



## 'Attention Aligned with Action': A Conversation with Patricia Ryan Madson

(via Zoom on 11 August 2020)

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Patricia Ryan Madson is an authority on improvising in everyday life. Her book *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up* (2005) has been translated into nine languages. She is a Professor Emerita from Stanford University where she has taught since 1977. In their Drama Department she served as the head of undergraduate acting.

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ANTON KRUEGER: It's great to meet you. I think yours was the first book I read when I became interested in the connections between mindfulness and improvisation. I never thought I would actually get to speak to you, but then via Ted DesMaisons and the Applied Improv Network, we got connected.

PATRICIA RYAN MADSON: Good to meet you too!

ANTON: This lockdown has given amazing opportunities for meeting people from all over. I'm in California with you today, I was in Australia just a few hours ago, and I'll be in Berlin tomorrow.

PATRICIA: It's really astonishing what this

has opened up. I just watched a video of yours about 'many voices' – *The Voice in Your Head...is that an entree to something else?*

ANTON: That was a live Zoom show I did for our National Arts Festival which went online this year. It's a sort of inter-active experience about mindfulness and performance, an experiment in playing with Zoom, messing with video backdrops and so on.

PATRICIA: There's an improv group here in the Bay area that has been doing genre work. They'll do longform Film Noir improv shows, and they have a lot of backgrounds to improvise different locations and things – the library down at the wharf, and

whatnot. So there's a lot that's possible.

ANTON: Yeah, we're trying to figure it out. I watched a video of yours from the Applied Improv Network, and was heartened to see you encouraging people to write. Some people talk about writing as 'the opposite of improv'. In some ways it does seem to be an oral lineage, people passing things on in person to small groups. Your book is still a landmark. More books have come out in the last few years, but there aren't that many.

PATRICIA: I've been working on a second book for the last 15 years, but I keep reconfiguring things. I love to improvise, but writing means that you've decided and it's clear. I had an – aha – moment this last week that since *Improv Wisdom* seems to still be useful, maybe I'll redo it as *Improv Wisdom 2.0*. We'll see.

ANTON: It feels like there are different kinds of books on improv. For myself, I'm just starting out, so I'd like to write a book to help me learn about improvisation. It's kind of an excuse to read and interview people, because I don't have that much experience or training. Then you get people like yourself and Steven Nachmanovitch. Have you seen his book,

*The Art of Is?*

PATRICIA: Oh, yes

ANTON: That's a sort of 'maestro' book – after a lifetime of doing something, you write the book to assemble what you've been teaching. Like the book Jacques Lecoq wrote, or Al Wunder's book. So that's very different from what I want to write, which is more a means of grappling with the topic by writing it out.

PATRICIA: It takes a while...the writing of it is how you discover what you need to say, and then you need to refine it. I had a wonderful editor with my book who kept chastising me. She'd say 'Patricia, you keep saying the same thing over again'. She said, 'You must be a teacher because teachers have to do that, but a good writer says it once clearly and doesn't repeat herself. So go back and cut out all that stuff and find the one way to say it'. And she was so right. We like to hear ourselves think, but a good book has done some thoughtful cutting out. Most books have too much in them.

ANTON: Sure, it's the same as with improvisers. I was doing a course last week with *The Nursery* in London. And this

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is one of the points that kept coming up, that the beginner improviser wants to put everything in and keeps adding wild and crazy ideas; whereas, just one idea is enough to work with. I did a scene with somebody where I was a sort of very strict meditation teacher and she kept falling asleep, and the teacher was pointing out that this simple premise was enough for a good few minutes. You don't have to set the building on fire, or discover that you're on a mysterious island. But let's get back to you – in your book there were a lot of references to Zen. Are you a Buddhist?

