

Nine perspectives to the Retreat Workshops

a deeper look at how this experience can affect and transform those who participate

The nine insights, or perspectives, can be categorized as

- psychological (emotional health)
- artistic (unleash creativity)
- spiritual (nurturing connection)
- philosophical (thought renewal)
- sensorial (sharpen awareness)
- motorical (developing technique)
- moral (group sensitivity)
- economical (sharing your work)
- political (building community)

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psychological (emotional health)

I am often asked what "HA!" means. To me it is the living moment when mind meets body, when the mind as director relinquishes that role and starts to flow along with feeling. It is the moment of becoming present, like your senses are awakening. Spontaneous expression, which will be the main focus of the Retreat, brings one time and again back to that point of connection, time and again you are reminded of flow, as opposed to static concepts and truths.

We are so accustomed to starting any action with an idea, any motivation with a future goal, any performance with a script. While all these have a certain effectivity, if applied too heavily, it actually dries us up, it robs us of the more reliable sources of fulfillment.

A week of spontaneous expression will strengthen your ability to find presence and emotional flow in many situations. Emotion IS flow, and the integrity of body and of soul rests on strong and sustained flow. It is flow that brings us to a whole - the starting point of all healing, physically mentally and psychologically.

artistic (unleash creativity)

What are the sources of creativity? How does one unleash creativity within oneself? Where does one find the inspirations to be creative, or create something? And how do you unblock stoppages in the creative flow?

The problem with all these questions is that there is hardly a rational way to answer them. True creativity inevitably is shrouded in mystery - not as a kind of magic or vagueness, but because we can literally not get our minds around it.

Our age still glorifies the mind. There is a tendency to believe that life is locked up in the brain, and once you master the brain - either through applying it or studying it, you will have the keys to life - and creativity. We badly want to KNOW what we are doing and how to do it.

During the Retreat, the mind will not play such dominant role. I approach being human from three basic dimensions: the mental indeed, but at the same time also the instinctive and the emotive (very concretely, the upper part of the body, the lower and the middle part).

To unleash creativity and to re-vitalize its sources, all three these dimensions need to come into play - and they most effectively work together IN PLAY.

It is about more than improvisation. It is to ignite being alive as a creative act, moment by moment. As much as I can analyze it here, the above questions only get answered through the doing. Our Retreat will provide and facilitate the space for such doing.

spiritual (nurturing connection)

In a materialistic age, spirituality can be quite a contentious issue. If spirituality is introduced in any context, the reaction to it can be negative in two ways: the one is that it would involve religious beliefs with all its divisive baggage coming along, the other is that it is a fluffy concept which has no place where anything rigorous needs to be accomplished.

It is a pity. Spirituality is everywhere, not because people believe it should be there, but because it is so essential to life. Simple: bring the word back to its root meaning, and you have breath. The term I employ to point to something that is hard to point to, is HA! But HA! is also, just simply, a breath. But a breath in the older, more

wholesome sense of the word. Not just oxygen. Oxygen too! But also the ineffable part of what it is to be alive. You only "understand" this part, the spirit, if you do not try to look at it, but just be it. Be alive. Breathe. Move, flow. In and out. Day and night. In rhythm with all that is.

It is both material and non-material, the one always alongside or because of the other. Western Idealism is a grand project (and ongoing) to try and separate the material from the non-material. First religion tried this, then science followed from the other side.

During these workshops, we'll revive some of what it is to be truly spiritual: how does the soul and oxygen come together again to give us that simple and nurturing sense of being truly alive. And just as the material and non-material cannot exist by itself, this is an endeavour that cannot succeed in isolation. It is through other living beings that I feel, know and sense my own being alive. Spirituality in this sense, is nurturing connection - with the self, with others, with the universe. A dynamic, living connection that spans all from silence to chaos, finding the river that creates community.

