

*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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## Shared Vipassana

*The mover enters the space and closes her eyes. She takes a moment to breath. Relaxing her body, she lies on the floor, on her side, and is perfectly still. Slowly, movement develops—first a finger, then a hand, then her whole arm slowly arcs up...and then over, so that her hand rests on her head. She speaks...*

*“Feeling my hair. Soft. Can feel individual strands, curls. Thinking: I hate this haircut.” There is a pause. “Sound of air vent. Musty library smell.”*

*She turns, face down, and pushes with her hands until she is resting on all fours:*

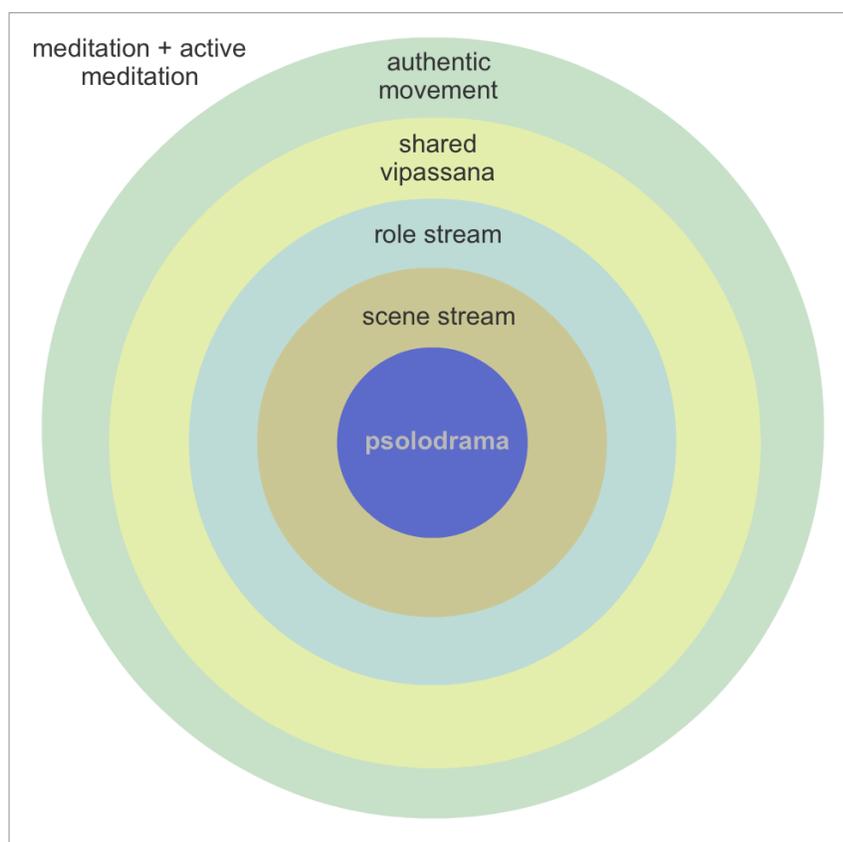
*“Puuuushing.....feeling lower back arching, feeling weight there. Texture of carpet. I’m in my childhood bedroom. Light blue shag carpet. Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls. White furniture.”*

*She arches her back and rolls up her spine, upright on her knees and feet. Her hands stretch up over her head, and come to rest on her head.*

*“I’m a prisoner. We’ve been lined up to be shot. I look out over fields. There’s a ditch in front of me. I’m sad.”*

*Her hands drop by her sides.*

*“Pressure on knees. Belly relaxing. Breathing.” Pause. “Feeling of letting go inside my head. Tongue relaxed. Eyes loose.” Pause. “I’m hungry.”*



from meditation to psolodrama

In the progression from meditation to psolodrama, shared vipassana is a pivotal step in that it introduces speech.

For many, the idea of speaking aloud while meditating, or speaking while doing authentic movement, may seem strange and antithetical to those practices.

