights of their own as they create their own psolodramas.

Balancing Horizontal & Vertical. The best workshops give the feeling of everyone being on a journey together in which every step of that journey is itself a worthwhile, rich exploration, while at the same time there is a clear destination. Parallel to van Itallie's ideas about storytelling (1997), the horizontal movement through a workshop is how it

progresses and builds toward its end-point, and the vertical is how it slows down to examine more deeply a particularly idea or experience, exploring it thoroughly as if there were all the time in the world—as if that one activity were the entire program. From a design standpoint, this means that every idea and exercise introduced should be rich enough to warrant such exploration.

Variety of Learning Styles. A good agenda varies the mode/approach from exercise to exercise and module to module—for example, alternating meditations with more active exercises—and appeals to different learning styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, as well as cognitive, affective, and physiological.

Empathy and Clarity

As much as possible, as I design a program, I am exercising empathy, putting myself in the shoes of the participant as I think about how the different modules are strung together, how the exercises flow in each module, how I will segue from exercise to exercise, when and how to introduce new ideas and terminology along the way, etc. At the same time, clarity and logic are key because the danger in an experiential program is that participants become lost in the experience, wondering “why are we doing this?” but being unable to articulate that question as exercises blur by. A good experiential program balances depth of experience (emotional, physical, imaginative) while maintaining intellectual clarity as to why and how we are working.

Modular structure. Organizing the program into modules groups the material thematically and helps the facilitator manage time. For example, each morning and afternoon of “Life Drama” is a single module that focuses on a few overarching ideas.

Modules are comprised of one or more exercises, with key concepts introduced in support of the active work.

Arc of an Exercise. A typical exercise has a segue/introduction (including, if needed, a demonstration of the exercise), then the exercise itself, and then a debrief. This is parallel to the psychodramatic process (described by Moreno) of Warm-up, Action Phase, Sharing, and Warm-Down.

> **The Introduction** to an exercise provides a segue from whatever came before, and says enough to establish credibility and the rationale for the activity—explaining where we’re going and why—without saying too much; it’s best to maintain a little mystery and keep an introduction as succinct as possible. There are usually two parts to the intro: the conceptual introduction or rationale, and the initial instructions for the exercise. If a demonstration is needed, it’s also good to build a little extra time in for Q&A—a good demonstration will elicit questions and comments.

> **The Exercise Itself** is ideally active, experiential, different from what came before but building on prior skills and adding new ones. It should stretch the group, but not beyond its limits. The best exercises use the whole body and whole voice, and require no props or advance preparation. They can range from creative, playful, and improvisational, to profound, personal, and transformational—and the very best exercises are both fun *and* deep.

Skillful use of repetition is important—human beings learn best not by seeing something once, but by encountering the concept multiple times in different forms and contexts. For this reason, exercises in Insight Improvisation programs tend to be part of a multi-stage progression. Typically, the first stage introduces the new idea to the group as

a whole; the second stage then invites participants to work with that concept or technique by themselves in pairs or small teams. When introducing meditation—e.g. *samadhi*, *vipassana*, or *metta*—each module is structured to introduce the “pure” form first (sitting in silence, with the facilitator providing verbal guidance), and then to take type of awareness into a more active meditation (e.g., authentic movement, shared vipassana, or *metta* dialogue in pairs), and finally to apply the underlying concept—mindfulness, choicelessness, or lovingkindness—more broadly in the workshop as a whole (e.g. how the soloist and witness can each treat their roles in solo drama as forms of meditation).

> Structuring Debriefs. It is usually best to debrief in pairs (or small groups) before having individuals share with the whole group. In this way everyone gets to develop and speak their thoughts before sharing with the whole group. This leads to a higher quality debrief with the whole group, and encourages those who are a little more shy or less verbal to share their experience. (A skilled facilitator will also explicitly draw out the quieter participants in a group—more on this below.) Well-designed debriefs tend to begin with general questions and then progress to more specific ones, for example:

- ⇒ *What did you experience in this exercise?*
- ⇒ *What surprised you? What did you learn?*
- ⇒ *What was most challenging for you?*
- ⇒ Specific questions about details of the exercise, e.g.: *Were you able to make use of the director, double, and audience roles—and if so, which ones, and what was the effect?*
- ⇒ *What are one or two insights or learnings you can take from this exercise and apply going forward?*

⇒ *What questions do you have?*

For some exercises, such as psychodrama, authentic movement (as well as the other entryway exercises), and psolodrama, the debrief is preceded by a sharing process—either the group sharing with the protagonist of the psychodrama, or the mover or psoloist sharing with the witness after their psolodrama and vice versa. This sharing process can then be followed by a group debrief, which can include sharing the learnings from the exercise as well as questions for the facilitator. This two-stage process preserves the safe container of the exercise in the sharing process, inviting an expression of feelings, personal reflections, and insights, while also offering a chance in the debrief to take a step back to reflect on the process as a whole, the mechanics of it, why certain choices were made, etc. Because this sharing plus debriefing process is key to the effectiveness of the exercises it is used in, it is vital to educate participants in good sharing practices beforehand—for the group, in psychodrama, and for the witnesses, in exercises such as authentic movement and psolodrama.

(See the relevant chapters in Part III of this book for best practices in witnessing and sharing.)

Closure. At the end of each module or day of the program, the facilitator can build in time for reflection and questions, to help ground participants' experiential learning, both in the concepts being taught as well as in practical, real-world implications for the work. In addition, the program itself ideally ends with activities to help provide a satisfying sense of closure. One example: standing in a circle, have each participant share a word or phrase expressing one learning or one feeling they are taking from the day (or from the program). With a larger group, and given more time at the end of a two- or four-

day program, I will sometimes give a fun assignment—before the closing circle—for each participant to go visit three other participants in order to acknowledge them for the difference they made in their workshop experience. I also often end a program by having participants hold hands and take a bow together as a way to acknowledge the good work of the group; or breathe, hum, and sing notes together (similar to the Chords exercise in the “Singing” chapter in Part II of this book), ending with a final chord in harmony.

The Importance of Warming Up

As Moreno identified, proper warm up is essential. If a group is well warmed up, they can jump in and do almost anything. A group not warmed up for an exercise may resist it and will likely not have as deep, thorough, or satisfying an experience.

An aware facilitator can tell if a group is not warmed up and can add an activity spontaneously to help warm them up. But it’s even better to think things through in advance and include warm-ups in the program design.

A good warm-up for an exercise anticipates where a participant will need to be—physically, vocally, mentally, and emotionally—and helps move them toward that state.

Arriving in the space and becoming present. In most Insight Improvisation programs, I encourage participants to begin as soon as they arrive—even before the official start time—by finding a spot on the floor, closing their eyes, moving, stretching, and following their bodies. I then lead the group through a kind of guided authentic movement, inviting them to notice what’s coming in through the different sense doors, to be present to the texture of the floor, the smell of the air, how their body feels, and to notice specific bodily sensations, sounds, etc. Depending on the agenda, I may continue

this warm-up progression by doing a little sitting meditation with group, then some silent authentic movement (in which the group moves and I witness), and, finally, having them move with a partner in *The Three States*. This then flows quite naturally into a pair check-in with their movement partner.

Checking in. One of the best ways to warm up near the beginning of a program (or in any meeting, in fact), is to check in. This not only gets participants to speak and share personally, it also provides helpful information to the facilitator about the group. With a small group, say, eight or fewer, I like to go around the circle, asking each person to share their name, a brief self-introduction (one sentence), how they are feeling in a word or phrase, and what brought them to the workshop (in a sentence). It's important to keep the check-in brief so that everyone stays engaged. Depending on the type of workshop it is, rather than go around the circle, I might ask the person who just finished to throw an invisible ball to someone else, inviting them to go next—this helps keep everyone more alert and listening, and simply makes the check-in more fun. For a shy group, if we have the time, I might first ask them all to “practice” their check-in with the person next to them before we hear from individuals. This pair check-in also works well coming out of a warm-up activity in pairs, such as *The Three States*, or *Metta Dialogue*.

In a large group, I usually begin with sociometry (described above). Then I'll have participants pair up to answer similar check-in questions to those I use in a small group. If there's time, I might invite a few people to share their check-in with everybody, just so we can hear a few examples of how people are feeling and why they are attending.

Checking in more deeply. Early in the development of training programs for psolodrama, I began to sense that due to the compact schedule, and the fact that early

exercises in the entryway progression (authentic movement, shared vipassana, and role stream) were not always prompting participants to share in a vulnerable way, more of a warm-up was needed to prepare the group to venture toward psolodrama, one that would invite participants to share more truthfully about their lives. Out of this necessity, the **Deeper Check-in** was born.

