

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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The Entryway to Psolodrama

Treat every moment as your last.

It is not preparation for something else.

— *Shunryu Suzuki*

The Entryway to Psolodrama	
<p><i>Entryway Stages</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">I. Entering the Body—Authentic MovementII. Giving Voice—Shared VipassanaIII. Embodying Others—Role StreamIV. Inviting Dialogue—Scene Stream	<p><i>Other Topics</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Witnessing the Entryway• Planning, Timing, and Guidance• Training• Preparing for the Psolodramatic Journey...<ul style="list-style-type: none">...by Letting Go...by Dealing with Fear...by Gathering Material

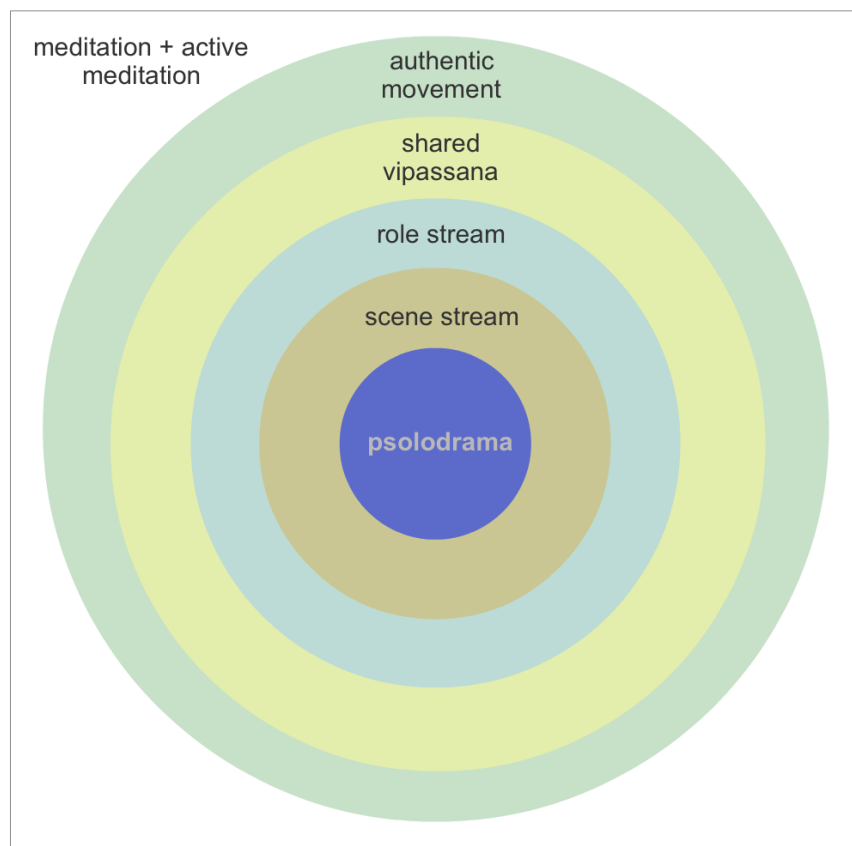
If psolodrama is a burning fire, the entryway practices are kindling, helping to catch a spark and spread the flame.

When psolodrama was first developed, it became evident that starting from nothing and finding one's way into a solo improvisation, portraying interactions among

several roles, could be challenging. Over the years, four steps which precede the practice have evolved, serving as an ideal entryway into one's psolodrama.

By beginning with authentic movement, then adding words with shared vipassana, entering roles in role stream, and letting those roles dialogue with one another in scene stream, the psoloist is given a more gentle, gradual path, in which he can be fully present, listen to his body (instead of his thoughts), and allow what is inside to emerge organically.

Each of these four entryway steps is a deep and worthwhile practice in itself, and all four practices have been covered individually earlier in this book. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the sequence as a whole when used as a prelude to psolodrama and to discuss best practices for the psoloist. The chapter concludes with thoughts about timing and how the witness can offer support.