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philosophical (thought renewal)

i often get asked what goes on in my mind while i am improvising. this is a rather difficult question. the impulse behind the question - i suspect - is the tendency we have to look for any mental strategy to hook on, to get things done. so when the music seems to flow almost magically from my hands, some people are very curious to hear about my mental secrets - mind over matter, mind you - some trick that you can get a grip on and steer the process.

but in the flow of expression the mind does no such thing. others again think that if you don't have mental control, the control must lie with some supernatural agency, a kind of universal mind - another mind, mind you - that you tap into. the art then lies in subduing your ego so that this heavenly flow can be realized through you. if you do not control it, someone else surely does!

again, no such thing. when feelings flow, the mind is too slow. in fact, every time the mind plays a dominant role, things get slowed down. but that does not mean that the mind needs to shut down. it still plays an important role. and this is where philosophy comes into it - not a philosophy of constructing a cathedral of truth, but one that orientates the mind in such a way that it enlightens the environment where feelings are at play. it brings more clarity, it focuses the message, it provides a map for the flow to reach a meaningful destination. we normally train the mind to be able to micromanage all our actions and expressions, but in improvisation, the mind takes a step back - it illuminates, yes, but it is the boss no more. how it does this, and what it means for the way we organize our mental worlds, this will surely come up as a topic of discussion during our Retreat.

sensorial (sharpen awareness)

we are the species that found a way to live in our minds. we conjure whole worlds and alternative realities and can have the sense that we "live in" them, so much so that what we experience with our senses can become less real to us. it is natural to dream when we sleep, when realities emerge in mysteriously spontaneous ways, also seemingly very real sometimes. but we recognize those as dreams, and not as being real.

the problem with our constructed dreams, or mental theatres, is that our senses weaken. and as they weaken, we trust them less.. we develop fears of things in the real world which we often need not to fear at all.

improvisation is a call to return some of those capabilities, to sharpen our senses again, because no matter how wonderful our alternative realities may seem to us, they all are ultimately found on what we can see, can hear, feel and smell. losing touch with these foundations can dislodge our general experience of life to the point where we start believing things to be real that are not, and even become delusional. and underneath it all, develop a concealed hollowness of fear and insecurity.

creativity can hardly flow under such conditions. the immediateness of spontaneous expression grounds one's awareness back into the body, unto the present moment. it strengthens our general unity and as such, we become more confident again - the kind of confidence we readily see in little children. in a group context, one is also directly exposed to the expressions of others and is gently forced to listen better, to anticipate and respond to the movements of others better, just as you feel your own being more concretely.

we are human, we will always conjure up worlds in our minds, because we can. the Retreat and similar engagements are there to ensure that the balloon does not lose its anchorage. it is playing with feet firmly on the ground.

motorical (developing technique)

our bodies come alive when we are emotionally involved in something. that is why the practising of skills in itself is actually not such an effective exercise. we can artificially boost emotional involvement by setting up competitions, so a fighting spirit

can be put behind the drudgery of practicing scales on a musical instrument or lifting weights to build muscles.

animals in the wild invariably look (and are!) fit with good muscle tone and amazingly skilled. and yet they never put themselves apart to practice any skill by itself or to get fit. in their day to day existence, their whole beings are employed in finding food, fighting or evading predators, finding and building shelter, procreating and rearing the young. each of these activities is deeply existential and therefore also emotional. for a lion to prey on buck, it is not only about making a successful kill, it is directly involved with survival, with caring for the group, with the joy of being alive.

I am often told that the reason I can now improvise so well on the cello is that I had the background training - I took lessons, did the hard work to acquire the skills to now be able to express my feelings. but this is typical of our culture to think that we first need to become a good machine and then have license to play. in reality, it works the other way around. no one will develop skill if the desire to make music did not come first. and that desire, along with the social instinct to share our expressions with others, keeps driving the acquisition of skill.

my experience is that my skills only grew effectively once my focus shifted away from practicing towards playing - and specifically, expressing my feelings. feelings are centred in the heart which literally pumps life throughout the body and spirit. when the energy starts there, each limb knows its place better and the whole facilitates the optimum functioning of all the parts. the nervous system as properly activated and muscles freed up to be supple and focused. it also changes the aim of having a skill - from the mastering of a technique to the ability to express feeling more effectively.

spontaneous expression rebuilds the whole and also ensures that you become sensitive to the limitations of your body, for the over-development of technique and fitness not only diminishes the speaking power of an expression, but can also be harmful in the long run.