In the Deeper Check-in, one person at a time—the protagonist for that round—lies on his back (if it's a hard floor, it nice to use a blanket or cushions to help them be more comfortable). The rest of the group sits on the floor or cushions around the protagonist. Before the round begins, the protagonist can say whether he is open to contact from the group. If he would like contact, group members place their hands on the protagonist's body: arms, legs, head, feet, etc. (protagonist can say what is best for him and the firmness of contact he would like). The protagonist closes his eyes, takes a moment of silence, and then answers two questions—both extensions of or deeper versions of questions asked in the initial check-in (“how are you feeling ?”and “what brings you here?”):

1. **How are you feeling right now *in your life*?** What's bugging you, that you wish to clear, about work, life, relationships, family, etc.? Say whatever you need to say to be fully present.
2. **What do you need right now *in your life*?** What's next for you on your personal path of growth? What are your hopes, dreams, needs, desires for your life right now?

The protagonist ends his round by taking a moment of silence, slowly rising, making eye contact with the group, and then rejoining the group. There is a brief

transition where group members can stretch and relax. Then the next person lies down in the center.

A few additional guidelines for the group:

“Try not to plan in advance what you will say. As you witness others, notice these thoughts and let them go. Instead, when it’s your turn, trust the spontaneity of the exercise—follow your feelings. Answer each question from your heart and gut, as truthfully as you can, without censoring. It’s OK to look bad, to be messy, to cry. Discover what wants to come up. Say what is most important to say.”

“When you are a witness, your purpose is to support the protagonist. It helps to treat the exercise like a meditation, by practicing mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness. Bring your mindful awareness back to the protagonist whenever you are distracted or tired; practice openness by bringing an attitude of non-judgment and support no matter what the protagonist shares or how they share it; and actively bring your lovingkindness and caring to the protagonist, both through the quality of physical contact as well as by empathizing with whatever feelings arise.”

Because the Deeper Check-in involves lots of sitting and not much movement, I will often precede the exercise by leading the group in a walking meditation together (forming a line, and leading the group in slow walking, with the aim of relaxing the body and returning the mind to the present). It is also possible to lead another physical warm-up mid-way through the Deeper Check-in if it begins to feel too long. And it helps to remind the witnesses about bringing their mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness throughout.

Although the Deeper Check-in was originally designed for a small group, I have led it in large groups by demonstrating it myself, then doing the exercise with one or two participants while the whole group witnesses, and then splitting into small teams to give everyone a chance to try it. Timing in this exercise is important, especially for a larger group; use a timer and limit each protagonist to three minutes of sharing, if small groups are working in parallel.

After the exercise, spend a few minutes debriefing in small groups and as a whole. One discovery often shared afterward: “It felt good to realize I am not alone.” By sharing their truth—their imperfection, brokenness, or pain—and hearing others do the same, participants feel less isolated in their suffering and begin to bond as a group. And because they feel less alone, and have begun to trust the others a bit more, it helps them open up in subsequent exercises.

Other ways of getting to know one another. Over time, I have found that the Deeper Check-in, powerful as it is, can sometimes take too long, so I have looked for other ways to provide more personal check-in opportunities, especially with larger groups. An alternative approach is to have pairs share “three issues or challenges they are facing in their lives.” The best time to do this is over lunch; not only do pairs of participants get to break bread together as they chat, but by dialoguing over lunch, time is saved for the main experiential activities. This is a great way to warm up many things: connection, empathy, caring for the other, feeling safe with the other, feeling this person has supportive intentions toward me and can be my witness, as well as—ideally—warming up my willingness to be vulnerable and share real issues with this person, both during my drama and in the sharing process afterward.

(A shorter version of this exercise can be led during the program, for example as a brief warm-up before introducing group psychodrama and asking for volunteer protagonists. I will sometimes have participants share one issue or challenge with three different partners, but reduce the time provided in each round: at first they have three minutes to share the issue/challenge, then 30 seconds to share it with another person, and finally just one sentence to share it with a third person. Afterward, I find participants are more readily able to sum up their issue succinctly and powerfully during the psychodrama selection process.)

A related type of partner dialogue is to have participants meet in pairs to share three stories—three significant moments—from their lives. This is a great lunch activity to do on the first day of a program because it invites participants get to know one another better in a fun and engaging way. I suggest that participants tell stories they rarely or never have told before; brainstorm examples of “classic” significant moments (e.g. getting married, death of a loved one, birth of a child, etc.); and I underscore that the exercise is confidential—I will not be asking pairs to report back on the stories afterward.

Energizers. Sometimes what’s needed is not an intimate dialogue, but just the opposite: a chance to get physical, move around, create energy, and laugh together. Although I may note an apt moment for an energizer in my written agenda, I also throw in fun physical activities in the midst of a workshop, such as dancing to music in a playful way (linking arms with different partners and gently spinning around), sending “HA!” and a clap around the circle (and similar theater games), a group massage standing in a circle (each person turning to their right to massage the shoulders of the next person),

and whatever else I can think of. I make sure to jump in first and participate fully in everything myself, so the group sees that it's OK to let go and look silly.

Principles of Facilitation

A facilitator of Insight Improvisation programs plays many roles, including host, presenter, demonstrator, traffic cop, coach, therapist, meditation leader, and more.

Although this chapter cannot provide a complete guide to the art of facilitation, what follows is a brief guide to what I personally have found most helpful to keep in mind when facilitating Insight Improv workshops.

Being Prepared

So much of the work of a facilitator is simply being prepared and showing up. If I prepare well and show up on time (that is, be there early, so I have plenty of time to arrive, set up, and greet others), there is a higher likelihood the program will be successful.

Preparation consists of a few things:

Initial Planning. Months in advance, I have thorough discussions with the organizer or host about the potential audience for the program, the goals of the program and what topics it should include, the venue and logistical requirements, budget, publicity, pre-work/reading/questions for participants, etc. (See “Appendix B: Sample Logistics for Group Programs” for details.) If *I* am the organizer/host, then I create an action plan with deadlines so that I'm not scrambling to find a venue or participants at the last minute.

Regarding the location, the quality and size of the space matters. For a typical Insight Improvisation workshop, an empty space with a clean floor that participants can roll around on is essential (a studio with a wooden dance floor is perfect; a clean, carpeted floor is also fine). Each participant ideally has 30 square feet within which to work; for a group of 12 this is 360 sq. ft., rounding up to roughly 20 by 20 feet; for a group of 40, it would mean a space of 1200 square feet, or about 30 by 40 feet. I usually request a small table set up at one end of the room for my materials, surrounded on each side by a flipchart pad on an easel stand if I anticipate using charts (I'll typically use flipcharts in non-English speaking countries to help clarify the concepts being taught; more about teaching overseas later in this chapter).

Logistics and Participants. As the program approaches, it's vital to review the logistics in advance, to be clear on timing, location, and other details, as well as any information about the participants, including any pre-work questions they answered.

Agenda. Even if it is an agenda I've led many times before, it helps to review it and modify it as necessary for the group I'll be working with, incorporating any learnings from previous programs. A good preparation step is to create a high-level outline of the agenda, with timing, that fits on a single page, a summary one can glance at during the program.

Materials. There are a few basic things I always bring to workshops, tools of the trade for facilitators: a travel clock as many spaces lack a wall clock; Tibetan prayer bells that can be rung to get a group's attention (for a very large group doing a noisy activity, I sometimes ring them into a microphone); music player and portable speakers; flipchart markers in an assortment of colors; masking tape or blue painter's tape to put up

flipcharts. If I have charts from a prior program, I bring them along, either folded up or rolled up in a tube.

Living the Work

As a facilitator, am I just espousing ideas, beliefs, and practices, or am I living them and practicing them myself? It's helpful to remind myself of my intention before leading a program.

I try to send clear signals from the opening moments of the workshop that although I am the leader, **I am also a participant**. Right from the start I'm on the floor moving with participants as I lead a mindful movement and stretching warm-up. When I lead a meditation, I am also meditating. As often as I can throughout the program, when demonstrating an exercise, I actually *do* the exercise, in an authentic and vulnerable way, drawing upon personal material as appropriate. By modeling vulnerability, I try to create a space where participants feel it is OK for *them* to be vulnerable and share personally.

In Insight Improv we are specifically teaching about the benefits of cultivating mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness. The facilitator must practice and embody these kinds of awareness in their own behavior:

Mindfulness. As a facilitator, am I present, undistracted, relaxed, centered? Like Sonoko, whose writing appears at the beginning of this chapter, can I empty myself, taking the time to meditate when I awaken that morning, or in my preparation before the program? Once I arrive in the space, or anytime during the program, can I notice if I am tense, and take a deep breath to return to the here and now?

Being present may be a particular challenge when participants are doing pair or small group work. Can I stay present—not looking at the agenda or my phone (or in international programs, chatting with the translator)—but instead stay focused on participants’ work? If I am truly living the work, I will use opportunities to witness during the program as mini-meditations, bringing my awareness back to the participants as the objects of my meditation.