Entryway Stages

All four entryway steps were described earlier in greater detail, and readers new to these exercises are encouraged to peruse the chapters “Authentic Movement,” “Shared Vipassana,” and “Role Stream and Scene Stream.”

The purpose of this section is to paint a vivid picture of what happens when these practices are used together as a prelude to psolodrama.

The following is a sample entryway sequence as a knowledgeable practitioner might experience it—a fluid, organic progression. Later in this chapter we will discuss how a therapist might introduce a client to these stages, and how peers newer to the practice can guide (and provide timing for) one another.

Mindset. The psoloist begins the entryway process with the intention to enter empty; to let go of her goals, preconceptions and “good ideas;” to be present. Rather than treat the stages as preparation (as Shunryu Suzuki warns against, above), she immerses herself fully in each phase as a practice in itself.

I. Entering the Body—Authentic Movement

The psoloist enters the space, finds a comfortable position to begin in—standing, sitting, lying down, or some other position. She closes her eyes.

She begins with stillness and silence, taking a moment to listen deeply to her body and inner state. She opens to the six sense doors—the five senses, as well as mind

objects: thoughts, inner imagery, etc. She also opens to how she feels: her mood, emotional or energetic state.

To an experienced, perceptive practitioner, the first moment of authentic movement contains volumes of information. It is important not to skip over this moment but let it inform what is to come. For example, it's not unusual when entering the space and physically relaxing for a wave of emotion to arise—sadness or grief, relief, joy or energy, etc. Learning to open to these feelings and following where they lead is a skill that authentic movers and psoloists develop over time.

By taking her time in these opening moments, the psoloist opens to “being moved.” She relaxes her muscles, releasing any unnecessary tension, and lets the resultant movement simply happen. She is keenly aware of sensations, noticing the coolness of the floor or the texture of the carpet, smells, small sounds, etc. In doing so she completely drops any agenda she may have unintentionally entered with—she is now fully in the present moment, following the flow of sensation and feeling moment-by-moment.

She follows her body's movement impulses, opening her eyes only if necessary, and only slightly, to avoid collision. As she follows her body and what it wants, she lets her mind be a nonjudgmental inner witness. She becomes more present, feeling herself opening physically. As her movement unfolds, she encounters new sensations, and can experience images, memories, and feelings.

II. Giving Voice—Shared Vipassana

Eyes still closed, the psoloist begins to speak aloud what she is noticing—whatever is arising in any of the six sense doors:

“Tension in left thigh....Sound of air conditioning, white noise....Relaxing face, lips loose....Thinking: ‘I haven’t allowed myself to relax like this all week’....Faint sound of birds....Musty smell of carpet....Feeling back of hand dragging against carpet, flopping forward...”

Speaking aloud helps her become even more present than before. She is fully aware of every sensation, every impulse. She proceeds slowly. She does not try to share everything—pauses/silences are welcome in shared vipassana. As she continues, imagery may naturally emerge:

“Hand reaching forward....feeling of rug on fingertip....I’m in the desert....Can barely move....scratching in sand....distant oasis....mirage....”

As with any thought, feeling, or sensation, imagery arises and passes away, leaving space for something new to arise, such as a memory:

“Thirsty....pain in knees....remembering jumping off bed and onto knees as a child....aware of belly....heavy belly....relaxing belly with in-breath.”

The psoloist is not speaking for the benefit of the witness. The witness will get what he gets. The psoloist is speaking to articulate her moment-to-moment experience, at first just **reporting** it, as a way to release thoughts and impressions; then **expressing** it, by allowing her voice (and body) to be affected by what she is sharing; and finally, **experiencing**, entering and describing feelings, inner imagery, roles, memories, and stories—aspects of which continue and develop further in role stream and scene stream.

III. Embodying Others—Role Stream

The psoloist, continuing her movement with eyes closed, begins to notice what role or character her body position or movement reminds her of. She moves, makes sound, and speaks as that role. At any time she can let go of the role, return to authentic movement, and then enter another role.