Our habits around speaking are so strong that the fear is “if I open my mouth, I will go into my head.” To some extent this is true. Speaking is a different mode than

meditating or moving, and our habitual relationship to speaking may not be mindful. Part of the practice of shared vipassana is learning to change our relationship to speaking—to get out of the head, break free of habits we may have such as our tendency to censor, be clever, intellectualize, entertain, etc.—and instead let our speech be a simple, clear, and open channel for self-expression.

Ultimately, we may discover in shared vipassana that by speaking we can be even *more* present, using speech as a way to clear thoughts, express feelings, describe and focus in on bodily sensations and inner imagery. Speech can help us stay present and connected to what is unfolding in the body-mind moment by moment.

In Insight Improvisation, when we say “shared vipassana,” we are mainly referring to “moving shared vipassana,” which is the form of the exercise that builds on authentic movement, as in the example above. But let’s start even more simply, with sitting and speaking...

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## Sitting Shared Vipassana

With your partner, decide who will be the “meditator” first. The other is the witness, who will keep time, and afterwards, share their experience of witnessing. The meditator prepares by finding a comfortable meditation posture—typically sitting, but lying down and standing are also possible. The ideal posture is relaxed but alert.

As the meditator, begin by closing your eyes and tuning in—scan through the body, notice the breath, relax. Open the awareness to all the channels: notice sensations, thoughts, emotions. So far, this is a *vipassana* meditation. What makes this shared vipassana: as objects arise in your field of awareness, you can speak them aloud. For example, “Body sensation: left foot touching cold floor. Sound: crickets. Seeing light through eyelids.”

Do not feel a responsibility to share *everything* that is arising—often there is too much to speak about all at once. Allow there to be pauses. On the other hand, it is important in this exercise to speak, rather than sit in silence. There is something to be gained and discovered by adding speech. Take advantage of the opportunity to explore your relationship with words and speaking aloud.

Some thoughts or feelings may arise that you would prefer not to share. That is completely OK. What is important is to share the truth of what is happening to you in the moment in a way that supports your mindful and choiceless awareness.

It can be helpful, particularly when learning shared vipassana, to begin each statement with a label, naming the sense door through which you perceived whatever you are sharing—“smelling,” “body sensation,” “thinking,” etc. This helps one remain present and focused on what is occurring moment by moment, cultivating a quality of awareness

that is alert, precise, and subtle. However, you may find over time that you no longer need to label, at which point you can let it go.

As in traditional *vipassana* meditation, sometimes it is useful to be even more specific in one's labeling. For example, if I find I am planning, sometimes using the more specific label "planning," rather than "thinking," can help me identify and clear what is arising, making it easier to let go and move on to what's next.

You can share in any way you like. Feel free to go slowly and take pauses, to speak rapidly, to make sounds, even to sing your sharing. Find the style that works best for you. Your approach to sharing may change moment by moment.

Shared *vipassana* can include the entire realm of human experience. For example, although you may begin the exercise by noticing and sharing certain sensations (sounds, body sensations, smells, etc.), as you continue, your meditation may also include thoughts, emotions, inner imagery, memories, fantasies, etc., which you can share aloud as they arise.

In a typical silent meditation, it is all too easy to identify with and get carried away by thoughts, memories, planning, fantasy, etc. As we watch the train of mind objects roll by, we have a tendency to jump on the train. Before we know it, several minutes have passed in which we were unaware of anything, completely lost in thought.

In shared *vipassana*, by speaking thoughts aloud we can more easily stay connected to the present moment. For example, by speaking my "planning mind" aloud—"Thinking: I have to prepare for that presentation on Thursday"—I immediately notice what I am doing, and can choose to return to an awareness of the body, the senses, or the next mind object arising. If I speak an image, fantasy, or memory aloud as it unfolds in

this way, it means I am not carried away, identified with these mind objects and lost in them, but rather that I am exploring them with awareness, choosing to give them my attention before returning to the body. Awareness of the body and breath—as in traditional meditation—serves as the anchor in shared vipassana (and in all Insight Improvisation practices), something we can always return to if feeling lost, confused, or not grounded.