Choicelessness includes qualities of openness and acceptance. Can I accept what is happening in the workshop, especially those things I do not like? A participant expressing an opinion I do not agree with, someone suddenly leaving the room, a technical or logistical problem—all of these present opportunities to slow down, notice my own aversion, and practice nonreactivity, rather than jump to take action or say something rash. Can I take a breath, pause, and *respond*—rather than *react*?

Lovingkindness. It should go without saying that the facilitator takes an attitude of lovingkindness toward their participants. And yet—what about the participant who is driving you crazy (e.g. with resistance, irritating questions, annoying habits)? How can you send that person *metta* and think about what action to take to connect with them skillfully—or sometimes choose to take no action. (More on working with difficult participants appears below.) Also, how are you treating each person you come in contact with: workshop organizers, translators, center staff, audiovisual support, cleaning staff? Ideally, connect in a caring way with each person you meet, and treat them as equals. Be a contribution to their day. Smile!

The Relationship is Everything

They may forget what you said — but they will never forget how you made them feel.

— Carl W. Buehner

Facilitating is a big job, there's a lot to juggle, and the facilitator can get tense. I find this often happens to me at the beginning of a program, when I'm rushing to get ready. *Am I all set up and ready? Everything in place? Oh, the participants are arriving! Who are these strange people!?*

This tension is due to my being overly focused on myself and my agenda, rather than other people. That's a shame, because the entire purpose of the workshop is to serve them.

What helps:

1. **Calm down, relax, breathe.** Return to your own center. Smile! As Thich

Nhat Hanh writes (1991, p. 16):

Breathing in, I calm my body

Breathing out, I smile

Dwelling in the present moment

I know this is a wonderful moment.

2. **Reach out!** Go right up to people, shake their hands, smile, make eye contact, introduce yourself, learn their name.

It may take a while to learn their names—that's OK. But try to learn everyone's name if possible early in a program—it makes a big difference. Using a person's name sends a caring message. (For large programs name tags are great—so too for programs in other countries where names may be harder to remember.)

During the program, look for ways to put the participants' needs first. You are in service to them, while also balancing the needs of individuals with what's best for the group. Examples:

Be flexible with breaks. Let them determine (within reason) when breaks occur and the length of breaks. Don't be upset or overly strict if someone needs to leave the room; flexibility is key.

Be open to questions. Try to answer every question thoroughly, ideally when asked, rather than putting it off until later. (One exception: if a participant asks “why are we doing this exercise” before the exercise has started, it is sometimes helpful to say “there are several reasons we're doing this exercise. But rather than explain in advance, I'd like you to experience it for yourself so *you* can discover why we are doing it. Afterward we will discuss why we did it. Does that sound OK to you?") Make yourself available, either over lunch or at the end of the day, to answer further questions. If someone needs additional coaching or help, make the time to spend with them.

Give feedback skillfully. Be very liberal in the use of endorsement, but make sure it's authentic and specific; don't just say “good job” or flatter in an empty way. Identify what they did well and say it. If you need to give someone negative feedback about a disruptive behavior, it's usually best to chat with them

privately, during a break. Be careful not to make someone look bad in front of the group; chances are they will not accept the feedback.

Don't be afraid to apologize. If you do or say something that you fear may have hurt someone's feelings, don't be afraid to approach them during a break and apologize. Over the course of teaching hundreds of workshops (both in the corporate and therapy worlds), I have had to do this many times. It is always scary and/or awkward to do, yet I am always amazed at the positive outcome—often the two of us leave the interaction feeling much closer. And I am often better informed about them and their issues and sensitivities.

Intentionally build relationship. Get to know participants throughout the program, not only during exercises and discussions, but over breaks and meals. If lunch is not a working lunch, invite those who are interested to join you at your table for Q&A. You can also invite them to join you for dinner after the program, as a group, to chat, to ask questions, and for you to learn about them and their lives. Be open to learning new things yourself, and to making new friends.

Be nice to *everyone*. Not just the participants. (See the section on lovingkindness, above.)

Creating the Safe Container

A safe, clear, strong container is needed to practice Insight Improvisation. This is especially true for the therapeutic aspects of the work, in which participants tap into their most vulnerable selves. Key elements of that safe container include communicating guidelines in advance; establishing ground rules at the start of the program; introducing

and leading exercises with clarity; and having a compassionate but firm response to strong emotions or to resistance—both for the individual concerned and for the group.

Communicating guidelines in advance regarding who can attend the program is an important first step in creating a safe container. There are several guidelines I like to communicate before any Insight Improvisation program; these are especially important for programs of a therapeutic nature:

- **Attendance.** “In order to help create a safe therapeutic container, participants are asked to attend only if they can be present for the entire program.”
- **Age.** “This program is appropriate for ages 21 and older.”
- **Ego strength/boundaries.** “This workshop, although therapeutic in nature, is not a psychotherapy group. Participants must have the ability to hold and support their own emotional process.”

Note that the last guideline is perhaps the most important but the most difficult for some to follow. Those who lack ego strength or personal boundaries—e.g., who suffer from Axis I or II disorders, addiction, trauma, etc.—may be unclear whether they meet the guideline, or knowing that they do not, wish to attend anyway, to alleviate their suffering. Ideally, one would include everyone who wishes to register in a workshop. But having even one participant whose neediness, mental or emotional state, behaviors or habits draw undue attention or energy, can make it challenging for the group to function or for the facilitator to provide a satisfactory workshop experience for all. For this reason, I will often ask the program organizer to help make decisions about whom to admit into

the program. For those the program is not appropriate for, we may encourage them and provide ideas for seeking support in other ways.

Ground rules are helpful for establishing the safe container. I typically introduce three main ground rules early in a workshop:

I. Being Present. “In order for us to be fully present—in body and in mind—throughout the workshop, a couple of ground rules: please **turn off or silence all devices** and please **break together as a group**. Due to the experiential nature of the program, it makes it difficult when individuals are out of the room and miss key instructions or steps, or are needed by a partner in order to do an exercise. So please speak up when you need a break, and I will work one in as soon as possible so that we can take a break together as a group. If you’re having an emergency and *must* leave the room, that’s fine; just let me know.”

II. Confidentiality. “There are three types of confidentiality that support our work together:

Group. “This is what we tend to expect when we think about confidentiality: Anything of a personal nature shared with the group does not leave the room.

Pair/Team. “Please do not assume that your partner or teammates in a small group exercise are OK with you sharing something they said or did with the whole group; they may have meant to share it only with you. Please ask them first.

Breaks/Post-Program. “Also please do not assume that another participant in the workshop is OK discussing their work in the program over a break

or after the program. They may wish to preserve that experience for themselves and not hear others' interpretations or questions. If you'd like to chat about their work, please ask their permission first."

III. Caring. "Caring" is a word that attempts to sum up how we want participants to treat one another during a program. The meaning of the word varies depending on the emphasis of the program.

For a drama therapy program, caring refers to how participants can support one another's emotional expression: "Our goal is to create an environment in which everyone is able to express his or her authentic emotions freely, including emotions such as sadness and anger—emotions participants tend to hide or suppress in the outside world. If someone is crying, for example, our goal is to support them. Beware unintentionally sending signals that you want them to stop." (At this point I often demonstrate what *not* to do, such as throwing tissues at the person or patting them rapidly on the back.) "Instead—as the Israeli workshop leader Gil Alon says—if someone is crying, *help them to cry more*. If we slow down and use our sensitivity in that moment, it will usually become evident what's needed, whether that means sitting next to them, providing some kind of supportive contact—a hand on their arm, an arm around their shoulders, a hug—or perhaps being a good witness as they continue whatever activity or scene evoked the emotion. Rapid patting, which many of us do habitually, sends a signal to stop crying ('it's OK, it's OK, you can stop now...'), whereas a firm hand on the back can help provide

steady support, conveying that there is all the time in the world to have a good cry. Rather than rush to provide tissues, as one therapist said, ‘that’s what sleeves are for!’ If it’s getting very messy, by all means offer a tissue or have a box nearby.”

For a theater-oriented program, the ground rule of “caring” can also refer to how participants give feedback to one another: “To encourage creativity and risk-taking, it is best to begin feedback with something positive, rather than starting with what’s not working, or by asking a challenging question (‘why did you do that that way?’). It’s also important that positive feedback be specific and authentic (rather than saying ‘good job!’ and then offering a critique). The ideal feedback is a sandwich, positive/constructive/positive.”

Other ground rules or ways of framing the overall approach or attitude of participants can also be useful, e.g., the idea of the program as a **learning laboratory**: “This is an opportunity to experiment, take risks, and be vulnerable. If you are trying to ‘look good’ or be perfect here, you and others will not learn as much.” There are other ground rules or practices that I may not speak about up front but tend to emerge during the program. For example, when teaching Insight Improvisation I have found it helpful to acknowledge individuals’ work in front of the group with “silent applause” (holding the hands in the air and twisting them a few times, which is American Sign Language for “applause”) rather than actual applause. This promotes acknowledgement—the group’s thanks to those individuals—while deemphasizing the performance aspect, and without

the recipient feeling they have been rated in some way (e.g., receiving faint instead of thunderous applause).

