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.

Troubleshooting Psolodrama

showing their backs
then their fronts
falling maple leaves

— Ryokan

There is no "right way" to do psolodrama—everyone who tries the practice seems to find their own path. Those experienced in meditation, authentic movement, improvisation, psychodrama, etc., tend to use that experience as their guide, initially. Individuals also bring different habits and personal patterns into the practice.

In teaching psolodrama to many different kinds of people, I have found that there are certain common pitfalls to watch out for, particularly early in the practice. These should not be seen as absolute prohibitions, but rather little traps or habits that a beginning psoloist may tend to fall into. Ideally, they point to areas for experimentation and self-discovery.

Psolodrama Traps and Habits

- **Keeping it Inside:** doing a lot of thinking/feeling, but not much speaking, moving, or expressing
- **Monologuing:** speaking only as the protagonist; storytelling or free-associating as opposed to enacting
- **Getting Stuck:** feeling confused or lost, trapped in repeated patterns, or just not present
- **Feeling Unsafe:** not trusting the witness, or feeling overwhelmed by the content of the drama
- **Working from the Head, Not the Gut:** planning the psolodrama in advance; making choices from the head; intellectualizing rather than being in action; focusing on surface issues
- **Being Exclusively Concrete:** working only with real-life roles and day-to-day problems; avoiding metaphors, images, fantasies, archetypal roles, and existential issues
- **Randomly Improvising:** playing out a wide range of creative roles and stories without relating them to one's own life or to deeper emotional meaning
- **Worrying about the Witness:** censoring oneself to "look good" in front of the witness; performing/entertaining to not bore them
- **Judging Oneself or the Process:** criticizing oneself or having aversion to one's own psolodrama

Keeping It Inside

When I teach psolodrama for the first time to a group of people, and walk around the room watching the pairs (psoloists and witnesses) work, I often see several psoloists moving very little and/or being silent. There is nothing wrong with this: that person may be having a very deep, rich, moving experience. On the other hand, the psoloist who hardly moves or speaks will often report afterward that their psolodrama was basically

centered on one feeling, problem, or role, and that it did not change much during the process.

To experience the power of the psolodrama form fully, it is important to move, make sound, speak, and express. This is not about communicating to the witness: the rule is that the witness will get what she gets (and all can be discussed afterward in the sharing process). The trap to avoid is making the psolodrama experience purely internal—to get caught in repeated patterns of thinking and feeling, without taking advantage of the means to express them and move on to what is next, to discover something new.

By letting movement arise from sensations and feelings in the body (via authentic movement), by speaking one's thoughts and feelings aloud (in shared vipassana), by entering and embodying different roles (in the role stream), by exploring interactions between roles (in scene stream), and by cooking the emerging conflict/themes/issues (in the psolodrama itself), all of the things the psoloist tends to keep inside—including her deepest feelings, desires, fears, aspirations, unlived roles, etc.—are given a chance to express themselves, to be seen and heard, opening the way for catharsis, insight, and change.

Of course, not all psolodramas look—or sound—the same: a quiet psolodrama can still be profoundly moving. One friend of mine has a longing to be present to nature; I recall a psolodrama in which he stood in silence before a rocky cliff-face in the Grand Canyon, embracing the earth. Every now and then he reversed roles to become the rocky cliff and get in touch with how it might feel. Working in almost complete silence, he was moved to tears.

Monologuing

Another pitfall among new practitioners is to use psolodrama as an opportunity to deliver a monologue. The psoloist is sometimes an actor, improviser, or just an extroverted person who is experienced in delivering (sometimes quite entertainingly) monologues or stories about his life. There is nothing wrong with a monologue—it can be a useful, valid, and sometimes enlightening form of self-expression and exploration—but it is not a psolodrama.

In most cases, for psolodrama to work well, it needs to be a drama: there must be some kind of conflict or interaction between two or more forces—usually the protagonist and an auxiliary ego. The drama is not conveyed as a story as it would be in a monologue; it is played out, live, as it would be in real life, or onstage in a play, using the movement, sound, and language appropriate to each role (the difference in psolodrama is that the psoloist usually has his eyes closed). What is distinct from a monologue is that the psoloist actually shifts his voice and body to *become* the different roles—rather than just narrating or talking *about* the roles. A common sign of monologuing is the psoloist who is either not moving or just moving in his typical way, not physically entering distinct roles.

Psolodrama gets much of its power from psychodramatic role reversal—the psoloist becoming "the other," not only speaking as but embodying the other role. Perhaps the main effect of this is empathy: if the psoloist is talking about his mother, it is invariably more powerful for him to become his mother, speak *as* his mother, and by doing so begin to empathize with her, enter her world, her feelings. Role reversal also allows the psoloist to switch back into the protagonist role again and respond to his

mother. It is through this process of becoming, empathizing, and interacting that something unexpected can happen. But if the psoloist remains in monologue—talking *about* his mother, complaining about her—he tends to reach the same conclusions as always, reinforcing old patterns.