Sitting shared vipassana can be done as a short “check-in” for three to five minutes, or as a more substantial practice for ten minutes or more. To end the meditation, either set a gentle alarm to go off, or have the witness ring a bell or say “slowly, in your own time, bring your meditation to a close.” It is best if the meditator does not pop right out to talk with the witness, but really takes her time to transition, keeping her eyes closed for a few moments, noticing her breath, her body, and how she feels.

In the sharing afterwards, the witness can begin by asking “would you like to speak first or shall I?” The meditator can share her experience of what happened. The witness’s role is to provide a mirror, to reflect back what he heard in an accurate, nonjudgmental, and supportive way. The witness can also include his own experience—thoughts and feelings that arose for him during the meditation. As in authentic movement, the witness acknowledges and owns his projections.

### **Benefits of Sharing Aloud**

As a meditator, I find that sharing my inner experience with a witness helps me be more present than I sometimes find myself to be in my own solitary sitting practice. I can more clearly distinguish and focus in on even very subtle sensations. The sharing gives each object its own momentary importance. Even when I am silent during shared

vipassana, I am usually completely engaged, mindful, watching very carefully. This is partially due to the presence of a witness, and partially due to engaging that part of the mind that observes and is readying to articulate what it is noticing.

Shared vipassana also helps me explore elements of thought, emotion, and inner imagery consciously, mindfully, rather than drifting off into daydream or identifying with them, getting caught up in their emotional swirl. By supporting a conscious exploration of (sometimes deep) emotions, shared vipassana can at times lead to both insight and catharsis—the latter an experience of feeling, expressing, and releasing strong emotions. As we add movement to this conscious exploration—in moving shared vipassana, below—and progress from shared vipassana to forms such as role stream (see Part II of this book) and psolodrama (in Part III) that incorporate enactment, the potential for insight and catharsis further increases.

### **Whom The Sharing is For**

It is important to be clear that the “sharing” in shared vipassana is for the meditator, not the witness.

As in authentic movement, the witness’s sole purpose is in service of the meditator. Ideally, the witness is bringing her most supportive, nonjudgmental, engaged, and caring presence to her witnessing, as well as to the mutual sharing process afterward.

So it’s interesting to notice, as the meditator (or mover, as described below), whether I am relating to my witness as a nonjudgmental presence—trusting her in that way—or if I am projecting all kinds of judgments onto her.

Similarly, I find it useful to notice my underlying intentions for speaking as the meditator. Even if my primary intention is to use my speech as a vehicle for authentic

self-expression, and for being present to all that is arising, I may be subtly influenced by my feelings about the witness. Do I want to impress her? Am I afraid of offending her? Am I censoring before sharing?

In my own case, as a teacher and developer of this practice, I may also be laboring under intentions such as “Is this a good example of shared vipassana? Could I be doing a better ‘demo’ of this form?”

One good way to deal with these normal social defenses and concerns is to share them as part of the meditation, and by doing so, help clear them out. If I can speak aloud, for example, “Thinking: is what I’m sharing interesting enough? Projecting: my witness must be bored,” doing so can free me up, help me to enjoy myself more, and allow me to return to sharing openly without censoring.

### Variations

***Shared Vipassana Dialogue.*** In this exercise, both partners actively share as well as listen. Begin by sitting facing your partner, in silent meditation. (How long a period of silence can be agreed upon beforehand: a minute or two is fine, but if there is a mutual desire for a longer silent meditation, that’s even better.) For greatest focus, it is best to keep eyes closed throughout the exercise, although it’s fine to open them a little now and then to take in more of what is arising in the visual channel, as well as to see your partner.