Physical safety is a vital part of the safe container, and is not to be assumed. In an opening check-in it is helpful to ask if anyone has any injuries or physical limitations they wish to share, and to remind the group to take care of themselves and others—e.g., in a group improvisation, to not assume it is OK to jump on someone else's back.

Authentic movement and working with eyes closed is a big part of Insight Improvisation, but having a group move with eyes closed can pose dangers. I always remind participants right before doing authentic movement, any of the entryway practices, or psolodrama, to open their eyes a little when moving through the space or making big gestures, so as not to step on or collide with other people or with objects. I also add **“you are responsible for your own safety and for the safety of others.”** As I witness the group, I will sometimes place my body between two movers (or psoloists) so they will collide with me rather than one another, encouraging participant witnesses to stay aware and do the same to help guard movers' safety.

Timing is another factor in maintaining a safe and sound container for the work. Have clear start, end, and meal times and stick to them; other breaks can be determined by group need. If you're running over, discuss it with the group and find out if they're willing; don't assume it's okay, and don't make a habit of running over as it erodes the group's trust.

An effective facilitator stays on time without conveying to the group the need to rush or that she is shortening certain exercises. The facilitator's own sense of urgency, or the adjustments she needs to make to the agenda, remain invisible to the group. The

facilitator is like a duck, looking completely placid gliding along the surface of the water, while underneath the feet are paddling rapidly. Ideally, participants feel they have all the time in the world to go deeply into each exercise—one hallmark of a well-facilitated program.

Being an Effective Teacher

Instructions for exercises are best when succinct and clear. Certain instructions may need to be repeated so that participants understand them, because much may be new. Both the content of the instructions and the delivery needs to be compelling—even entertaining—to engage participants and excite them about what they are about to do. Tone is important: I try to introduce fun exercises with a sense of humor, and more serious exercises with gravitas.

Demonstrations also need to be clear and succinct, but ideally are also real and spontaneous. For example, when demoing the role stream exercise for a group, I really do the role stream—I close my eyes, open to my body, move authentically, notice what role or character is arising, and become it. I don't just recreate what I did in a previous demonstration. This helps convey the power of the work to the group, as it's evident I'm entering a process, a journey with depth and creativity. A canned demonstration doesn't generate the same kind of excitement, interest, and inspiration in the group. People are so used to seeing pre-planned demonstrations that I will often preface the demonstration by saying something like, "Rather than do a 'demo,' I'm actually going to do a short role stream so you can see what it's really like. Because I'm not planning this, I cannot predict what will happen. So I'm going to let go of the idea of trying to do a good demo, and just

allow what comes up for me authentically.” In some demos I pause now and then to comment on what’s happening, or to introduce a different stage of or variation on the exercise before I illustrate it. Sometimes, rather than demo an entire exercise, such as psolodrama, I talk through the instructions and enact brief role-plays along the way to illustrate the five psychodramatic roles and other concepts.

The exercise itself. During the exercise, the facilitator works to make sure everyone is engaged and involved. When directing a psychodrama, for example, one part of my mind is on how to engage the entire group, not just those active in the drama. I can do this by literally involving them, looking for ways to create small groups of auxiliary egos, or choruses of auxiliaries—e.g. having four people play “The Scary Boss” rather than one; or casting the entire group, e.g. as the “gossiping townspeople”. Or I may encourage everyone to gather around and sit closer during a particularly important or quiet scene. During pairs and small group work, I am looking carefully to make sure that the witnesses or coaches are fully engaged; if I see someone tuning out, getting drowsy, or looking elsewhere (e.g. the witness who is not watching their own partner during psolodrama), I may go and whisper in their ear or give an instruction to the whole group to remember to treat witnessing as a meditation and bring their focus back to their partner. I also encourage participants to stand if they are sleepy or just feel they’re sitting too much.

Debriefs are where much of the real learning occurs, and leading a debrief well is an art form in itself. (See the earlier section on Curriculum Design for thoughts on designing debriefs, and the relationship between sharing processes and debriefs.) The primary purpose of a debrief is to invite reflection on an experiential activity, so that

participants can recall and articulate their experiences doing it and begin to concretize those experiences into insights and learnings. But the debrief also has an important secondary function: it serves as a “warm-down,” so that any strong emotions encountered during the exercise can be acknowledged and appreciated. It is a transition between the imaginal and emotional world of the exercise and the more cognitive and social world of the workshop and thus to the consensual reality of the outside world.

In a group debrief, the facilitator tries as much as possible to hear from a variety of participants, especially those who are quiet or tend to raise their hands less. Quieter participants often have important messages that contribute to the learning of the whole group, including key insights and learnings, or feelings they are sitting on and not expressing which if expressed would actually allow the entire group to go to a deeper place. Including quieter voices also helps other shy or introverted participants feel more included, encouraging them to become more engaged and speak up as well.

There are a few things a facilitator can do to invite quieter voices into the conversation.

- **Explicitly ask.** “Let’s hear from those who have not had a chance to speak yet.”
- **Start with a pair conversation** before inviting sharing. This helps assure *everyone* has a chance to speak, even those too shy to share in front of the whole group. You can also time that pair conversation—give one or two minutes each—and ring a bell when it’s time to switch. This gives the less confident person, who may tend to go second, an equal chance to speak. After the pair debrief, say “We’d love to hear what’s being said in your

pair conversations. Perhaps someone who hasn't spoken yet to the whole group can tell us what they said to their partner...?" This is an easier step for an introverted or shy person because they've already said what they'd like to say aloud to their partner—in a sense, rehearsed it—so it's less scary when repeating it.

- **Call on them.** Later in the workshop, if you notice some people who are completely silent in group debriefs, try calling on them by name. "Jeff, how was your experience?" This is a little risky as it could cause the person to feel "on the spot." But usually the person has just not found the right time to jump in and appreciates the invitation. If they don't know what to say, you can follow your general query with a more specific question, such as "While you did the role stream, were you able to enter different roles?" Often offering a simple question, even a yes/no question, can invite them to then say more. However, if they really don't wish to speak, it's important to support them without hesitation: "You do not need to speak if you don't want to. Let's hear from someone else."

In exercises where the action is happening in pairs or small groups, and it's difficult (or inappropriate) for the facilitator to be listening in on each pair, it's helpful for the facilitator after each round of the exercise to get a quick read on how each group is doing. I often do this by asking how it went—e.g., asking "How'd your psolodrama go?"—and inviting the psoloist to give a thumbs up, shaky hand (for so-so), or a thumbs down. (You can tell if it went really well because participants will sometimes show two vigorous thumbs up.) I then ask those who had a shaky hand or thumbs down if they have

a question they'd like to ask, or anything they want to say. In that way, participants who are challenged in the exercise get special attention. If there's time, I'll invite those with thumbs up to share a little, if they would like, about what happened for them as well, so the group also hears examples of how the activity works when it is going well.

One of my favorite approaches to debriefing—which I use quite often, especially when the group has just been through an intensive process such as leading their own psychodramas in teams, or doing their own psolodramas—is inspired by Open Space technology (Owen, 2008). I say to the group: “For this group discussion, I'd like to take a few minutes now to create the space for *anything* you'd like to say: comments, questions, sharing your experience, anything. Let's take 10 minutes. It's open space, anyone can speak.” Periodically during the open space time, I may remind the group that anyone can say anything, especially if someone has asked a question that has led to a discussion on a specific topic—it may be necessary to open things back up. It's also helpful to add, midway through the open space, “I'd like especially to hear from people who have not had a chance to speak yet in front of the whole group.”

Maximum Engagement, Participation, and Connection

Another thought on facilitation—and this has design implications, too—is that a primary goal of the facilitator is to encourage maximum engagement from each participant.

One implication of this is that each participant is participating as much as possible, in whatever ways are appropriate for them. For some participants that means challenging them to stretch further; for others it means creating a safe enough space to dip a toe in the water (and perhaps, eventually, more of themselves), to experiment and

explore. Maximum participant also means encouraging participants to try different roles in the workshop; e.g., when learning psychodrama, to gain experience as protagonist, as auxiliary ego and double in another's psychodrama, and as a director.

Another aspect of maximum engagement is maximum connection: each participant gets to work with as many other participants as possible, in meaningful ways. The design of the "Life Drama" program emphasizes exercises for pairs and small groups; part of my approach as a facilitator is to repeatedly ask participants to pick someone they do not know well, whom they have not yet worked with in the program. I will sometimes ask them to purposely pick someone they feel might be different from them. Changing partners help participants get to know more people over the course of the program, building invisible bonds of understanding, empathy, and trust within the group. Rather than repeatedly pairing with their best friend, or with a person they feel comfortable with, participants get to meet others who are different from them, providing new perspectives. Encountering others in a workshop context can teach powerful lessons in listening, empathy, caring, and patience; it can also open one to new and unexpected feedback and/or insights. Sometimes the biggest takeaway from a program is to encounter someone whose life experience—and/or ways of thinking or behaving—are truly different; to discover that someone who *appeared* different is actually quite similar, and struggling with parallel challenges in their life; or to make a new friend.