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moral (group sensitivity)

the last three aspects are social in nature and might be thought of as not so relevant when it comes to individual artistic expression. the thing with improvisation, however, is that even if you shut yourself out from the world, you somehow tap into a dimension inside of you that wants to connect, that thrives on interaction. a way to try and explain this is to accept that once you establish a living and dynamic connection with your own self, you are ripe and ready to do this with other human beings and living entities.

improvisation brings you to a level of awareness that is the same with which we interact with each other. when you follow a scripted score, your awareness turns away from yourself to something that is fixed and abstract. one can of course do this in a group context, but each individual in this group firstly follow the script, and it is primarily the script that coordinates collaboration.

one can actually say that when you truly improvise, you become a society of one. this is because you act in relation to yourself – you are listening to yourself, feeling yourself and reading your own thoughts as you play, in short, interacting with yourself. this interaction is not social per se, but forms the basis of all other social interactions. that is why it is so important for children to be allowed to “talk to themselves”, play-acting and expressing with seemingly no real purpose behind it. without this ability to have yourself as an audience, you will always tend to “lean into” other people (co-dependency) or lose yourself in a crowd, or conversely, isolate yourself, searching for connection in abstracted things and beliefs.

improvisation therefore starts with the solo individual but will always, once the self is established as alive and heard, spill over into the natural desire to interact with others. in a group context, improvisation then goes further to enhance group interaction, sensitivity to each other and an inner “feel” of where the other(s) are at and coming from. the coordination does not come about through an external script, but through the establishment of a dynamic community. the “script” is internal, tapping into more universally shared senses of rhythm, harmony and texture. in fact, without this basic openness and fluidity, no true community can come about.

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economical (sharing your work)

Art and money. Does improvisation have any bearing upon this thorny issue? To me the underlying question is the nature of the “economy.” Wherever we are and whatever we do, we are implicitly part of an economy. Economy is much more than just matters of money (or much less). It is essentially about the sharing of goods and services within a community. When the focus shifts too much on the medium we commonly use to share these goods and services, namely, money, the whole thing starts to turn askew.

As we have seen with the moral implications of improvisation, it does not serve egoism too well. It is by its nature too open and sensitive to others for that. in economic terms, self-enrichment does not stand a good chance with the practice of improvisation. And self-enrichment only takes root when the focus in an economy shifts to the acquisition of the means of exchange (money) rather than the actual practice and meaning of exchange (sharing).

Improvise enough, grow deeper into spontaneous expression, and the whole point of becoming rich with money fades off. Money is too abstract for the concrete presence that improvisation engenders. That does not mean one becomes an eternal fountain that does it all just for love and charity (there are some artists who believe one should never be compensated for one’s creativity). The dynamic interactivity that improvisation calls forward also translates on a material level: it is only natural that the living, creative gift brought forward be compensated for, so that the giver can actually keep on doing this sustainably.

As we have seen right in the beginning, the nature of spontaneity is flow. A healthy economy, alike, is one that keeps flowing, preventing wealth to dam up in certain corners. In this way, improvisation is a powerful social antidote to economic inequality and as such needs to keep operating within the material realm as well.

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political (building community)

the political sphere has been under strain for quite some time now. politicians are some of the least trusted agents in society. there has been a growing perception that politics needs to be run like a business, then it will be effective. often the arts is seen as a form of escape, and any artistic work with a "message" is frowned upon.

yet down to its core, the political sphere is paramount in social life. this is the terrain where all the different aspects of life are brought to a coordinated whole. downplay or downgrade politics, and you take the heart out of society.

that is why i kept this aspect for the last: it is at once the most complicated and the most vital aspect to consider in improvisation. you may ask, what on earth has a few musicians jamming together have to do with the grand and dirty drama of government? well, there is a strong academic voice in the jazz field that sees improvisation as inevitably being a political act, in the way that it challenges all existing orders, including the political, through its openness and creativity.

to me the link is even more direct, if one takes the political as a broad spectrum of social activity - not only "high up", there on the national and international level, but right "down here" on the local as well as personal level. as improvisation especially speaks from and to feelings, swimming in the waters of emotion, it has the power to connect people on a pre-verbal level, before they start forming slogans and designing ideologies. improvisation therefore strengthens the foundation of relations in society (the building of community), blows oxygen into those relations and makes it more possible for people to tackle the hard questions and issues of the political domain.

improvisation is a political statement inasmuch it demonstrates and activates the universal stream that binds the human family together. the established music traditions are less able to do this, because they are often reflective of the current or past order. but true spontaneity always remakes the present, extracts from the past, and liberates the future. every tough political process should be underpinned by the exposure to and practice of artistic improvisation.