New roles can arise in psolodrama a few different ways. The psoloist may listen to and follow the body as it enters a new role spontaneously (as in role stream). He may imagine he is interacting with someone or something and then reverse into that other role. Or he may, in the course of speaking, mention another role (e.g., notice he's complaining about his mother), and then decide to stop monologuing and become the other role.

By becoming another role, letting it move and speak, the psoloist can learn what its messages are for him. Through interaction, dialogue, and conflict he may come to a new understanding of what that role means in his life.

Although taking on a role, reversing roles, and having roles dialogue and interact are some of the most powerful tools in psolodrama, there are exceptions, occasions when a monologue may be an equally powerful choice:

Monologuing as Auxiliary or Protagonist (P3): Exploring a New Role

Many times I've begun my progression into psolodrama, and discovered through the role stream a character so fascinating or powerful, that my intuition tells me to stick with that role, amplify it, and speak as it. One time it was a rotting tree trunk. Another time it was a "mud monster." Or it could be a P3 protagonist—one time I became an aging rock star walking around New York City.

Now and then, doing this, I find there is no need to reverse roles—the experience of playing that role is so rich or moving, the wisdom of that role so valuable, there is no

need to do anything else. On other occasions, the protagonist (P1) enters the scene at the very end, to have a brief interaction with that role, sometimes just to honor and thank them for their wisdom—to acknowledge the value of that role in my life.

Monologuing as Protagonist or Double: Integrating Information or Feelings

A monologue can often be an important part of a psolodrama. For example, the protagonist may experience a strong conflict with an auxiliary ego, and come to some new resolution, a place that not only feels new but somewhat unclear or unsettled. He dialogues with the director, who asks "How do you feel right now?" The answer may be more than a sentence or two: it may be a monologue, exploring all of his feelings in that moment, digging more deeply into the meaning of what has just happened. Sometimes the double is invited to speak, if the protagonist cannot yet express all of the feelings for himself. In this way, the psoloist can use a monologue as a tool much like a psychodrama director would, to help express the range of feelings he is experiencing.

Getting Stuck

Even those experienced with psolodrama can get stuck. The pitfall is not knowing how (or not really trying different ways) to get unstuck.

Being stuck can happen in several different ways:

Feeling confused/lost—unclear about the meaning of the psolodrama so far and how it relates to one's own life. The psolodrama may feel random, chaotic, dream-like, or nonsensical.

Feeling trapped in one's issue/problem—e.g., repeating the same thing over and over; feeling depressed or frustrated.

Feeling not present—disconnected from the psolodrama itself, possibly distracted, drowsy, uncomfortable, or embarrassed/shy—or just feeling like "I don't want to do this!" (also known as resistance).

From a drama therapy/psychotherapy perspective, all of these ways of getting stuck (and, in fact, most of the pitfalls discussed in this chapter) are defenses used by the psyche to avoid dealing with a core issue—which the self may find too threatening to confront honestly and explore. Usually, by working slowly, gently, patiently, and consistently—and by using the tools psolodrama provides—almost any personal issue or pattern can be explored. (The exception: memories that are so traumatic, or patterns of thought or behavior that are so disturbing, that professional intervention is called for. For this reason, psolodrama is not recommended for those suffering serious trauma, depression, anxiety, or other mental illness or disorder.)

When stuck in these ways, the psoloist basically has three choices: To persist in his current feeling and behavior until the time is up, usually resulting in a dissatisfying experience; to break out and end the psolodrama prematurely, also usually dissatisfying (unless the psolodrama has been so emotionally upsetting that there is a real need to end it); or to take skillful action—clearly the preferred option! But what does skillful action look like when one is stuck in psolodrama?

First comes the **awareness—I am stuck!**

Next comes the ability to **speak this aloud**: "I'm stuck. Boy, am I stuck!!"

Then there is **a choice**:

To work with different roles, or

To return to the body and to movement.

Working with Different Roles

Taking the first path, it is useful to see if some of the psychodramatic roles, particularly the double or director, can help. A skillful psoloist can dialogue with the director (or monologue as the double) to dig deeper into the truth of what's happening right now, as in the following example:

Protagonist (p1): I am really stuck. I have no idea what I'm doing right now. Hmmm…OK, I'll ask the Director. Director, what should I do?

(The psoloist reverses roles—shifting his body to enter the role of director—and then takes a moment to breathe, settle, and feel that role fully…)

Director: (pause)…Well, how do you actually feel right now?

(As the dialogue continues, the psoloist repeatedly shifts his physical stance to become the roles of protagonist and director.)

Protagonist: I feel stuck. I began this psolodrama and no roles are coming to me. I feel blank and uncomfortable. This just isn't working.

Director: Any other feelings?

Protagonist: (pausing)…yes…I feel sad.

Director: About…?