Special Topics

Working with Strong Emotions and Resistance

In a typical Insight Improvisation program, participants usually have signed up of their own free will. (This is not always the case, however. When teaching drama therapy to clinicians working for a particular organization, for example, some of those participants may have been told to be there.). Generally speaking, those who sign up for such programs tend to have a personal interest in or connection to meditation, theater, psychotherapy, and/or creative arts therapy, and—as one might expect—often have a relatively high level of emotional intelligence and self-awareness.

However, the work we do in Insight Improvisation can be a stretch for some people. They may suddenly feel they are sharing more than they would like to and that they are feeling too vulnerable or exposed, which can cause them to react. Others may become triggered by the personal content that comes up in the work (theirs or others'), sparking deep sadness or grief, guilt or shame, anger or rage, directed toward some past relationship or incident in their life. Those emotions may feel out-of-control to those not used to experiencing them.

Much of what's already been discussed above—creating a safe container, being nonreactive, modeling lovingkindness, setting clear ground rules—is all helpful in reducing resistance and encouraging the healthy expression of emotion. Ideally, one approaches challenging moments with a combination of non-reactivity, empathy, and firmness (rigor, strength, and courage), but also with the attitude of letting go, not being

attached to a certain stance or approach. Here are a few other thoughts about what to do when faced with the unexpected as a facilitator:

Strong Emotions. If a participant is becoming overwhelmed with strong emotions in the midst of an exercise, approach them in a way that is supportive, not jarring, and that gives them a chance to pause the exercise and calm down. However, the boundary between what is a healthy and productive expression of emotion and what is “overwhelming” can be unclear from the outside. For example, when conducting the empty chair exercise and working with a single protagonist in front of the whole group, quite often that person expresses strong sadness or anger toward the empty chair figure. It is not unusual for them to kick the chair or throw it in rage; nor is it unusual for them to collapse in tears in front of the chair, putting their head in the “lap” of the invisible auxiliary ego. My role in either situation is to support them in the expression of these emotions, to facilitate, removing any obstacles that arise. However, if I see the protagonist being *overcome* with emotion, anger that seems out of control, or sadness that is collapsing in on itself—the person is uncontrollably sobbing or just silent, unable to speak—I will intervene. This can take different forms, depending on the situation:

Empathic support. For someone experiencing deep sadness or grief, knowing that the facilitator is right with them and supporting them fully is vital. Sometimes this just means sitting next to them as they sob. Supportive touch is also helpful. I always ask permission before touching someone—“may I touch you?”—and if they nod or say yes I may lay a hand flat on their back to provide support, or put an arm around them. As discussed earlier, providing tissues can also be supportive, but may send a mixed message (“does he want me to stop

crying?”), so it’s sometimes best to put them nearby so the protagonist can see them and easily reach them, but not put tissues right into their hands.

Changing channels. Sometimes a protagonist or psoloist—caught up in their anger or grief—may be silent, either acting out physically (e.g., kicking a chair) or bent over in grief. Adding the verbal channel, inviting them to add words, can help them express the thoughts in their head that are driving the strong emotions. (Articulating thoughts as language can also be a more intellectual activity, helping temper the strong emotions.) Often, this can also help take the scene from a stuck place to its next stage. Another channel to consider is the other role. In empty chair, psychodrama, or psolodrama, if the protagonist is stuck in a strong emotion, inviting her to reverse roles and become the other character usually helps her shift from the single strong emotion she is stuck in and see how the other character might feel. For example, if the protagonist is grieving for her dead mother, and is overcome with sadness, allowing her to become her mother, and say the things that she wishes her mother could say to her now, or had said before she died, can be supportive and affirming. It also lets the protagonist know that the spirit of her mother is alive within her.

Deescalating. If someone appears overwhelmed by strong emotion, I might check in with them, saying gently: “Mmmm. A lot of feeling. Shall we pause for a moment? How are you doing?” If I don’t get a clear response, I might ask a more concrete question, “Would you like to pause the exercise, or keep going?” If in my judgment I think the exercise should be stopped either for their

safety or the safety of the group, I intervene by saying, “OK...let’s pause here. Let’s sit together and talk.”

Returning to the here and now. Once they have paused and sat down, it’s good to take a moment to see what is needed. Sometimes offering some water can help the person transition from the imaginal realm, which was triggering the strong emotions, back into the present. If someone is truly dissociating or if they just seem out of it and not quite present, I might ask them to face me and make direct eye contact with me. I might smile and say slowly, “Hi. It’s Joel. Welcome back to the workshop. How are you doing?” Once they have calmed down a little, then inviting them to speak about what they just experienced can be helpful to them and to the group in processing what happened.

Resistance can take many forms. The seemingly common-sense question of “Why are we doing this?” before an exercise is usually a participant’s attempt to put on the brakes. Similarly, not understanding instructions despite explanations (e.g. “why do you want us to act out different roles?”) can indicate not a lack of understanding but an unwillingness to come on the journey. Usually a fear of looking foolish, or of being too vulnerable, prompts this inquiry. Someone who holds him or herself apart from the rest of the group, wishing only to observe, not to participate, is usually worried about what would happen if they participated. What might it reveal? Resistance also appears in a variety of subtler forms: the participant who is sleepy, zoning out, distracted; the participant who whispers to someone else and has side conversations; the participant who cracks jokes, or who seems sarcastic rather than speaking straightforwardly; the

participant who leaves the room whenever he pleases or comes back late from breaks, or checks his phone during the session.

The challenge with resistance is that it can push the facilitator's buttons, causing her to take the behavior personally and be reactive, even get angry, rather than see through the behavior and empathize with the likely underlying cause, which is fear: fear of being made fun of, fear of revealing something shameful, fear of confronting something in one's life that is uncomfortable to confront, fear of not being accepted by the group. The participant who is being humorous or whispering to others is likely doing that—usually unconsciously—as a way to avoid being fully present to work that is asking him to reveal aspects of his life that he does not wish to see clearly and does not wish others to see.

A few tips when dealing with resistance:

Smile, breathe, and respond with kindness. Most behaviors that come across as challenging are not meant to undermine the facilitator. The participant who leaves the room right before a pivotal exercise might have an emergency phone call; the participant who sits out an activity may be scared; the participant who is whispering to another may be too shy to ask you if it's OK to use the bathroom or may be asking if the other person understood what you just said. It is always best, if you find yourself triggered by what a participant is doing, not to take it personally, not to take it seriously, but instead to smile, breathe, and respond kindly. Treat the other person as you would wish to be treated, with respect, and with an assumption of innocence rather than guilt. Even better see if you can be *playful* in your response to resistance, rather than be a disciplinarian.

Take it offline. As mentioned earlier, if you would like to talk with a participant about a behavior that is negatively affecting you and/or the group, it is best to approach her during a break, or before or after the day's work. Ask her if you could talk with her privately for a minute, and take her aside. This is also a good thing to do if you have a difficult interaction with a participant in front of the group. I will usually approach that person offline to apologize to him and listen to him. Having a discussion offline helps because it avoids shaming the person in front of the group, and creates a more intimate context where the participant may feel he can more readily speak his truth.

Agree with them and involve the group. If a participant challenges something you are saying or questions the premise of an exercise, rather than battle with them, find a way to agree with them. For example, if in the debrief of psychodrama, a participant named Paul were to say, "Well, psychodrama isn't real life," I might respond by saying, "You're absolutely right. Psychodrama is not real life, and it's important to maintain the distinction between the two. In a psychodrama, everything we're playing out is a projection of the protagonist's psyche." Then I might open it up to the group: "Since psychodrama is not the same as real life, the role-plays we're doing are just role-plays, not real interactions, as Paul pointed out. What then is the point of doing it?" This invites the group to provide counter-arguments to Paul's stance. This group participation is much more effective for the group's learning process than if I were to debate Paul.

Teaching Internationally

I've been fortunate as a trainer and coach—through my corporate as well as drama therapy work—to teach in dozens of countries around the world. I've also had the chance to spend time in developing countries volunteering as a teacher and therapist. These experiences have shown me some of what can help when teaching in another country.