PATRICIA: Well, I would say yes and no. I've been involved in various Buddhist communities for a long time. I was on the financial advisory board at San Francisco Zen Centre for a few years. I'm a kind of a dilettante Buddhist, I don't really identify with a single incarnation. I like Tibetan Buddhism and Zen, and *Jōdo Shinshū*. I've been studying little bits of everything and I kind of feel that my soul is Buddhist, I try to make everyday life my meditation. So, I just try to slow down and live in the world that I'm in, and appreciate it. I've always loved world religions from the time I was a child. I used to run off and go to different churches and hide in the back and try to pretend I was Catholic or pretend I was a

Quaker. I really love the different ways we connect with the possibilities of a spiritual world, but I don't think any particular group would call me one of theirs. So that's a long answer to your question.

ANTON: Do you have a practice of meditation?

PATRICIA: Occasionally I'll do a sitting, I'll know what I need to do is sit for 10 or 20 minutes and do a meditation practice. One of my favourites when I'm walking, is a practice from Sufism with the mantra '*Ishq Allah, Ma'bud Allah*', which means 'It's all God, everything is Allah'. Sometimes, just walking with that phrase moving through my body takes me into a very, very fine place, gets my bodymind right. How about you?

ANTON: I resonate with what you're saying about growing up loving different world religions. I've also found it fascinating, the mystical sides of things. I grew up very Christian, charismatic, and converted 15 years ago to the Kagyu Tibetan lineage. What's intriguing is the unnameable, the mysterious, that you can't put your finger on. There are versions of Christian mysticism, and in Buddhism this is maybe related to the idea of emptiness; but even

trying to frame it can feel a little bit artificial. I mean every religion or structure is perhaps a framework for something out of reach –

PATRICIA: Ineffable.

ANTON: Right, ineffable for sure. If I think of my own commitment to the Tibetan tradition, I also see it as a means to what is beyond it...

Nevertheless, to get back to our topic, for this project I'm really interested in creativity and in all facets of what we might call 'spontaneous expression'. And improvisation and mindfulness seem to naturally be in a relationship with each other. They use a similar language. So, I wanted to ask you about your own definition of mindfulness. In your book you define it as 'attention aligned with action'. Would you still stand by this?

PATRICIA: Let's see, what would I say now? Before I start to answer that, let me say that I do think there's a common misunderstanding about mindfulness. It often seems like mindfulness is something about being very present in the here and now. So that I'm noticing everything about how I feel, and what's going on with me, and it can focus on a sort of 'self-ness in

the world'. A lot of mindfulness seems to be all about *me*. And I find that problematic because what I want to work on for myself and to help others work on is shifting that attention from 'How am I doing?' and 'How do I feel?' and 'How is my body now?' and 'Am I in touch with my inner whatnot?' ... I want to also be noticing *you*, and what's going on outside of myself and in the world and in reality.

So, for me, I guess a definition of mindfulness would involve 'attention that allows me to be useful'. (By the way, I hate the term 'the present moment' – what other moment is there?) It seems that we're all looking for 'What should I be doing?' Or maybe a lot of people are looking for 'What should I be feeling?' or 'How can I feel this or that?' and I am a lot more interested in what we *do*, because how we feel, although it's interesting to us, doesn't have much impact on the world. But everything I *do* does.

I can be an environmentalist, but if I walk down the street and I fail to pick up trash in my way, I'm really missing an opportunity. So, how I behave in the world becomes the operative thing. For me, action is key.

One of the book formats I'm working on now takes the 13 maxims I proposed, and takes it down to four A's:

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1. Attention – paying attention to life, (in other words, mindfulness).
  2. Acceptance – of what I find when I pay attention.
  3. Appreciation – when I look at all that I'm receiving.
  4. Action – how do I act in and on the world?

In order to act in the world, I need to notice what's happening, accept it as it is rather than fight it or wish it were different, appreciate how, despite whatever it is, I'm receiving a lot, and then decide – what can I do? What action is called for?

ANTON: I get where you're coming from. I have a friend, Lucy Draper-Clarke who's writing a book about 'joyful activism' and brings in mindfulness practises. I sometimes feel, though, that an activist's agenda could be a bit different from mindfulness, in that it's often about trying to take control of one specific aspect, and sometimes lacks awareness of larger contexts and consequences. So it can sometimes be short sighted, fighting one very particular thing, but not always realising the longer term repercussions of the anger used to fuel the action. Well, this would come back to awareness, attention,

which you put right up at number one, so maybe I'm not really saying anything different.

