

The following is an excerpt from the book:

Insight Improvisation

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

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

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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)

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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.

References

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