Unexpected Challenges, and Rewards. Although I love traveling internationally, there are certainly downsides. Jetlag can be brutal when traveling long distances. Allow at least two nights of sleep in your destination before teaching, ideally more. Also, one's personal safety is not to be taken for granted. Pickpockets in Florence used a knife to cut into my backpack while I was wearing it. On my first visit to Delhi, a midnight taxi from the airport took me down foggy roads not to the hotel I'd made a reservation for, but instead to a strange, rundown hotel where, given the late hour and everyone claiming to not know the location of my hotel, I had to pay for a room. Different countries have different standards. In some areas, the lack of availability of toilet paper in bathrooms will be new to many Americans. It was a personal breakthrough to learn how to use a squat toilet in India and clean myself with the water provided. And I had to fall seriously ill in Thailand before I learned to stick to cooked foods. Then there is the potential of unexpectedly offending someone by using your left hand improperly, pointing with your foot, refusing a gift or an invitation, or touching someone's head. Any of these can be problematic in different countries.

Despite those potential difficulties, it's an incredible feeling to be among people of a completely different culture and to be learning about them and getting closer to them

through teaching. As Paulo Freire wrote (1970), good teaching is dialogic: the teacher learns as much as the student. Teaching Insight Improvisation internationally not only provides a window into another culture, it also provides a profound experience of connection with what makes us human across all cultures.

Working with Cultural Differences. Although the internet is an excellent source for general advice about cultural dos and don'ts, there are things the internet won't tell you that can come up in workshop situations. In Thailand—and this is true in different forms throughout much of Asia—it is a loss of face to express anger directly and openly. Instead, one of the highest cultural values in Thailand is to maintain calm, and to smile. In the empty chair exercise, no matter which country I am in, it is possible for the protagonist to see in the chair a challenging figure from their past, such as a sadistic teacher or abusive uncle. But it is only in Thailand that, when I ask the protagonist how they feel in the presence of this person, the response is often, "I'm bored." This puzzled me the first couple of times it happened, until I began to realize that "I'm bored" was the polite way of saying, "I'm so filled with rage right now that I could kill you." Within a minute or two, especially when invited to take physical action, the protagonist would often be kicking the empty chair, throwing it across the room, while screaming the most violent insults.

Guiding Meditations. Another cultural difference useful to be aware of concerns meditation. One facilitator I know who leads programs in the US that involve mindfulness has taken to calling meditation "inner listening" because some Christian groups have negative associations with meditation and Buddhism. In Thailand I have sometimes encountered the opposite problem. Thailand is a proudly Buddhist country,

where it is not unusual to encounter experienced meditators, some of whom are devotees of a particular monk or meditation teacher. Early on, as I began to introduce meditation in workshops in Thailand, I would sometimes get feedback afterward that one or two participants were unhappy and had the idea that I was trying to supplant their meditation master. For others, it may have felt a little strange for a westerner to be teaching Buddhist meditation to Buddhists. I've learned that when teaching meditation, it is important to take a humble, low-key approach. So I often preface the first meditation in a workshop by saying something like: "Before we meditate together, I'd like to say that it's a little funny for an American to be offering a meditation in a Buddhist country like Thailand. There may be some of you who are experienced meditators, who teach meditation, or who are the student of a particular meditation teacher or method. So please understand that I am not trying to become your meditation teacher. The reason we are introducing meditation in this program is to help illustrate and practice the different kinds of awareness we will then be applying in our drama therapy work. So please, for those who are experienced, do what works for you. Meditate in the way you know best, and feel free to ignore any of the instructions that I give and use the approach that you are familiar with and most comfortable with."

Working with Translation. Language can present multiple challenges. So much of drama therapy depends on timing, and one only fully realizes that when trying to work through a translator. Directing psychodrama through a translator is like trying to do surgery with thick winter gloves on. Clarity becomes a big issue, not only *my* ability to give clear instructions—clear enough for the translator to understand and convey—but also my ability to understand my translator, who is half the time whispering in my ear,

rapidly, with a strong accent. Being succinct is an enormous challenge; can I break what I'm saying down into bite-sized pieces so my translator can communicate each part? The temptation is to try to say more and then let them do their best to sum it up, which does not work well.

The good news is that working through translation can actually be helpful. Saying a little and then pausing for translation provides a welcome gap that allows me to craft my next succinct sentence. Sometimes the instructions come out *more* clearly than in a workshop for English speakers.

I have learned over the years that one of the secrets to working through a translator is not only the quality and experience of that person, but also the quality of communication I have with them before we work together. I've developed a set of guidelines (see "Appendix B: Sample Logistics for Group Programs") that the organizer can send to the translator in advance, covering issues such as translating literally what I say (rather than interpreting it or adding to it), matching my volume and energy, and more. I also have learned to ask the translator to arrive a half hour early on the first day so I can chat with them, build a friendly relationship, review the translation guidelines with them in person, and answer any questions they have.

One more thought about language: typically in the US I do not use flipcharts for Insight Improv programs, preserving the informal, interpersonal quality of a theater workshop or therapeutic process; however, I find that in non-English-speaking countries having some of the concepts spelled out on charts helps a great deal with understanding and retention.

Being a Guest Teacher

Both in the US and internationally I have had the opportunity to be a guest teacher, in university programs, drama therapy programs, peer groups, conferences, and in other contexts. Teaching in someone else's class or context is like coming into a different culture with its own language and norms. One can easily and quite accidentally violate those norms and rub people the wrong way.

Insight Improvisation is not like other forms of drama therapy; its pace is slower, its focus more contemplative and inward-directed. Teaching Insight Improv in someone else's program is a bit like being asked by an Italian restaurant to come in and offer some Chinese food during the meal. Some may love it, others may think it's weird, and others may find that it just doesn't go with their calzone. I have also found that everyone has different standards and ground rules. The safe container we depend on in Insight Improvisation may or may not be established. A few commonsense principles help:

Name it and claim it. Talk with the host beforehand about the unusual nature of Insight Improv and discuss whether it will be a fit. If you decide to teach the program, be clear with the group from the start that this work is a little unusual, and we may go places they are not used to going. If you're going to teach psolodrama or the entryway practices, it's helpful to poll the group (ideally, in advance) to find out how many have experienced meditation, authentic movement, or psychodrama before.

Make no assumptions. Coming into a new class or group, inquire about and don't be afraid to discuss the ground rules. Do what's needed to create the safe container for what you will be teaching.

Be aware of time. Teaching Insight Improv well takes time, usually more time than you would expect. Every exercise takes longer than you think it will; the nature of this work is meditative, contemplative, intimate, personal, and cannot be rushed. It's different from typical improv or acting exercises where a group can just jump in. Insight Improv has a little bit of a ritualistic feeling. For example, when teaching psolodrama, it's vital that the group get a solid grounding in authentic movement, and then have sufficient time to return to authentic movement as they encounter each new stage of the entryway progression (shared vipassana, role stream, etc.).

When in doubt, don't do it. Although I've had some lovely experiences teaching in others' classes and in other contexts, in general I've learned to turn down guest teaching slots and focus on organizing my own workshops. Ultimately I've found that the unique nature of this work is expressed best in dedicated programs.

Final Thoughts

A good workshop leader is continuously learning and improving. After every program, make sure to seek feedback from the group—ideally, a written letter or evaluation form *before* participants depart—to learn what worked well and what could have been better. This will help you improve your program design as well as facilitation skills.

I would love for others to have the chance to teach Insight Improvisation to groups, to have the opportunity to create a sacred space in which people can relax, let go, and discover and express their personal truths. Every time I do this work I feel privileged, and especially grateful to the many teachers, therapists, theater artists, and dharma guides

who helped me on my path and helped give me the confidence to share what I know with others. Allow me to end this chapter with a deep bow of gratitude to all my teachers, as well as to all my students, whom I learn from continuously.

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Additional Resources

Opportunities for training in the five areas of expertise mentioned earlier in this chapter:

Insight Improvisation

I periodically teach Insight Improvisation programs in the US and other countries, usually several times per year, and will soon add clinician and teacher training. To learn more, please contact me through my website, www.insightimprov.org.

Meditation

Building on the list of books and other resources mentioned at the end of the chapter on meditation earlier in this book, I would strongly suggest a meditation retreat for those who are interested in deepening their practice and gaining a better understanding of how meditation develops and conditions the mind toward greater peace, lovingkindness, and nonreactivity. An eight-day retreat at Insight Meditation Society in Barre, MA is a good way to start (or try Spirit Rock on the west coast, or any of the Insight Meditation centers worldwide). Teachers I'd recommend include Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, Larry Rosenberg, Mark Nunberg, Steve Armstrong, Sharda Rogell, Narayan Liebenson, and Rodney Smith. It is also worth checking out centers teaching Tibetan and Zen Buddhist approaches to meditation, to further enrich one's learning.

Cultivating a daily practice of meditation is supportive to all aspects of one's life. I would also suggest finding opportunities—even as a volunteer—to teach meditation regularly. (In my early days developing Insight Improvisation, I taught meditation weekly to inmates in a medium-security prison in Boston.) The combination of daily meditation, reading about meditation, teaching meditation often, and sitting retreats periodically, will increase your ability to teach meditation skillfully and with credibility in an Insight Improvisation context.

Theater

Particular teachers or schools of training I recommend:

Voice. Kristin Linklater, or a Linklater-certified teacher, as well as the Roy Hart Theater and teachers trained in their approach.