Protagonist: (long pause)…hmmm…I don't really want to say this…I'm sad about my mother's illness.

Director: OK…why don't you become your mother?

Protagonist: Ugccch!…I was afraid you'd say that…..OK, here goes…

(The psoloist slowly shifts to a new position, beginning to feel what it feels like to be his mother. He moans softly in pain.)

Mother (aux): Ohhh….I cannot take this pain anymore.

Protagonist (p2): Mom, I'm trying to help you…

By dialoguing with the director, and exploring the deeper truth about one's feelings, it is possible to break free from a stuck place and return to action. The scene that follows may be difficult and painful, possibly leading to tears—but also to new insights

into the psoloist's assumptions and habits concerning his relationship with his mother, and perhaps greater awareness of his feelings toward illness and the dying process.

Returning to the Body and to Movement

Another avenue for getting unstuck—and an important one to use if talking is not helping—is to let the problem go (as much as possible), and simply return to an awareness of the body, and to authentic movement.

Psolodrama is based in *vipassana* meditation and authentic movement—two practices that can be healing and transformative in themselves. There is nothing wrong with the psoloist getting out on the floor and discovering in the process that what he really needs to do is simply, silently move—or even to be perfectly still and meditate. Psolodrama is not a performance; the psoloist's time is for himself alone, not to entertain the witness. Afterward, the psoloist can discuss what came up in his movement or meditation.

Often, if the psoloist can fully relax into stillness or movement, letting go of any need to make something happen, he will be surprised to find an image arise out of nowhere, leading him quite naturally to a character, scene, or story. Or he may feel moved to speak aloud, reentering shared vipassana. Or he may, through the movement, discover a role/character and enter role stream and then scene stream.

Ultimately, there are no rules in psolodrama: the psoloist may find that his shared vipassana *is* his psolodrama—that that form gives him maximum freedom to express and explore.

Finally, when really stuck, the psoloist can always turn to the witness and ask for her coaching. Sometimes an outside eye can see an opportunity (e.g. for entering a role,

or putting an idea into action) that the psoloist has completely missed (see the subsequent chapter, “Coaching Psolodrama”).

Feeling Unsafe

Now and then when doing psolodrama, the psoloist may find himself censoring what he is doing or shutting down, noticing that for some reason he does not feel safe in the process.

Feeling Unsafe with One’s Witness

Sometimes this is due to his feelings about the witness. If he is working with a new witness, someone he does not know well, it may be natural for him to do some amount of censoring—he does not yet know how they will react to his psolodrama. In other cases, he may be aware that a witness is uncomfortable with certain kinds of content or certain topics (e.g., of a violent or sexual nature).

One needs to trust a witness and building trust takes time. A skillful witness can accelerate this process of trust-building. (See the chapters “Witnessing Psolodrama” and “The Psolodrama Sharing Process.”)

In addition, the psoloist will tend to find, over time, that he naturally gravitates toward peers who are unafraid to witness or confront in their own psolodramas a very wide range of difficult, existential human issues—and who bring a nonjudgmental, open attitude toward witnessing.

Feeling Unsafe in the Drama Itself

It is also possible to feel unsafe in the psolodrama due to the nature of the material arising. The psoloist may find herself (as the protagonist), in a scene dialoguing with an auxiliary ego she does not feel safe talking with—e.g., an abusive person from her past, an estranged family member, or even a scary fantasy character (a serial killer, monster, demon, witch, etc.). She may feel drawn to reenact a traumatic memory, but not feel safe enough to do so. Or the situation itself may make her feel unsafe: perhaps the story that is unfolding feels too violent, or sexual, or counter to her nature in some way.

There are several approaches to avoid getting stuck or shut down in these situations. The psoloist can, of course, stop her psolodrama at any time—she is in complete control. But she can also try the following:

Bring in the double, a role that can speak what she is really feeling/thinking but does not wish to say in this conversation. The double can monologue: "What I am *really* feeling right now is…" The double can also confront a scary auxiliary in a way the protagonist may not feel empowered to—e.g. to tell that abusive person "I HATE you!"

Bring in the director to support and guide her through the interaction. Sometimes just talking about a difficult scene can help the psoloist warm up to entering and enacting the scene.

Transform the situation. Alone, or with the help of the director, the psoloist can change the scenario in some way that would make it feel safer to enact, or safer to speak her truth. For example, she can imagine she's watching the scene via streaming video from the other side of the planet. She can imagine the monster is in a cage, or is only two inches tall. She can imagine speaking to her ideal parent, rather than her actual, abusive

parent. Or she could imagine bringing another character into the scene to be her ally and help deal with the situation.

Return to mindful stillness or to movement. The psoloist can take a moment to return to stillness, with her eyes closed, returning to awareness of the breath and the body. Or, she can return to authentic movement, moving in silence or with sound. When she feels relaxed and centered enough, she can explore what happens if she returns to the uncomfortable scene. She can pause and get grounded as many times as she likes (similar to taking a vertical moment, a technique from Storytelling).

