

*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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## 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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