Movement. My favorite movement teacher was Richard Toma, who was trained in physical improvisation, street theater, and Commedia

dell'arte. I have also benefitted from the training exercises of Jerzy Grotowski and the Polish Laboratory Theatre. Ruth Zaporah's Action Theater is wonderfully physical. And I recommend learning yoga (e.g., Iyengar technique) for strengthening and overall physical presence, as well as any type of dance training.

Improvisation. Authentic movement is a foundational form of improvisation that underlies many Insight Improvisation exercises (see the earlier chapter devoted to it) and is worth training in and practicing in depth. Also described earlier in this book, the types of improvisation taught by Scott Kelman and Ruth Zaporah are unique and worth pursuing. I have learned a great deal from the work of Keith Johnstone, Augusto Boal (Theatre of the Oppressed), and Jonathan Fox (Playback Theatre). In addition, *any* improvisation experience can be helpful, including theater games in the Viola Spolin tradition, improv comedy, etc.

Scene Study and Shakespeare. There are countless approaches to scene work—from Stanislavski and Michael Chekhov to Mamet's work with The Atlantic Theater Co and Anne Bogart's Viewpoints. In addition to my initial training at the Trinity Rep Conservatory in Providence, I would also recommend Shakespeare and Company in Lenox, MA for their month-long intensive training focusing on voice and Shakespeare.

Finally, for real experience, there is nothing like doing actual theater. I'd suggest auditioning for and acting in a play, or joining (or forming) an improv group.

Drama therapy and Psychodrama

One can find individual workshops or classes in drama therapy and psychodrama in many cities, a great way to dip one's toe in the water or to refresh existing skills. At the other end of the spectrum, there are graduate training programs in drama therapy, including those at NYU,

CIIS, Concordia, and Lesley; attending one of those programs can fulfill many of the prerequisites for earning the RDT (Registered Drama Therapist) certification. (For a complete list of schools, see <http://www.nadta.org/education-and-credentialing/resources-for-students-and-bcts/accredited-schools.html>.) There is also the Alternative Training Program, a way to become certified without going through an academic graduate program (see <http://www.nadta.org/education-and-credentialing/resources-for-students-and-bcts/alternative-training.html>). Psychodrama has its own approach to certification (see <http://www.psychodramacertification.org>); however, in my experience, a good training program in drama therapy should provide a solid grounding in psychodrama (if not, one should seek additional training opportunities with experienced psychodramatists). For those new to this field, I also highly recommend attending the NADTA's yearly conference, an opportunity to be exposed to a wide range of approaches.

In addition to training, there is practice. I'd suggest joining a peer practice group, or forming one, for those interested in trying out drama therapy techniques or practicing psychodrama directing. The training programs listed above require and include opportunities for practical experience, including internships with mental health clinics, hospitals, and the like. If you are not yet certified but would like to practice with individuals, it is also possible to get together with friends to practice drama therapy techniques (with the clear mutual understanding up front that it is a practice session, and that you are not trying to be their therapist). And once you have done all of the above, it is helpful to practice leading drama therapy exercises with groups—not only in clinical settings but in workshops for the general public.

Facilitation

Although there are books on facilitation, teaching, and training—and training programs in these domains as well—I would suggest that practical experience is the best way to improve as a facilitator. When I was learning to deliver programs in leadership presence and communication for the corporate world, I practiced by offering free workshops to the local Department of Employment and Training. Look for opportunities to teach classes and workshops, in a wide range of topics, to a wide range of audiences. Teach theater to kids. Teach meditation. Offer a workshop in an Assisted Living Community. Volunteer with the formerly incarcerated or in prison. Share what you know with the world, and be open to learning, seeking feedback from participants so you can continuously improve.

Further Exploration with Insight Improvisation

“It seems to me now that what I do is no longer dance, though it has moments of pure dance in it. It has turned into Tao, a way, a becoming. Movement, as I know it now, touches people in their lives. It opens up their individual sense of themselves and teaches them that they are humanly valuable to each other. It is the discovery of the growth process that is themselves becoming.”

— Mary Whitehouse (1977)

Insight Improvisation as a diverse set of ideas and practices has applications beyond those described so far, as well as potential for further development. This final chapter explores some of those applications including how Insight Improvisation can be used with children, couples, ongoing therapy groups, and leaders, as well as in actor training and in creating theater. It also offers thoughts on future directions for exploration.

Further Exploration with Insight Improvisation	
<i>Working with Children</i> — <i>Working with Couples</i> — <i>Working with an Ongoing Therapy or Practice Group</i>	<i>Working with Leaders</i> — <i>Applications in Theater</i> Actor Training & Coaching Sourcing Theater — <i>Final Thoughts and Future Visions</i>

Working with Children

I've been fortunate enough to work with children—in the US and abroad (in particular, Thailand and India)—at different points in my career and have learned from their openness, imagination, enthusiasm, and creativity. And now with children of my own, I see the potential every day for offering them experiences that are out of the ordinary and can contribute to their development by offering them gentle, fun ways to stretch their imaginations, voices, bodies, and emotional selves.

Insight Improv is a great fit for kids. Children love theater games and improvising, and they also take well to and benefit from mindfulness and meditation, when it is offered in a way that fits their age, attention span, and energy level.

For kids in elementary school, many of the exercises in Parts I and II of this book can be introduced inside or outside of the classroom, as fun ways to practice mindfulness while incorporating movement and acting. Exercises such as “Walk-Stop-Walk,” “Amplification,” and the singing warm-ups “Chords, Jams, and One-Liners” work well

with kids, as I've seen with my own daughter and son (ages eight and four at this writing).

With older children, depending on their level of maturity and receptiveness, all of the meditation, active meditation, and theater exercises in the book could be introduced, including authentic movement, which opens the door to teaching shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream.

For teens, one challenge is to create a safe space where they can do the work and not feel embarrassed or judged. Although I have not done so yet, I would love to offer a Life Drama training just for teens, incorporating not only theater games but also more introspective exercises such as the empty chair, psychodrama, authentic movement and other entryway practices, and psolodrama. If they are open to the experience, teenagers could benefit from the opportunity to express themselves fully; share their feelings about their family, friends, school, and the wider world; and learn to quiet the inner critic and invite their own supportive inner witness. The program would also introduce practices such as *vipassana* meditation and *metta* practice that could become positive daily habits, serving teens beyond the program to bring greater mindfulness, equanimity, and awareness into their lives.

Working with Couples

Successful couples work requires a different mindset and approach from working with individuals. Established techniques are available including the Gottman Method, Emotionally Focused Therapy (Jones, 2009), and Imago Therapy. What Insight Improv

can offer is not a replacement for these approaches, but rather a supplement—practices or exercises to turn to when something different is called for.

In particular, Insight Improv offers a number of meditative and theater-based activities for couples that can encourage a greater sense of connection, intimacy, relaxation, and play—qualities that may be missing from their day-to-day interactions. Some of these activities work best when facilitated by the therapist as part of a session; others can be introduced in therapy and given as homework assignments for the couple to experiment with. Some the couple might adopt as new practices to try daily or weekly.

Activities I've used with couples include metta dialogue, mindful massage, eye contact meditation, The Three States, authentic movement, shared vipassana, and psolodrama. These exercises model ways of relating a couple may have lost along the way: the ability to express love and kindness directly, verbally and physically; being fully present for the other; seeing them as they are; the desire and ability to be intimate; the willingness to play together, or improvise together; the attitude of being a loving, nonjudgmental witness and container for the other; and the capacity to express one's deepest truths in the presence of the other. The ultimate benefit of such techniques is to encourage the couple to approach the relationship in a way that feels fresh, non-habitual, encouraging openness and "beginner's mind."

Although challenging to organize—it's hard enough getting busy individuals to come to a workshop, let alone couples!—I can imagine an Insight Improv program geared specifically for partners. Couples could benefit not only from their own encounters with one another through the experiential exercises offered, but also from seeing others improvise, play, and meditate together. Such observations could help

motivate a couple to break through their own barriers—including strongly held beliefs and habits—and connect in new ways with one another.

Working with an Ongoing Therapy or Practice Group

Although the constraints of my private drama therapy practice have not been conducive to creating an ongoing Insight Improv therapy group, I would love to do it, and have a few ideas about how the group might work.

Paralleling the use of psolodrama as a peer practice, the purpose of an Insight Improv therapy group is to support members on their own individual paths of healing, self-discovery, and growth and to help them support one another in this work. Because drama therapy in Insight Improv is usually a one-to-one experience—consisting mainly of the entryway practices and psolodrama—the challenge is to find ways to engage all group members simultaneously. Many techniques can be borrowed from Insight Improv group workshops (described in the previous chapter).

However, a therapy group is quite different from a workshop: the participants are clients, who are looking to the leader to be not only the group facilitator but also the therapist. In addition, group therapy happens in short segments, and occurs over time, unlike the intensive, standalone experience of a workshop.