Let it go! The psoloist can remember that this is *her* psolodrama—she does not have to do anything she does not want to do. She can end the interaction that feels unsafe, go back into movement, and discover a new role and/or scene. She can also end her psolodrama at any time—just because the time limit is, say, 20 minutes, does not mean she needs to fill that time. After her psolodrama is over, she can share with her witness what she might have said if she had felt safe enough.

Working from the Head, Not the Gut

This is a significant trap in learning and practicing psolodrama, especially for those of us who have a tendency toward intellectualization, over-thinking, or advance planning.

Psolodrama is designed to be mysterious—the psoloist enters empty, letting go of present issues or plans, to discover the images, roles, and messages arising from his body, his gut, and his deeper emotions. Psolodrama is also designed to be surprising—the psoloist does not know what he will encounter on this journey. It is the mystery and

surprise of psolodrama that gives it much of its power. Entering empty is different from working with a therapist and saying "I'd like to talk about X today," or working with a psychodramatist and saying "I'd think I'd like to do a psychodrama about Y."

In psolodrama—as in its root practices *vipassana* meditation and authentic movement—the psoloist truly lets go of his agenda, creating space for something to emerge from his depths, from the depths of this moment. Essential to this approach is being present. From the beginning the psoloist releases into authentic movement, being present to the body and all the senses. If he is caught up in thoughts—"Why did my brother write me such an angry e-mail?"—he must notice he is doing that and come back to the body. True, his brother's angry e-mail may pop up in his psolodrama later, but at this stage he needs to let day-to-day concerns go, to listen more deeply to what his body needs.

When he really does this, beginning to follow his body and not his mind, an almost alchemical change happens. He shifts from his day-to-day neurotic self (obsessively worrying, comparing, seeking approval, etc.) to a sudden experience of unity: mind, body, and intention all aligned; mind relaxed and open as it focuses on the tiniest physical sensation (tension in right thigh muscle, feeling of cheek on carpet); body relaxed as it is freed to follow its every impulse.

As he continues the process, the shared vipassana practice reinforces this present state, encouraging him to speak aloud what he is noticing. If distracting thoughts continue to intrude, by speaking them aloud he is able to "clear" them, and return to his body.

Continuing with authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream, by staying very present he begins to notice other things besides bodily sensations:

emotions, images, roles, and scenes begin to arise from his movement. From there it is usually a simple step to enter the psolodrama itself.

However, for those new to the process, it can be very easy to overthink all of this, to not trust the messages of the body. There are several traps of this nature that can arise during the process:

Advance Planning

One friend of mine likes to call this "applied psolodrama"—choosing a topic in advance to do one's psolodrama about, e.g. "I think I'll do a psolodrama about my marriage today." There is nothing wrong with this idea—one can certainly choose any topic to do a role-play, improvisation, or psychodrama about, and it can be a very rich and useful experience. But it is not really psolodrama. Here's why:

Psolodrama is based in authentic movement, based in the wisdom of the body, the gut, the dantian or hara—and the messages, feelings, imagery, and roles stored there. If the psoloist decides in advance what to do her psolodrama about, she disables her ability to listen fully and deeply to what she *really* needs—what her conscious/rational mind may not be aware of. Choosing a topic in advance for one's psolodrama is like choosing a topic in advance for one's authentic movement.

There are times when a psoloist may meet with her partner to do psolodrama, and it is clear to one or both of them that there is something "up," something really bugging her that she'd love to talk about or have a way to deal with. However, rather than plan the psolodrama in advance, it usually works best to share this issue in the check-in with her partner—to do some clearing—and to say "So, this issue may come up in some way in my psolodrama—we'll see what happens!" In this way she is reminding herself to let go

and enter empty. If the issue is really important, it will find its own way into the process without her having to make a decision about that up front, and without any conscious intervention during the psolodrama.

Often when present-day issues do arise in psolodrama, they do so in dream-like metaphors and archetypal roles—the full implications of which the psoloist may not understand until she shares with her witness afterward. These metaphors and roles can point to new ways of seeing her problem, and thus shift her perspective completely. Such insights might not be available if she tried to tackle the issues directly with her rational mind.

Making Choices from the Head

One of the clearest examples of this pitfall can be seen when observing someone do the role stream exercise.

Normally, in the role stream, the psoloist begins with authentic movement, following the body, and a role/character arises from the flow of movement and sound spontaneously. The psoloist discovers what the body is already doing, and begins to focus or amplify that role as it emerges.

However, those new to the practice often do the following: the psoloist is moving authentically, and then suddenly changes his body position completely, and says: "now I'm the captain of a ship!" There is nothing wrong with this necessarily—the psoloist may have suddenly had a strong image occur in his movement (may have smelled a salty scent in the air, or have been rocked as if by a wave) and simply followed that image. But oftentimes when asked afterward what was happening, the psoloist admits that what he was actually doing was *trying to think* of a role, and then becoming that role.