One person begins the dialogue by speaking aloud something they are noticing in their meditation: “Body sensation: feeling of cool air in my nostrils.” Then it is the other’s turn: “Hearing: faint roar of truck engine going by in the distance.” The sharing bounces back and forth until the exercise is over (it is useful to set a gentle alarm so that

you do not need to consult a clock during the meditation). A few pointers: allow pauses, preferably silences. Breathe and relax. Take your time. Try not to censor: see if you can go with the first thing that is arising, in this moment. Afterward, share with your partner your experience of the process.

**Group Shared Vipassana.** It is also possible to extend this idea of a meditative dialogue to an entire group.

Seated in a circle, invite the group to close their eyes, and lead them in a short meditation: first on mindfulness of breathing, then opening to the six sense doors (see the earlier chapter on meditation for more complete instructions), and finally opening to choiceless awareness in a short traditional *vipassana* meditation.

Then invite sharing aloud: “As we continue our meditation together, in a moment we’re going to add a new element: speaking. At any time, anyone can speak aloud something they are noticing in their meditation that is coming through one of the six sense doors—including the five senses as well as thoughts. When you share, I invite you to begin by labeling the sense door you are aware of. For example: ‘body sensation: right shoulder relaxing, releasing’ or ‘hearing: sound of bird calls.’ Other labels can include smelling, seeing, tasting, and thinking. Try to keep sharing brief—a phrase or short sentence. Once someone shares, let there be a pause or silence, for at least a few beats, before someone else speaks. If two people begin to speak at the same time, just pause, let go, and share again later. Let’s begin by taking a few moments more in silence, and then anyone can speak.”

Group shared vipassana can last for any length of time: five to ten minutes is good for a group trying it for the first time; longer can work if the members are experienced

meditators. When time is almost up, the group leader has a few options. If the group is new, with some shy members, the leader can say: “In our last few minutes, I invite those who have not spoken much or at all to share something if they would like.” An alternative for a more experienced group might be to invite closure through sharing emotions: “Before we bring this meditation to a close, let’s use the last couple of minutes to share any feelings or emotions that are present, either directly or through describing an image or body sensation you are having.”

The leader can end the process by saying: “To end our meditation, let’s return to silent *vipassana* meditation for a couple of minutes, being aware of the body, the breath, thoughts, and feelings.” Afterwards, invite the group to share their experience of the meditation.

***From sitting to moving.*** Typically, when doing sitting shared vipassana with a witness, the meditator begins in stillness, sitting in traditional meditation posture. In contrast, moving shared vipassana, which is based in authentic movement, begins with silent movement. However, in sitting shared vipassana it is possible to begin in stillness and gradually add subtle and then gross movement as you follow your awareness. Sometimes sharing aloud can lead to movement: “Body sensation—I feel a tightness in my belly. Noticing breathing in. The tightness is dissolving. My legs feel very light, almost playful. Uncrossing my legs. Mmmm. I want to kick them. Feels good!”

## Moving Shared Vipassana

Instead of starting in sitting meditation, shared vipassana can also begin with authentic movement. It is still called shared vipassana because the focus moment by moment is bringing our choiceless awareness to what is arising and passing away through each of the six sense doors, and sharing aloud what we are noticing.

With a partner, choose who will move first and who will witness. Decide on a length of time for moving and for sharing. Have a clock handy for the witness to keep time. Optionally, the witness may also wish to have paper and pen to capture some of what the mover shares aloud, particularly as images and memories arise. When doing so as a witness, it's nice to ask the mover beforehand whether they are OK with your taking notes.

### Moving and Speaking

The mover enters the space and finds a place and position to begin—standing, sitting, lying down, or any position—and then closes his eyes.

He takes a moment in silence to breathe and relax, letting his body just be as it is, opening to all the senses, opening to his feelings. He begins to follow movement impulse, letting the body lead, entering authentic movement.

He allows himself to move silently for as long as he likes, typically a few minutes. If sound comes naturally during this time, that's fine. It can be a helpful precursor to sharing to allow natural sounds of breathing, sighing, grunting, humming, etc. to come out spontaneously.