The best venue for Insight Improv group therapy would have a large common room suitable for movement, and smaller breakout rooms available so participants can split off to practice psolodrama and other exercises in pairs.

In the early stages with a new group, much of the work is in teaching the foundational concepts and techniques needed to practice psolodrama, including authentic

movement, psychodrama and the empty chair, and such entryway practices as shared vipassana and role stream.

Later in the development of the group when everyone is confident using the basic techniques, sessions can be structured similarly to classic psychodrama—warm-up, selection, action phase, and warm-down—as follows:

Warm-ups can include checking in, different types of meditation and movement, theater games (such as the ones appearing in Part II of this book), or simply practicing shared vipassana, role stream, or scene stream in depth.

Selection and Action. Varying by session—taking into consideration the needs and preferences of the group—the action phase alternates among psychodrama, coached psolodrama in front of the group, and psolodrama in pairs. For psychodrama, a standard selection process can be used. For coached psolodrama, balancing who most wants to work with who has not worked recently is important; ideally, two psolodramas can be coached in a given session. All work done in front of the whole group is followed by a sharing process.

Warm-down would typically consist of group reflections on the session, a closing meditation, and a verbal “check-out” such as sharing a feeling or learning one is taking from the session.

It is not necessary to frame such a group as “group therapy.” As of this writing, plans are in the works in Boston, Massachusetts, and in Seoul, South Korea to offer a “Psolodrama Practice Group,” an ongoing group for those who have learned psolodrama in a workshop, in therapy, or in a peer context and would like to practice it with peers in a safe environment with the help of a trained facilitator.

Working with Leaders

As I have seen from my work coaching and training executives, managers, and leaders of all kinds in the corporate and nonprofit worlds for over 22 years, there are certain skills and attitudes—which tend to be categorized in the corporate world as “soft skills”—that leaders often need to work at diligently to develop in themselves. These skills include the ability to be a nonjudgmental, supportive listener for others; the ability to be nonreactive, able to sit with strong emotions and *not* act on them; the skills of improvisation, to be open to what is arising both internally and with one’s team or audience and work with it wisely rather than negating it; and the ability to listen deeply to one’s own thoughts and feelings, “gut” truths and highest aspirations, and express those ideas and feelings authentically, skillfully, and in ways that engage and inspire others.

What I’ve noticed in my drama therapy work—which until now I’ve kept quite distinct from my work in organizations—is that the skills and types of awareness cultivated in Insight Improvisation tend to parallel the skills and qualities of a good leader. One could say that the path to more holistic, aware, and authentic leadership is also a path of mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness.

A program currently in the planning stage, “Insight Improvisation for Leaders,” would invite executives, middle managers, and/or high-potential leaders-in-training for a four-day retreat. It would follow the basic framework of the “Life Drama” program:

- **Days 1-2: Drama therapy and Psychodrama** with a particular emphasis on improvisation, the empty chair, role-reversal, doubling, and directing
- **Days 3-4: Insight Improvisation** including different types of meditation (and meditative awareness), authentic movement, the entryway practices, and psolodrama

The purpose would not be psychotherapy, but skill development through experiential exercises and coaching. Effective leadership training integrates an exploration of business and personal issues, and invites introspection in ways that feel safe, not intrusive. “Insight Improv for Leaders” would offer exercises that provide an open structure—such as the empty chair, psychodrama, and psolodrama—in which the individual can choose how deep or personal to make the exercise. One leader might choose scenarios that occur in the workplace; another might use the same exercises to explore more personal issues, such as work-life balance or dealing with the inner critic. Each exercise is debriefed with the help of an experienced coach with the aim of drawing out personal insights, principles of effective leadership, and practical learnings that can be applied immediately upon returning to work.

The potential benefits of such a program are multiple. As I’ve coached and trained leaders over the years, I have found that many benefit from having the opportunity in a safe context to explore their issues and challenges, to confront their demons, and to open to new insights. A clear and compassionate leader is usually someone who has done her own personal work, as well someone who has the ability to be with the imperfections of others, and the patience to encourage and develop her team. All of these things are modeled and practiced in Insight Improv exercises. In addition, leaders often find mindfulness and meditation inspirational as well as practically useful in addressing their often busy and stressful lives, in which simply returning to the present moment is a struggle.

And what of psolodrama—what could an organizational leader get out of such a practice? In my work with leaders I have found that they almost universally respond to

being offered a challenge and engaging in an adventure. Psolodrama is an inner adventure, the chance to go to new places inside and by doing so have new insights as to what is stopping them from reaching their full potential. The progression from empty chair to psychodrama to psolodrama helps one become more vulnerable, learning through role reversal how to empathize with the other. Ultimately, the function of psolodrama—and the entire training—is to help the leader feel comfortable enough to go wherever an improvisation takes them, helping increase spontaneity in life and leadership.

Applications in Theater

“Mindfulness is simply being aware of what is happening right now without wishing it were different.”

— James Baraz

“Acting is behaving truthfully under imaginary circumstances.”

— Sanford Meisner

Actor Training & Coaching

Some years back I was invited to be a guest teacher in a university acting class. After conferring with the instructor, I came up with a short agenda, drawing a few exercises from the material in Part II of this book, including Walk-Stop-Walk, One-minute Solos, and Amplification. The class went well; the students were engaged and excited and particularly enjoyed the variations on Amplification involving duets and trios.

That experience, and similar ones teaching contemplative theater in other contexts—the earliest Insight Improv programs, beginning in 1999, focused exclusively on the intersection of theater and meditation—have convinced me that Insight Improvisation could benefit the training and coaching of actors. Insight Improv can help actors become more aware of their Performance Mind habits and develop the skills to shift to Being Mind. Doing so helps actors relax in the face of stage fright, improve their ability to improvise, and open up their awareness to draw inspiration from all of their senses (not only from their thinking brain).

A curriculum for actor training could be drawn from Parts I and II of this book, and either be offered as a standalone program or woven into a broader acting training that includes voice work, movement training, scene study, etc.

Sourcing Theater

Coincident with the early development of Insight Improv, I was creating many one-person shows, both my own and others' (as director and collaborator), practicing what in the drama therapy world is called self-revelatory theater. Looking back on that time, I would have loved to use some of the techniques in this book as a way to generate ideas and scenes. Psolodrama in particular is potent vehicle for creative self-expression, and the scenes that emerge can become the seeds for monologues, scenes, plays, films, etc. One theater company I know of has used role stream and scene stream as a form of physical/vocal brainstorming for generating new ideas for characters and scenes.

Final Thoughts and Future Visions

The exercises which appear in this book are only a beginning. There is great potential in exploring the intersections between theater, meditation, and therapy.

One can imagine future Insight Improv exercises that specifically focus on certain meditative concepts, such as *metta*, *karuna* (compassion), joy, equanimity, non-self, suffering vs. acceptance, attachment and aversion, etc.

Many of the exercises in this book are designed for an individual working with a witness. There could also be a greater variety of structures for groups as a whole to play with.

Another step for the future is to train and certify therapists in using these techniques in individual therapy, and eventually to train others to lead Insight Improv workshops. I would also like to teach acting teachers how to use this work in actor training.

In addition to its use with children and couples, Insight Improv has the potential for being used to promote peace and dialogue among conflicting groups; for helping at-risk populations such as inmates, ex-cons, veterans, and the homeless; and for promoting mindful forms of play, connection, and self-expression for seniors.

When I imagine a world in which the ideas and methods of Insight Improvisation are more widely used, it is a world in which people have more tools for self-work and for mindfully supporting one another in that work, expressive tools that help them give voice to their feelings, imaginations, and inner selves, leaving them feeling more empowered and more connected to others, a world in which there is a little less stress, a little more

self-awareness, a little less suffering, and a little more mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness.

References

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Eight Verses for Training the Mind

By thinking of all sentient beings
as even better than the wish-granting gem
for accomplishing the highest aim
may I consider them precious.

Wherever I go, with whomever I go,
may I see myself as less than all others,
and from the depths of my heart
may I consider them supremely precious.

May I examine my mind in all actions
and as soon as a negative state occurs,
since it endangers myself and others,
may I firmly face and avert it.

When I see beings of a negative disposition
or those oppressed by negativity or pain,
may I, as if finding a treasure,
consider them precious, for they are rarely met.

Whenever others due to their jealousy,
revile and treat me in other unjust ways,
may I accept this defeat myself,
and offer the victory to others.

When someone whom I have helped
or in whom I have placed great hope
harms me with great injustice,
may I see that one as a sacred friend.

In short, may I offer both directly and
indirectly all joy and benefit to all beings,
my mothers, and may I myself secretly
take on all of their hurt and suffering.

May they not be defiled by the concepts
of the eight mundane concerns,
and aware that all things are illusory,
may they, ungrasping, be free from bondage.

— *Geshe Langri Tangpa*