This is a common habit, conditioned not only by the psoloist's past experiences doing improv ("think of a character"), but also by a cultural tendency to look to the head for creativity rather than the body. Actors and improvisers tend to value what's clever, funny, and unique, pushing to make the audience laugh or react—one aspect of Performance Mind (discussed in Part II of this book). The psoloist learns to censor his impulses, rejecting what feels mundane, unoriginal, boring, etc.

What's missing is listening—awareness of all the channels available—rather than tuning in exclusively to the wavelength of the rational, planning mind. As Scott Kelman said: "If you have a good idea, don't do it." By instead opening to the body, and to the flow of inner imagery it sparks, the psoloist can release the pressure to perform, to be "good," to have the right answer.

When the psoloist is fully present, there is no need to "think up" anything. Feeling the coolness of the floor against the side of his foot, he may have a sensation that reminds him of touching ice, and suddenly he is in a scene in winter, a young skater who has just fallen on a frozen pond. Or the coolness of the floor may feel like smooth metal—he lets the sensation fill him and becomes a robot, his metal parts moving and sliding against one another. Or, the sensation of foot against floor may be irritating; suddenly he is a baby woken from sleep in the middle of the night, crying for his parents.

When he is fully present, inspiration and creativity cease to be scarce—but instead flower at each point of contact with the world around him, and in each moment of awareness of his physical and emotional existence within it. He can be inspired by sensations (as with foot against floor), by feelings or emotions, by inner imagery, by a

role he is already inhabiting—the flow of possibilities when he is present are truly infinite.

Through practice, the psoloist develops a supportive inner-witness, and learns to stop censoring his impulses. If a role pops up that feels like a cliché —"I feel like a snake...uh oh...I've been a snake a zillion times"—rather than reject it the psoloist learns to go fully into the cliché. By inhabiting the snake fully, being fully present, he is likely to discover something new, and perhaps learn something about why he became a snake in the first place, about how it relates to him and his life.

Of course, there are different moods or states one can find oneself in when doing psolodrama. Sometimes one may feel "in the flow," aligned with the body and senses, very present, and the process feels effortless. At other times, particularly if one is tense or troubled, the process can seem less natural or feel forced. It is on these latter occasions that the psoloist may feel he is making many (most, all!) of the decisions in the psolodrama from his head—nothing is feeling natural.

Wise dharma teachers say that when a meditation is difficult, that is when one really learns and progresses on the path. The same can be said of psolodrama: doing it when it feels tough is an important part of the learning process. A psoloist learns over time that if he sticks with a psolodrama that is feeling difficult, through persevering he usually emerges with something new and unexpected. And if he looks back at the process with his witness, some of the decisions he made "from his head" turn out to have a deeper meaning and connection to the process that he did not realize at the time.

Talking Heads

As mentioned earlier, psolodrama does not work well if it is not physical. It is fine to have a dialogue between, say, the protagonist and the director role (or audience, or double), but if this dialogue becomes the main event—if the psolodrama becomes an extended scene of someone talking to himself—it may not be reaching its full potential. The power of psolodrama lies in the very physical act of taking on new roles, moving as them, and experiencing them fully.

If stuck in this mode, the psoloist can be aware of the pattern, let that dialogue go, and return to authentic movement—getting in touch with the body—and role stream, inviting new characters into the drama.

Focusing on Surface Issues

As discussed in the next section, the exclusive use of concrete, real-life, day-to-day material in one's psolodrama is often a sign of operating from the head. More on this below.

Forcing an Ending

There can be a feeling, especially at the end of the psolodrama, of wanting to tie up loose ends, acknowledge or say goodbye to the various roles, create a satisfying—if not "happy"—ending. All of this is fine, if it is an authentic expression of the psoloist's desires, as opposed to some preconceived expectation of how a story "should" work.

Being Exclusively Concrete

As I teach psolodrama to new groups, I try to communicate, even physically demonstrate, the range of what is possible in the form. At an Insight Improv intensive in Calcutta, India, during a brief demonstration, a dialogue emerged between various appliances in my "inner kitchen:"

Oven (aux): (squatting down, making a monstrous face, growling) I am the oven—filled with fire and passion. I am bursting with heat, sometimes I cannot contain myself!!

Freezer (aux): (moving to new position, standing tall like a refrigerator, placid face, rigid body, higher pitched voice) I am the freezer—cold, controlled, rational, peaceful.

(As the dialogue continues, the psoloist changes position in the space, moving between the two roles, as they talk to one another…)

Oven: How can you stand there looking so blank? Don't you know you have to FEEL? Where is your heart?!?

Freezer: No: I must stay in control. I have to lead a workshop. I have work to do. Others depend on me. I must stay cold—or my contents might spoil.

