

*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 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"><li>• <i>Meditation on Distractions</i></li><li>• <i>Gratitude Meditation</i></li><li>• <i>Metta-vipassana</i></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Nature Meditation</i></li><li>• <i>City Meditation</i></li></ul>
<i>Pair</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Eye Contact Meditation</i></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Mindful Guide</i></li></ul>

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.

## References

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Retrieved from <http://insightmeditationcenter.org/articles/FiveHindrances.pdf>

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

### **Additional Resources**

Bhikkhu, Thanissaro (2013). *With each and every breath: a guide to meditation*.

Retrieved from [http://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/Writings/withEachAndEveryBreath\\_v131019.pdf](http://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/Writings/withEachAndEveryBreath_v131019.pdf)

This free PDF is an up-to-date, user-friendly guide to meditation that offers an in-depth look at the process as well as advice on how to practice in daily life, cope with meditation challenges, find a good teacher, and other important topics.

Macy, Joanna (2013). *Joanna Macy and her work*. Retrieved from

<http://www.joannamacy.net>

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.