I completely agree with you about the danger of the self-centred view. Any mindfulness approach needs to have compassion as the other wing. I'm sure there are many well-meaning mindfulness practises which have been misused. For example, by corporations using mindfulness as a means of getting compliance from their workers. Or US army snipers using mindfulness to train to become better killers. It's quite bizarre, how far removed these are from its original intention.

It's been said that mindfulness and improvisation are both practises, tools, which can be put to good or bad ends. Perhaps it comes back to attention, or the idea of 'What are you attending to?'

I was going to ask you about making mistakes. In your book you talk about treating mistakes as gifts. Are you still making mistakes, are you used to it by now? What was the last mistake you made, if that isn't a rude question?

PATRICIA: Oh gosh, the most recent mistake I made was forgetting to put something in the refrigerator and then it went bad. Maybe I don't really experience

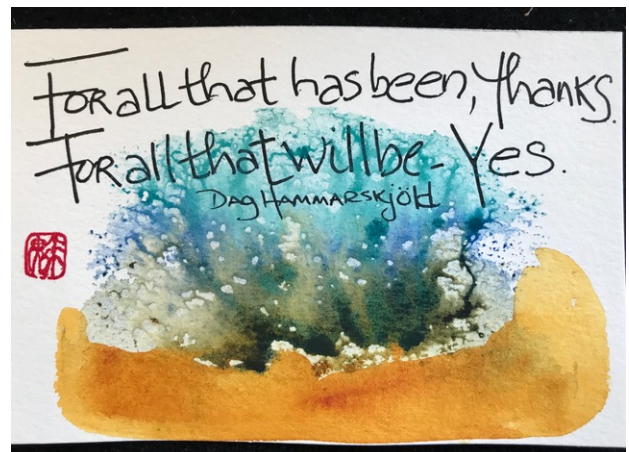
them as mistakes; but there are things that I really could have done better, or more skilfully, or differently.

A mistake is often an unexpected result, rather than something that's 'bad' or 'wrong'. With reference to the book, it's not so much that I want you to make a mistake, it's more that I want you to step out of your comfort zone and try things. Do stuff that you would otherwise stay away from out of fear of doing it wrong. I'm not championing mistakes, but don't let mistakes get in the way of trying things. On the other hand, if you make a lot of mistakes, you're probably not paying attention. So it's generally a lack of attention that is the cause of something that we commonly call a mistake. Like leaving the food out that went bad – there's not exactly an upside to that. But in the creative arts, in a lot of cases, something that goes awry is often this great gift that you can build on and create with. That's true in painting and the fine arts. Mistakes are the beginning of incredibly wonderful artwork.

ANTON: Are you still painting?

PATRICIA: I do small things called *Etagami*. They're postcards. It's a Japanese form, which means 'picture

words' and it was created at the turn of the century by a gentleman who was rebelling against a tradition. Everybody sends everybody New Year's cards in Japan. They're very expensive, and it's a lot of statusy stuff. And so he thought, it's not right that the ordinary person who can't afford these very expensive cards, or isn't an artist, can't get in on this. So he started making postcards. Let me go get some. Hold on.



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PATRICIA: So, the idea is that there's some kind of visual, some graphic, and a little phrase – a piece of poetry, or a good wish. Here's one I did yesterday. It says: 'To be able to offer back what the world has given you, but shaped a little by your touch—that makes a true life. John Tarrant.'

Anybody can do this, and the first rule of making these *Etagami* is to be clumsy. You're not supposed to be an artist. They're not supposed to be beautiful art. And the main thing is that you send them to someone, they're not art that you keep. So the idea is to think of someone that needs cheering and you make something – give them a good wish, put a stamp on it and send it away. I'll send you one.