Oven: Let it ROT, I say—what's the use of all that knowledge if you cannot express yourself!!

Protagonist (p1): (shifting to a third location) Guys, guys, whoa, hold on. Clearly, I need both of you—yes, I need to have a rational mind—people here need to feel safe, to trust the facilitator. But I also need to be in touch with my feelings, my passion. Without passion none of this would be any fun!

For those new to psolodrama, there is sometimes a tendency to work only with what is concrete: keeping to real-life, actual roles, usually from the present day—as opposed to working with fantasy figures, dream roles, metaphors, archetypes—or talking household appliances.

For example, a concrete psolodrama might center on the dialogue between the psoloist and her best friend. There is nothing wrong with this—there is no guideline in psolodrama that one must work with gods, rotting tree trunks, monsters, etc. The dialogue with the best friend may be extremely useful. It may be a chance to go back and redo the past—or to role rehearse a conversation the psoloist would like to have in the future.

What Moreno referred to as surplus reality—the "extra" reality that comprises our imagination—is the fundamental ingredient of all drama, including all psychodramas and psolodramas. Stanislavski referred to it as the "magic if." Even the dialogue with the best friend is an imagined dialogue: when the psoloist becomes her best friend, she is imagining how her friend would react, what she might say—and, most importantly, the psoloist has a chance to empathize with her friend. This is useful, powerful, and is sometimes sufficient to produce the insight and catharsis potential in psolodrama.

However, the psoloist who habitually dramatizes only her most recent challenges or relationship dramas—basically role playing whatever she "walked in the door with"—

is missing the opportunity for deeper themes to arise. If this happens repeatedly, she is likely forgetting the guideline to enter empty, and may not be letting her body lead her to discover new roles in role stream and scene stream.

If one's psolodramas are only concrete, one does not experience the full potential of the form.

The Power of Archetypal Roles

There are layers of reality that lie underneath consensual, mundane reality. These layers appear in our dreams and daydreams, we can summon them intentionally through fantasizing, and we can channel them into story, drama, and art. Viewing these added layers through the lens of metaphor, we can acknowledge their meaning, translating it back in a useful way to our own "real" life.

As Jung pointed out, these added layers are rich in stories and roles, many of which are universal—from person-to-person and culture-to-culture—what he called archetypes. Archetypes are not accidental: they occur because certain themes and energies seem to need to be expressed and explored in the course of human life.

For example, there is a part of human nature that is concerned with power, and can express itself through such roles as king and queen, warrior, god—and conversely through the roles of peasant, beggar, disabled person, etc. Each theme can be expressed through a wide range of roles—one can explore "aggression," for example, through the roles of wolf, monster, villain, and pirate, as well as conversely through the roles of victim, lamb, maiden, meditating monk, etc.

In psolodrama, when one taps into an archetypal role—really, any fantasy role—the idea of staying faithful to portraying "real life" can be released. Once this happens,

the psyche is free to create, and the emotions are free to express themselves. The psolodrama becomes an empty stage upon which any story can be played out. And all of these stories link back metaphorically to one's own life—links that can be explored during the psolodrama or in the sharing process.

Variation: The Complaining Selves

A different example of an exclusively concrete type of psolodrama is one in which the psoloist does not enter other roles, skipping role stream and scene stream, but instead speaks aloud the different voices in his head, different parts of himself, using the same body language and voice. These parts don't interact with one another, they just complain, so that nothing actually happens in his psolodrama. The issue here is partly one of sticking to what's concrete—day-to-day issues, previous complaints—but also monologuing and working from the head, not the body. The result is that the psoloist is stuck, repeating the same patterns of thought and speech that are his habit in daily life.

Realizing he is stuck, a helpful approach would be to stop speaking and return to authentic movement, and then to role stream, following the body as it leads him to become a distinct role, an unexpected auxiliary ego that he can fully inhabit, move as, speak as, and explore. This auxiliary can become the start of the next scene in his psolodrama.

Randomly Improvising

The most effective psolodramas are not only fantasy.

Another pitfall sometimes seen when observing newcomers to the practice: the psoloist is great at entering the process as a free improvisation, creating wild and strange roles and dream-like scenes with abandon, but she does not relate the process to her own life. She invents and creates, but does not truly listen, feel, and see the parallels to her personal experience. She lacks vulnerability.

Psolodramas are metaphors, laden with potential meaning and relevance. The purpose is not only creativity, but personal insight, catharsis, and, ideally, change. Sometimes the personal meaning of a psolodrama only emerges in sharing with the witness afterward. But the psoloist can also choose to explore this meaning during the process of the psolodrama, often with the help of the protagonist and director roles.

For example, the protagonist can ask a puzzling or strange auxiliary ego, "what are you doing in my psolodrama?" and let the auxiliary speak what it knows is its meaning or purpose there. Perhaps the auxiliary ego itself does not know the answer to that: the answer must be discovered through interacting with that role, through dialogue or even conflict.