Whenever he wishes, the mover can begin to share aloud, as described earlier in sitting shared vipassana. He continues to practice authentic movement, simply speaking out loud what his inner witness is noticing.

Typically, with moving shared vipassana, we notice three kinds or “levels” of sharing—reporting, expressing, and experiencing:

### **Reporting**

*Body sensation: buzzing feeling in feet. Head heavy, tilting to one side. Sound: wind in the trees. Thinking: how can I let myself fully relax right now? Cool breath in mouth.*

As with sitting shared vipassana, moving shared vipassana usually begins with reporting, in a fairly neutral tone, what the mover is noticing that is coming in through his six sense doors—body sensations, thoughts, sounds, sights, smells, and tastes. Because the meditator is also moving, there may be more to notice moment-to-moment than when sitting still. There is no need to share all of it—find a pace of sharing that feels relaxed and natural.

### **Expressing**

*Aaaarching back, aaaahhh, bunching shoulders, squeeeeezeing.  
Mmmmm.... Smell of wood floor. Feeling free...letting go...*

This next level of sharing is to allow what is being experienced to affect the voice. This can be true not only of body sensations (e.g., letting the feeling of “strehhhhtching” the upper back affect the timbre and elongated delivery of the word), but also emotions (e.g. “Feeling sad...” or “Feeling joy!” said with a tone of voice that expresses the feeling fully).

For some, allowing the feeling of the object arising to affect the voice is natural. They may already be doing it from the moment they begin to move. Others may need to be reminded or even coached to break out of the monotone of reporting and express more congruently using all the different aspects of the voice—pitch, volume, speed/rhythm, timbre, enunciation, etc.

The mover's expressive use of voice is not for the benefit of the witness—it's solely for the mover to allow his voice to be as open and effective a channel as possible for expressing and releasing sensations, emotions, thoughts, etc. The mover must notice and let go of his projections—what he imagines the witness is thinking and feeling—to let himself use his voice fully, neither censoring nor trying to impress, entertain, or engage the other.

As we progress further toward psolodrama in this sequence of exercises, those of us who are actors or performers may notice our tendency to amplify what's happening for the benefit of the audience—the witness. This is an interesting edge to explore: on the one hand, to not add anything to what is happening, but simply explore what is arising in its authenticity, letting my voice be an open channel for what's arising, without embellishing; on the other hand, to notice and appreciate my natural joy and passion in performing, and not suppress it. Part of the fun of this sequence of exercises—shared vipassana, role stream, scene stream, and psolodrama—is to let my performer self out and play, but without the usual fear, tension, or pressure of performing. *(See Part II, on contemplative theater, for more on applying mindfulness in performance.)*

## *Experiencing*

*Shoulders relaxed. Balancing...aligned. I'm standing on top of a tall building. Looking out over the city. Nighttime. Arms opening...stretching out. I see stars above. Belly relaxing. Breathing.*

The third level of sharing in moving shared vipassana is to notice images and memories arising in one's authentic movement, to speak aloud what one is noticing, and to explore them further through movement and speaking.

This is different from theatrical improvisation in which one may be thinking up clever situations or characters to enact. In shared vipassana—as in authentic movement—the images arising begin with the body. Opening to all the sense doors, informed by body position and movement, the mover may naturally make associations to past experiences, or may envision places or characters they have never encountered in real life. By describing these images aloud, and moving into them, the mover may also find a story begin to develop, discovering as it unfolds how the story affects him emotionally.

Exploring an image through movement and words is quite different from getting lost in thought during a sitting meditation. In the latter, one tends to “blank out,” losing one's connection to the present moment, often carried away with emotion tied to thought (worry, desire, etc.). In shared vipassana, the mover is reconnected to the present through his movement and his speaking, and therefore is less prone to get lost in identification with what is arising.