ANTON: Oh, I'd love that. Thank you!...To get back to some of the things I wanted to ask about, I've got one question which I thought to ask everybody I'm interviewing, which has to do with the issue of freedom and control. This is something which, in mindfulness, can seem paradoxical. In the more strict Tibetan and Japanese traditions, control seems clear. You are trying to master your mind, control it. When it gets to the West, though, a lot of teachers temper that language because I

think Western people tend to be over-controlled and more rigid. We've got very robust inner critics, we're told from very early on not to make mistakes, we're trained to compete with others and be the best, and so on. What is your sense of improvisation and the idea of control?

PATRICIA: Great question. Really great question. It's very simple and clear in my mind. Humans basically have only one thing that they can control: their own behaviour. I can't really control my thoughts. Although when I meditate, I attempt *to influence* that. Meditation is a kind of way to actually notice that even if I'm going to try to sit here and just do this breath or mantra, my mind goes here and there. So, I can't *control* my mind in the purest sense of the word. I can't control my own feelings. If I could control them, I'd set them all to: 'Good. Happy. Satisfied' and leave them there. Feelings come and go; thoughts come and go.

But the one thing we can all always control, with a few exceptions, is our personal behaviour – what we do, what we say. The only exception to that would be someone who has something like Tourette's Syndrome, a medical condition; but for the most part, even when I don't feel like it, I can control my behaviour. I

can choose to do or not do X or Y.

If I'm paying attention to life and I'm noticing what's going on, and I'm checking in on my purpose, I often know what I need to do. I can't control other people and I can't control the weather. I can't control politics, but I can control that I vote. I can control if I clean up my neighbourhood. This may be a debatable idea, but it's helped me.

I am many 'me's – I'm sometimes kind and I'm sometimes thoughtless. I'm sometimes attentive. There's not a single way that I am or others are. In fact, when I was teaching acting, I tried to disabuse my students of the notion that they wanted to find the consistency in the character they were playing: 'My character would never do this or never do that!'. And I reminded them that to be fully human is to be inconsistent. So don't try to smooth out those edges. The most interesting thing you might do playing a certain character is to do something that your impulse gives you to do. That variability in human nature is what makes us human. Consistency is really good if you're making a white sauce, but it's not useful for actors!

So if I'm sometimes this and I'm sometimes that, and I can control my behaviour, then it's incumbent upon me to pay attention so that I am doing the things

that I think are morally correct, or that are to some purpose I have, and that are useful. Does that make sense?

ANTON: Sure. How about creativity and imagination, we can't control those, can we?

PATRICIA: No.

ANTON: But maybe we try to create a space for them to emerge in some way.

PATRICIA: I think it's a dialogue. I love that way of putting it: 'creating a space', being present, bringing our mind and our body and our materials into some place and seeing what happens, following impulses. I don't think we *control* our creativity, but I think we can create the conditions through which it comes.

I spent some time in Japan at this organisation called Oomoto, which is a Shinto sect that believes that 'art is the mother of religion'. Some years they offered a month long course and students from around the world went. I went a couple of times for a month and I studied tea ceremony and martial arts and calligraphy and Noh drama. And the thing that came through so clearly to me as I studied these traditional Japanese arts



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was the sense of precision. As you know, there is a perfect way to do tea ceremony and to hold the brush. It's not improvised. All of those arts are defined and refined. But in the act of trying to do this perfect form, we learned something about improvisation. In order to try to make that perfect movement of my arm with the tea whisk each time, it's an improvisation of that form.

In the calligraphy class, we spent a couple of weeks learning how to make bamboo leaves. So we were studying the bamboo, and there was a single example that the sensei had put on the board and we were all copying that same one. So everybody did thousands of examples of this particular bamboo leaf. I got bored with that, after a couple of weeks of doing his composition, I started using my technique to make interesting new compositions. I got a couple that I thought were really good, and at the end of the day, we would take our compositions up and kneel before the Sensei, and he would correct them or give us feedback.

Finally, I thought, I'll show him my creative compositions. And I remember the moment when I put them down in front of him and I sat back and I was waiting for his approval, and the look on his face was of shock, like,

*how dare you!* He didn't have to say anything, he just kind of moved the paper away. And I realised that I thought learning technique was so that my creativity could come through; but in that tradition, the whole idea was, of course, at some point that may happen and you'll get old enough after you've done this for 40 years and then the Muses will move through you, and a new composition will come.