“I’m a dog....(sniff, sniff)...yooowwwwwrr...I love smelling...everything! The floor....my hand...a trail someone left behind...(silence as the psoloist follows her bodily impulse, laying down on her back, crossing her arms over her chest)...I’m an Egyptian princess...lying here for thousands of years....”

Roles may be suggested by sense perceptions (e.g, position of the body, facial expression, feeling of contact with the floor, hearing/feeling the voice), by sounding (growling, humming, singing, screaming), by the mind (e.g., inner imagery, emotion, etc.), or often by a combination of several of these elements at once. The psoloist is avoiding “thinking up” a role—she is not trying to be clever or entertain the witness (a particularly challenging habit for actors to break). Instead, she is tuning into her body and noticing what is already emerging, naturally.

Roles can be real or imaginary—the psoloist may become her own mother in one moment and a robot, fairy godmother, roaring truck, or singing lobster in the next.

Some roles may make sound. Others may speak, or sing, recognizable words. Others may babble word-like gibberish. Some roles may be silent. Something interesting tends to happen when a role is invited to make sound and/or to speak: emotions and thoughts are expressed, and the role evolves and clarifies further. For this reason, an

experienced psoloist will usually invite sound and/or words to a role that is silent, to open up to the richness of these additional dimensions.

Often, the first sounds the psoloist makes in a role help develop and clarify the role. When entering a role she may choose to describe the role while speaking as that role (e.g., “I’m a soldier...toughened by battle...”), but that is not necessary. Mainly, her aim is to fully embody and explore each role, seeing where it leads.

Note that a role may be unclear. For example, the psoloist may find herself making a certain sound while shaking or vibrating her body. This is completely OK, and part of the process—she does not need to understand or name every role that is arising. Sometimes, if she stays with a certain physical/vocal pattern or feeling, a clear role emerges; other times she goes back into authentic movement to discover the next role. What is important is to trust the organic process that is unfolding, rather than to try to force it to be something it is not.

IV. Inviting Dialogue—Scene Stream

As the psoloist continues the role stream, she begins to open to dialogue between roles, allowing herself to return to a previous role to let it reply to what is being said.

Princess: I’ve been lying here for so long...why can’t I get up? I’m stuck...help!

(Becoming the dog again—sniffing.)

Dog: What’s that voice? I’ll save you! (Begins to dig with its paws.)

(Laying down once again as the buried princess.)

Princess: My dog...my sweet doggie...I cannot see you...but I can hear you. Please get me out of here!

Dog: Yes, princess, I'm coming. I'll dig faster! (Digs furiously.) Found you!!! (Leaps on her and starts to lick her...)

Princess: Hey! (laughing) I missed you too! OK, OK!! (Getting up, looking around) Doggie, what is this place...?

As in the previous stages, the psoloist's eyes are still closed, and she is following what her body wants to do. At any time she can drop a role or scene and return to silent authentic movement, eventually noticing what new role wants to arise. She can loop back to any role at any time, creating scenes with two or more characters.

Transitioning into Psolodrama

Once she is practicing scene stream, the psoloist is usually well on her way to psolodrama—channeling roles, creating scenes, and often developing a broader storyline.

As we shall see in the next chapter, what separates scene stream from psolodrama are two main elements: first, an intention to explore the underlying or emerging theme, issue, or challenge, and how it relates to the psoloist's own life; and second, an awareness and use of the five psychodramatic roles, to help “cook” scenes and explore the themes arising.

Role Stream:	role A → role B → role C → role D, etc.
Scene Stream:	role A → role B → role A → role B → role C → role D → role C → role A → role C → role D, etc.
Psolodrama:	protagonist → auxiliary ego → protagonist → auxiliary ego → protagonist → director → protagonist → double → auxiliary ego → audience, etc.