Another approach is for the protagonist to explore meanings and interpretations in dialogue with the director. This can be valuable, if it does not become too much of an abstract intellectual conversation—the movement of any conversation with the director should always be toward returning the psoloist to action.

Ultimately, this is a paradox of psolodrama: on the one hand the psoloist actively seeks meaning and how the drama relates to her life; on the other, she actively lets go of judging her work while in progress, flowing with the mystery and wonder of it all,

trusting that in the sharing process afterward she can explore with her witness its meaning and relevance.

(From a clinical perspective, if the psoloist repeatedly engages in creative improvisation without exploring the meaning of her work, it may point to an underlying pattern or developmental limitation of the psoloist. Having the psoloist ask an auxiliary, "what are you doing in my psolodrama?" may be helpful, but if what's going on is that the psoloist is avoiding making the psolodrama personal in the first place, intervention on the part of the therapist may be needed, or a recognition that psolodrama may not be the best approach to use at this point in the client's process. *More on the clinical application of psolodrama appears in Part IV.*)

Worrying about the Witness

Another common pitfall in psolodrama, particularly when working with a new witness, is to worry about what the other person is thinking.

The psoloist may worry if the other is getting bored, in which case his tendency—especially if he is a performer—is to want to entertain her, by being dramatic or funny. Or, he may worry that his psolodrama is too strange and too personal for his witness—causing him to put limits on his psolodrama, and censor out personal thoughts, strong feelings, and unusual roles.

Of course, worrying about what the witness is thinking is entirely antithetical to the psolodrama process. A psolodrama exists to serve one person only: the psoloist. The witness is there only to support the psoloist; she is responsible for herself. Her role is to

remember to stay fully present and treat the process as a meditation, with the psoloist as the object of focus.

If the psoloist finds himself with a witness who cannot do that—for example, a witness who is yawning, sleepy, or seems bored with what he is doing—he may want to talk with her afterward about the witness role, or he may want to find himself a new witness!

A related guideline is that the witness will get what she gets. There is no need to explain anything to her, or clarify things (e.g. what a new role or character is), during the psolodrama. Everything can be discussed in the sharing process afterward.

Censoring

If the psoloist notices she is censoring herself, or trying to entertain the witness, probably the best approach is to notice she is doing it, stop, and return to being fully present to her psolodrama process.

Censoring may come from a hidden need to "play it safe" and "look good" in the witness's eyes. If the psoloist is worried about divulging something too personal, she must keep in mind that we are all human, imperfect, and that we all have (messy!) personal lives. Being willing to be vulnerable is essential to the practice of psolodrama. If the psoloist feels it's not possible to share certain things with her witness, she might consider finding someone else to work with, a witness she feels more comfortable expressing herself with.

Performing

The psoloist may notice that her "performer-self" can get very excited, and want to show off a bit. For example, as she gets further into a role, she may realize, "wow, what a great role!" and begin to amplify it physically, vocally, and emotionally. Often this enhances the psolodrama: the stronger her commitment to the roles are, the more she can "cook" the conflict/story, and the more likely a new path or discovery will emerge. At the same time, the purpose of psolodrama is not to entertain one's witness, but to contribute to deeper self-understanding. So if her joy of performing is taking her deeper into her psolodrama, that's great—but if she finds she is getting *too* carried away with performing, she may be neglecting how she feels personally, the meaning of the psolodrama and how it relates to her life.

Trying to entertain the witness is a double-edged sword. On the positive side, if the psoloist is entertaining her witness, she is probably entertaining herself too, meaning that her psolodrama may be filled with action, conflict, new roles, etc—it may also be funny, exciting, passionate, frightening, etc. On the other hand, if her focus is on performing, outward, not inward, if she has given away her center to the witness rather than really noticing what is happening inside herself, her own authentic feelings and impulses, she has lost the thread of her psolodrama. At that point the best thing to do is stop and return to stillness, with her eyes closed, and just notice simple things: her body, her breath, how she feels. This shift will usually lead to a deeper connection to authentic impulse, helping her discover what should happen next in her drama.

For those who find performing a strong habit (and, actually, for most people), working entirely with eyes closed is a useful approach. It keeps the focus on one's own

body and imagination, and significantly cuts down on one's awareness of the witness. Often, by the end of a deep psolodrama, a psoloist will have no idea where the witness is sitting—and will not care.

Judging Oneself or the Process

There are an infinite variety of ways to judge oneself in the psolodrama process. Sometimes when self-judging thoughts occur in the mind, the psoloist can easily disregard them as noise and refocus on what's happening. Other times the self-judgment is so strong that it becomes the focus. When that happens, it is best to either speak those thoughts aloud as the protagonist (P1), or give those thoughts as lines to another role or character.

Negative self-talk

Self-defeating thoughts can paralyze a psoloist:

"It's not very good: I've done this before."

"It's not very good: I'm not creative enough."