Some do not experience images or memories as much as others, some not at all. It can take time getting comfortable with authentic movement in order for these associations to arise. Do not push or strive for it to happen. If images or memories arise naturally for you, that's great; if not, that's fine too. In the absence of imagery one can be

even more present to the subtle phenomena arising in each of the six sense doors, noticing one's emotional and mental responses in each moment.

Moving shared vipassana—in particular the exploration of inner imagery—is a fully embodied version of what Jung termed Active Imagination (Chodorow, 1997), a meditation on what is spontaneously unfolding in the imagination, with the active participation of—but not overt shaping or influencing by—the meditator. What shared vipassana adds—movement, speech, and an observing witness—all help support this exploration by making it easier for the meditator/mover to stay focused on what is arising moment by moment.

### **Witnessing and Sharing Together Afterwards**

As in authentic movement, the role of the witness is to create a container of nonjudgmental and caring support for the mover, as well as to observe all that they do; and, in the case of moving shared vipassana, to listen to all they say.

To do this, the witness may wish to move—if the mover is whispering or very quiet, the witness can get up and move closer. (For safety, it's important to remember to maintain some space between mover and witness, in case the mover has a sudden impulse to make a big gesture quickly.)

At the same time, the basic orientation in shared vipassana is that the speaking the mover is doing is *for the mover*, not for the witness. The witness will get what she gets; things she cannot hear fully or does not understand may be clarified in the sharing process afterward.

With the permission beforehand of the mover, the witness may also take notes. This is particularly helpful to capture what the mover says, although notes about his

movement are useful as well. If the witness finds that note-taking is getting in the way of simply being present—if she needs to look down at her page often in order to write—she should let it go. Sometimes taking notes helps one be *more* present; this can vary from witness to witness. (If the mover wishes to capture what he says during his movement, he can also use an audio recording device or app.)

When time is up, the witness can say “Slowly, in your own time, bring your movement to a close.” Alternatively, if the mover is speaking a lot, rather than talk over him, the witness can gently ring a bell. The mover takes his time to bring whatever is happening to a close, letting go of the last image, memory, or movement, and ends with a moment of stillness, noticing his body and breath, relaxing and releasing.

Once the mover opens his eyes and comes to sit with the witness, the witness begins by asking: “Would you like to speak first, or shall I?” This is different from authentic movement, in which it is assumed the mover always speaks first. Because in shared vipassana—as well as exercises to come, such as psolodrama—the mover is speaking, sometimes a lot, they may prefer to be silent for a while and let the witness speak first. Also, having the witness begin the sharing dialogue is usually a more viable option in shared vipassana than in authentic movement, because the witness has had the additional window of speech during the movement to help her understand what was happening from the mover’s point of view—so she is less likely to contradict in her sharing the mover’s own internal take on what was occurring.

When the mover speaks, he can share anything he likes about what arose in his movement, in any way he likes. The witness’s sharing is completely in support of the mover. Ideally, she can intuit from what has occurred in the moving and sharing so far

what would be most helpful to add. Sometimes this may mean tracing back through the movement in chronological order, mirroring back as accurately as possible what she saw and heard. Or, it may be more important to focus in on one or a few key moments—perhaps moments the mover shared about afterwards—and discuss not only the movement and speech but also what the witness perceived and felt during those moments, including what she was projecting onto them.

### Final Thoughts

Moving shared vipassana is one of my favorite Insight Improvisation exercises. Practicing it, for me, is like stepping into a warm swimming pool. I have a feeling of instant relaxation, combined with a sense of freedom and possibility—anything can happen, and I can let go of the need to perform or produce anything. My role is just to “be”—and to share what is happening. Because of this comfort and freedom, the experience of the exercise can go quite deep: I often touch on profound and buried feelings that I’ve not allowed myself to experience or express in my day-to-day life. Shared vipassana provides an opportunity to converse with my authentic self.

*(For applications of shared vipassana in individual therapy and group settings, see Part IV, Insight Improvisation in the World—Working with Individuals and Groups.)*

## References

Chodorow, J. (Ed.) (1997). *Jung on active imagination*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.