Use of Roles in Role Stream, Scene Stream, and Psolodrama

Witnessing the Entryway

Witnessing the entryway practices is the prelude to witnessing psolodrama. Ideally, the witness treats his role as a meditation, bringing mindfulness, choiceless awareness, and lovingkindness to how he observes and interacts with the psoloist. His goal is to create a supportive, caring container for the psoloist’s work—he is completely in service to her.

The trap in witnessing prior to psolodrama is to treat the initial phases as “less than,” as in “this is not the actual psolodrama, so I don’t need to pay attention as closely.” In fact, the opening moments of authentic movement, shared vipassana, etc., contain a vast richness of information. So much is happening for the psoloist in these moments; if the witness can tune in and observe carefully, he will see (and feel) every movement, every moment, each emotion and image, etc., even before the psoloist speaks.

A skillful witness observes the entryway practices so closely that he can begin his part of the sharing process by recounting what he saw and heard prior to the psolodrama itself, with accuracy.

(For more, see the chapters “Witnessing Psolodrama” and “The Psolodrama Sharing Process.”)

Planning, Timing, and Guidance

Planning & Timing

Peer session. In a one-to-one session between peers, once checking-in and any preliminary warm-up exercises are complete, partners check in again briefly to see how they are doing, how much time is left, and how best to use the time. Usually, a plan is made to divide the remaining time equally, providing each person with time to do their psolodrama (including the entryway practices) and then share with the witness.

If the total session length is two hours, and the initial check-in and warm-ups take roughly 40 minutes, that leaves 80 minutes, or about 40 minutes per person, for psolodrama and sharing.

Each person can determine how they would like to use their time, but a good rule of thumb is to leave as much time for sharing as for the psolodrama itself, i.e. 20 minutes for each. Some may feel they need more time for their psolodrama and request 25/15.

The minimum amount of time required for psolodrama plus sharing is probably 15/10, or 25 minutes total. This requires keeping the entryway practices brief or skipping some (see “Untimed,” below). If pressed for time, therefore, partners can get together, briefly check-in, and witness one another doing psolodrama in the course of a single hour.

Therapy. For a therapy session, the total time needed is less because there is only one psoloist (the client), and one witness (the therapist). 90 minutes is recommended for therapy sessions using psolodrama to allow sufficient time for initial check-in and clearing as well as sharing and closure after the psolodrama. But a shorter session is possible.

Guidance

Whether and how the witness (either a peer or therapist) provides timing and/or guidance for the entryway practices depends on the psoloist's needs, desires, and experience level. Roughly speaking, there are three typical approaches (although elements of these can be combined):

Guided. The witness provides a verbal introduction, and if needed, instructions, to transition from one phase to the next. The witness and psoloist can agree beforehand whether the transitions will be based on time (e.g. three minutes per step) or more fluid, based on what the witness is seeing. Note that someone new to authentic movement and these other practices will likely need more time with each step (see "Training" below).

Timed. The psoloist and witness agree on timing beforehand, and the witness rings a bell to mark the beginning of each step (if the psoloist likes, the witness can also say the name of the step, e.g., "Entering shared vipassana..."). Allowing two to three minutes each for entryway practices can leave 10-15 minutes for the psolodrama itself.

Untimed. For a more experienced practitioner, no guidance or timing is necessary; he can enter these four phases in his own time, in an organic way. Psoloist and witness agree beforehand only on the total time for the psolodrama (including the

entryway practices), e.g. 20 minutes. The psoloist lets go of concerns about time, and simply follows his body and instinct. He can skip steps, do them in a different order, etc., whatever works best for him to enter into psolodrama. Skipping steps is not an intentional act: the psoloist may lie down on the floor and within seconds find himself in a role and talking to another character. He's jumped from authentic movement to scene stream in a matter of moments. (He can even let go of the "goal" of practicing psolodrama entirely: he may end up doing 20 minutes of meditation, authentic movement, or shared vipassana, or any of the entryway practices—and have a full and rich experience of doing so.)