I had a Western idea of how art works, that you're learning techniques so that you can express your own creativity. In Japan, you keep imitating the masters, you honour the tradition of art through that sort of way of doing things again and again. The Muse isn't the self. It seems to me that in Western art, we're where the self is, the ego. The Western artist is proud of being an amazing artist; whereas in the Eastern artist, the ego isn't running the show.

ANTON: Have you read *Journey to Ladakh* (1983), by Andrew Harvey?

PATRICIA: Yes.

ANTON: I'm reminded of an encounter where he's talking to this Rinpoche about Western art. And he shows him Nietzsche, and talks about the idea of the 'tortured

artist'. The French writer Georges Perec happens to be around and tells Harvey, 'Don't let them take your demon' or something like that. Then there are a few very beautiful pages where the Rinpoche talks about the anonymous artists who're making the eyes of Avalokitesvara, and he says that you have to have deep compassion and insight to be able to contribute to something that's not coming out of tortured ego...

To get back to Japan, somebody was telling me recently that Noh is improvised. I didn't realise that. Is it true?

PATRICIA: It's highly stylized, you practice particular steps and a particular chant over and over and over again to try to get it just perfect – the way the fan moves at the moment of the chanting. I actually experienced this once. I'd been practising this whole month in the class, and we gave a recital at the end to show off the student work. At the beginning of it, I took my place and I knelt down and I had my fan right there, and then I sort of emptied myself. The difference in Western actors is you try to fill up with a character in order to put it forward. But here there was a suggestion to become as empty as possible, that there is nothing in you. And then when I heard the music, the first sound of the chant just

came ...(chants) Noooooooooooooooooo....

ANTON: That's a pretty good sound.

PATRICIA: It's amazing where it comes from. Anyway, with this deep, sonorous Noooooooooo, something filled me up and lifted me up. It was just a two-minute walk to the front of the stage, but I remember this feeling that it wasn't me there at all. I was empowered with the role; the spirit of the role came through me and used my voice and body and we moved and did it. When I got up, it left me, but I felt like I was possessed in a really nice way. I've had that only happen once in my acting life. It was a character in a play that I was struggling with. I kind of gave up on it and the spirit of the character empowered me and it was like watching myself act.

So I think there's something wonderfully mystical in both Eastern and Western performance. It's also connected to how we manipulate or give up the ego, as well as practising. You have to do your due diligence – learning the lines, going over the form many, many times. And then there's something that happens psychologically when you kind of let go of it, and you allow the spirit of the role to come through you.

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ANTON: That's kind of the definition of inspiration, isn't it? Something moving through you. Like the Aeolian harp that's being played by the spirits. I guess that's what improvisation tries to get to: to witness the moment of creation.

I suppose good actors also do it – improvise the feeling or the emotion, even though they have a script. Still, there's something about also improvising the content which is a further step. Andrew Morrish, one of my improvisation teachers, was telling me that he wants to get solo improvisation recognised as an art form in its own right, rather than always being a supplementary training to assist in other forms. In painting and character acting, improvisation might be an exercise, but his aim is to have it recognised as an art form in its own right. He was also pointing out that there's no Oscar for improvising. It's quite a humble form.

PATRICIA: Exactly.

ANTON: It's often in small groups. It's never repeated. It can't really be captured by mechanical means. You can make a video of it, but it's not really the thing, is it?

PATRICIA: I completely agree with him. In

fact, that's been something that I have been trying to do at Stanford. Because of Stanford's general prestige in the world, my dream is that there is an endowed professorship in improvisation and innovation. And that would not be seated necessarily in the Drama Department or in Jazz music, but that we had a professor czar of improvisation that could raise the status in the academic world, to see improvisation as a field in itself. It's such a powerful way of approaching things. And Lord knows the world that we're in now is never going to go back to the world that we knew. Whatever comes after COVID, we're going to be improvising.

Improv is a way of working. It's not always rules, but there are guidelines that help us to become positive and to notice what's going on and use what's there.