"It's not very good: I'm not dealing with a deep-enough issue."

"It's not very good: the issue is too deep and I'm too scared to explore it. What a wimp I am!"

"It's not very good: I'm not feeling anything."

"It's not very good: I'm just a sobbing mess."

"It's not very good: I have no idea what all this means."

"It's not very good: I must look like an idiot doing this."

"It's not very good: I'm only playing one role."

"It's not very good: I'm playing too many roles/scenes and not settling on one."

"It's not very good: I had a much deeper experience last time."

"It's not very good: her psolodrama was much better than mine."

Etc.

As in meditation, the psoloist ideally learns to cultivate acceptance of what is happening—not wish it were something else—and see the value in it. Over time practicing psolodrama, one learns to trust the process and disregard the voices of self-judgment and insecurity, knowing that psolodrama almost invariably turns out to be a rich and rewarding process, even if in the moment one may have no idea where it will end up or how it relates to one's life.

But if the self-critique is too strong to disregard and move on, it's usually helpful for the psoloist to speak it aloud. Doing so can take several forms.

In shared vipassana (or psolodrama), the psoloist can preface the thought with the word "thinking" to convey that the thought is just one of the many sense-doors he is aware of, e.g. "Thinking: 'I have no idea where this is going.'" Speaking self-judgment aloud is often all that is needed to clear it, allowing the psoloist to move on to what's next.

In psolodrama, it can be useful to express the thought through the voice of the protagonist (P1), usually speaking to the director, who can then respond with a helpful question, e.g. "And how does that make you feel?" (An even better, more open-ended question would be "And how do you feel right now?")

The psoloist can also take a step backward and share the self-judgment as the double, a role used to convey the inner thoughts and truths of the protagonist. The self-judgment could serve as the opening line of a very honest monologue spoken by the double: “I have no idea where this is going. This reminds me that I’m getting older, losing the mental acuity I had just 10 years ago. I feel sad, worthless, helpless in the face of aging.”

The psoloist could give the line to the audience, who might say, for example, “Jeez, this psolodrama stinks. This guy seems to have no idea where this is going!” This then provides an opening for the protagonist to respond, and possibly argue the point, or invite the audience member to come up and do a better job if he or she can.

Finally, the psoloist can embody the thought in an auxiliary ego role. This could be a real-life person, such as the psoloist’s mother: “You have no idea where this is going! You never have a plan, no matter how much advice I’ve given you…!” Or it could be a fantasy character, such as an evil hypnotist (as portrayed by Vincent Price): “You have no idea where this is going….you are confused….you are growing sleepy….now you are completely in my control….Ha ha ha….!” The scene that then occurs between the auxiliary and the protagonist can springboard off the self-judging thought in an entirely new and interesting direction.

The role of “inner critic” can arise anytime in psolodrama, and can take several different forms: nagging family member, angel or devil on the shoulder, a “critic” in the audience, the demons in Milarepa’s cave. Dialoguing with the critic role can be a useful, powerful experience, not only allowing the psoloist to speak his truth in the face of another’s judgment, but also providing the opportunity to air his own self-judgment (as

the critic) so he can take a careful look at how his habitual thought patterns—self-judgments, worries, fears, etc.—may be affecting him.

Director or Critic?

One trap to avoid is allowing the director to slip into the critic role:

Protagonist (p1): I'm confused. Director, do you understand what's happening?

"Director": This isn't much of a psolodrama, is it.

Protagonist: What do you mean?

"Director": Well, you keep fumbling around playing different roles, but you're not getting anywhere. It's boring.

By confusing the director and the inner critic, the psoloist robs himself of the resource of having a truly supportive inner witness or guide. However, it's never too late to try a different path:

Protagonist: Wait a minute—you're not my Director, you're my Inner Critic!

Inner Critic (aux): (In same physical position as Director but with a slightly different, more sarcastic voice.) Oh yeah? Are you sure?

Protagonist: I'm pretty sure. I'll ask my real Director. Director, what do you think is going on?

Director: (Finding a new physical position to sit, as if observing the action from a different point of view; taking a breath to relax and be

present.) Mmmm…. yes. Looks like you were talking with the Inner Critic all along. How do you feel right now?

Protagonist: I feel…I feel relieved. I feel ready. I want to do battle with the Inner Critic!

Closing Thoughts

There really is no wrong way to practice psolodrama: all of the aforementioned traps and habits are useful to encounter and learn to overcome. No moment is wasted if one is present and aware.

A helpful attitude to take is to be able to simultaneously see that all of the process—and none of it—is accidental. That is, there may be meaning in everything that happens in psolodrama—personal, deep, relevant meaning—and, at the same time, we can let go and not attach to any of it: it is just a dream.

And as we shall see in subsequent chapters, a good witness and a thorough sharing process can help defuse self-judgment and put one's psolodrama into context, allowing its meaning to become even more clear, to resonate, and to deepen.