

*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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## Meditation



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

### Why Meditate?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Mindfulness: Meditating on a Single Object**

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

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

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

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

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

Continue this meditation for 5-10 minutes.

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

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

## What is Mindfulness?

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

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

## The Importance of Mindfulness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Mindfulness of...**

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

#### **Sound Objects**

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

## Visual Objects

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

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

## Bodily Sensations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Choicelessness: Opening to all Objects

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

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

## Practicing *Vipassana*

### Arriving in the Meditation

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

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

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

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

### Opening to Choiceless Awareness

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

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

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

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

### Labeling

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

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

### Transitioning

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

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

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

### **Working with Aversion: Pain**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Awareness of Awareness

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

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

### What it Means to be Choiceless

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

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

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

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

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

### Lovingkindness

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

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

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

### Practicing *Metta*

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

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

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

### **Sending Lovingkindness to Oneself**

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

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

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

***May I be well and happy.***

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

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

*May I let go, and be free.*

*May I live in peace.*

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

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

### **Sending Lovingkindness to Another**

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

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

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

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

*May you be well and happy.*

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

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

*May you let go, and be free.*

*May you live in peace.*

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

### **Sending Lovingkindness to All Beings**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*May all beings, everywhere, be well and happy.*

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

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

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

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

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

### **Applying *Metta*: Working with Anger**

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

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

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

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

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

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

## What *Metta* is Made Of

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

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

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

## Putting It All Together: Structure and Timing of a Sit

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

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

*By the power and the truth of this practice:*

*May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Addressing the Challenges of Meditation

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

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

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

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

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

*Breathing in, I calm my body.*

*Breathing out, I smile.*

*Dwelling in the present moment.*

*I know this is a wonderful moment!*

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

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

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

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

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

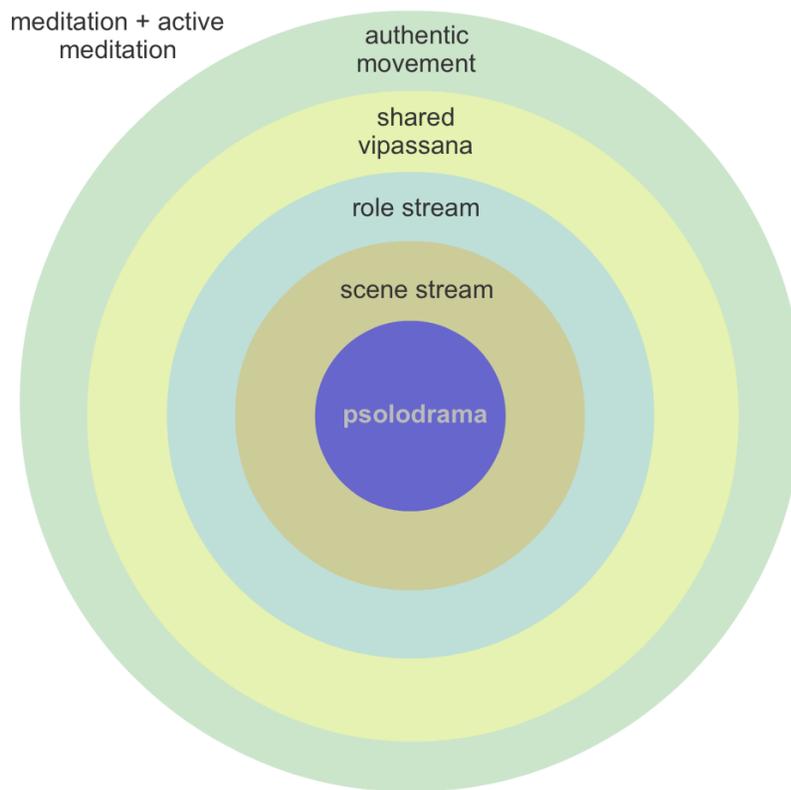
self-discovery, particularly when doing so with the guidance and support of skilled teachers. *(See the end of this chapter for recommend reading, talks, and retreat centers.)*

## Summary and Where to Next

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

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

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



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

## References

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

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

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

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

## Recommended Reading

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

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

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

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

## Other Resources

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

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

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

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

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

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