

*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 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

*Working with Children*

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*Working with Couples*

—  
*Working with an Ongoing Therapy or  
Practice Group*

*Working with Leaders*

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### 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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