No matter which approach is taken, guided, timed, or untimed, the psoloist can also request a two-minute warning before the end of the psolodrama itself, which the witness can provide verbally or by ringing a bell.

Training

Although one goal when learning psolodrama and the entryway practices may be to work untimed in the most spontaneous and organic way, it is equally important for those new to these approaches to have a chance to experience each phase fully and deeply. When teaching psolodrama in workshop settings or to individuals in my private practice, I make sure novices have the chance to experience authentic movement at length—ideally 20 minutes or longer—and at least 10-15 minutes each of shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream. For a therapy client these may be introduced over a series of sessions; in a workshop I generally introduce the phases gradually over the course of one to two days, in alternation with exercises such as the empty chair and group psychodrama, which introduce complementary concepts and skills. (*More on the*

use of all of these techniques in individual therapy and group workshops appears in Part IV of this book and in the appendix “Sample Agendas for Group Work.”)

Preparing for the Psolodramatic Journey...

...by Letting Go

One could compare the entryway practices to traveling down a stream or river: I consciously let myself be carried by currents I do not understand or control. Sometimes the themes, emotions, images, and roles that emerge will make their way into the psolodrama proper, sometimes not.

In some ways, the entryway sequence serves as a psychic or emotional palette cleansing, a way to slough off the surface tensions and issues of the day and drop into a deeper level of work.

The entryway can also be compared to flying through the layers of a hurricane—after moving through cloud, being buffeted about this way and that, we eventually reach the eye of the storm, a calm, open place where we can see clearly and in a new way.

In another sense, the entryway is the beginning of a shamanic journey—we trust that if we follow the path and go down the hole into dark places, we will eventually meet a guide who has an important message for us.

...by Dealing with Fear

It is possible to be fearful of doing psolodrama—one longtime practitioner shared with me that he knows of people, even skilled improvisers, who are terrified of it. Psolodrama is not only an act on vulnerability—sharing one’s innermost thoughts, feelings, issues, and challenges—but it also has some of the scary aspects of performance: will my psolodrama be good? What will happen? To enter psolodrama is to enter the unknown. The same person also shared that doing psolodrama, for him, is a little like going swimming: there is resistance to going in the lake, but once he’s in, he is usually very comfortable and feels like he could stay forever.

The entryway practices greatly ease the entry into psolodrama, helping relieve these feelings of fear at the threshold—or what Agazarian would call the “turbulent boundary” (2011, p. 116). The psoloist can enter authentic movement and completely relax, letting go of the idea of psolodrama completely, comfortable in the understanding that he can go as far as he feels comfortable in the progression—he may do 20 minutes of authentic movement, or of authentic movement and shared vipassana, etc. What typically happens is that once he begins, the psoloist feels so comfortable that the transition from phase to phase is natural, often automatic. Before he knows it he is happily in the midst of his psolodrama, creating scenes, weaving fantasy and real life characters, etc.

...by Gathering Material

The entryway to psolodrama is not only a warming up but a winnowing process: whereas in authentic movement we bring completely open awareness and a surrender to bodily impulse, in shared vipassana we begin to select and share aloud some of what we

are noticing. In the role stream we focus further—on roles only; in scene stream we zero in on interactions between those roles.

This winnowing process is like a funnel for the unconscious, gathering the rich, chaotic material offered by the body, emotions, and imagination, and focusing it more and more into a form that can be embodied in roles and played out in scenes.

When the preparation for psolodrama is relaxed, thorough, and deep, the psolodrama process is effortless—the feelings and roles discovered in the preparatory steps are organically incorporated into the story that emerges.

References

Agazarian, Y.M. & Gantt, S.P. (2011). *Systems-centered therapy: clinical practice with individuals, families and groups*. London: Karnac.

Additional Reading

Suzuki, S. (1970). *Zen mind, beginner's mind*. New York: Weatherhill.