My favourite of the maxim's is 'Wake up to the Gifts', because I think one thing that the mind likes to do is to notice what's *not* working, all of those negative things.

ANTON: Universities encourage that – the critical mind.

PATRICIA: Exactly, that's what you get points for – finding fault in other people's studies.

'Waking up to the Gifts' is not about

positive thinking. It's about realistic thinking. Realistic in the sense that at any moment we're all receiving. To be here, we are all receiving things all the time that have been created by the efforts of others. Someone created this Zoom programme and made it available, and that's allowing you and me to have this conversation.

I think I mentioned in the book, I went to Japan and I sat in a Zen temple in Kuwana, and did a practice called Naikan. The practice of Naikan is to go through your life systematically, period by period and ask three questions. The questions are in relationship to a particular person:

- 1) What did I receive from them?
- 2) What did I give back to them?
- 3) What trouble and bother did I cause them?

We don't meditate on the trouble and bother they caused us, because we're all really good at that. The mind has that information readily available. But with these questions, what happens is I begin to shift my worldview from my natural normal egocentric, vantage point and I begin to get a different perspective. And most of us would come to this question about what trouble and bother I caused, thinking, well, I never meant to. We don't

really spend time ruminating on our fault in an argument.

This Naikan practice is a form of meditation, and I do it all the time because it helps me see things more objectively, more realistically, in every moment. Right now, you'd say I'm not causing trouble. Well, I'm using electricity, I'm breathing air, I'm taking up your time, receiving your attention...I think if we look at what happens in an improvisation as some kind of a gift that we can work with, that's helpful.

And it also keeps turning our mind back to – what am I receiving here? My partner in the scene just made an offer of a story. If I start training my mind, I can see whatever my partner gives me as a gift, rather than judging it. I'm going to accept it. How can I work with that? How can I see it as a possibility? How can we take this incredible new life we're all in? How can I use what's here, and do something with it that's valuable or helpful? What's my purpose in these COVID times? These are different questions to: What do I feel like doing? What do I want to do?

ANTON: It ties in with interdependence, another of the big Buddhist concepts.

PATRICIA: Yes.

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ANTON: Acknowledging that, and seeing how we're interrelated to each other. What you describe in the Naikan practise sounds similar to something we did in 'Back to Beginnings'. This is a process created by Akong Rinpoche, who founded Samye Ling, the first Tibetan monastery in the West. It's a psychological group process involving things like writing your entire life story (backwards, and then forwards, and then backwards again); visualisation, relaxation, massage, and so forth. What's similar to the process you've described is a reflective process where you look through your whole life and you 'clarify blame'.

You get to certain places in your life story that are a bit knotted up, and you ask: When did you blame yourself or someone else? There are various ways of working with this. One of them is a letter writing exercise where you write a letter to the person you blame expressing everything that's wrong with them. You hold nothing back, saying very clearly what they did wrong, how they hurt you. Then you put the letter aside and the next day you pretend to be that person receiving the letter, and you respond with another letter. Now you write a letter back to yourself, as them.

We often justify our own mistakes 'I didn't mean to...' or 'I had my reasons'. So we sometimes forget other people's point of view. They also had reasons, they also made mistakes they regretted. You then put their letter aside for a day before you respond, again, as yourself to 'their' letter. You keep writing these letters back and forth. Sometimes there's a resolution or realisation. For myself, when I tried it, it was really quite eye opening. It sounds like there's a bit of a similarity with the Naikan practise. But you have to actually do it, not just go: 'Okay I get the idea'.

PATRICIA: Right. The two characters in Japanese – 内患 – means 'looking inside'. It's the specificity of doing the practise, rather than the general thought. It's very humbling and useful. There aren't a lot of meditation forms that really invite you to sculpt away at that part of your ego.

ANTON: Well, we've been going now for over an hour...I've really enjoyed speaking to you, thank you so much.

PATRICIA: Well, what a pleasure and an honour and if at any time I can be a resource, I'd love to talk to you again.

"When you are present in your own life,  
it extends infinitely in every direction."  
John Tarrant

