

*The following is an excerpt from the book:*

## **Insight Improvisation**

**Melding Meditation, Theater, and Therapy  
for Self-Exploration, Healing, and Empowerment**

by Joel Gluck, MEd, RDT

*To learn more, please visit <http://www.insightimprov.org>.*

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## Introduction

*It was an important day when I recognized that I did not teach Dance, I taught People....my primary interest might have to do with process, not results, that it might not be art I was after but another kind of human development.*

— Mary Whitehouse (1999, p. 59)

Walk up a road in a small village in Switzerland, away from the town center, toward the surrounding mountains, and you will find a signpost. It is a pole with several clearly printed signs, pointing the way to several different paths, each with an estimate of the time it will take to walk to the next village, or the top of the next peak. Standing there, deciding which way to go, you have no idea exactly what you will encounter on the way—but you have some idea that the walk will be worthwhile, filled with the unexpected: goats, waterfalls, wildflowers.

The ideas and activities you will find in this book are like the signs on those trails. Insight Improvisation is what remains from the journeys I've taken in the realms of meditation, theater, and drama therapy. For me, each Insight Improv exercise is an invitation to the unexpected, a marker pointing toward a path into my psyche. And if I am present, if I open my eyes and ears and all the senses of my body, if I open my

imagination and listen to my feelings, the journey will be worthwhile—I may learn something new about myself, and about the process of being alive.

My intention is to share these experiences of self-discovery with others—to share these path-signs, these maps—in the hope that others will follow the trails, and find something new for themselves: a new way of seeing the world, a new way of understanding their feelings, a new way of interacting with others, a new way to notice their suffering and choose a different path.

Of course, these “new ways” are really very old. These trails through the mountains have been here for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. 2,500 years ago, the Buddha walked these paths. Many have walked since. But in every age, a new generation needs to get out and go hiking, take along some paint and wood and nails, and repair and update the signs.

So here we are.

Let's go for a walk...

## **What is Insight Improvisation?**

Insight Improvisation is an integration of meditation with theater and drama therapy.

In practice, Insight Improvisation can take the form of a workshop, a class, an individual session, or a meeting between two peers. It provides an environment for creative growth by connecting active, expressive techniques—such as authentic movement, storytelling, improvisation, writing, solo performance, and collaboration with

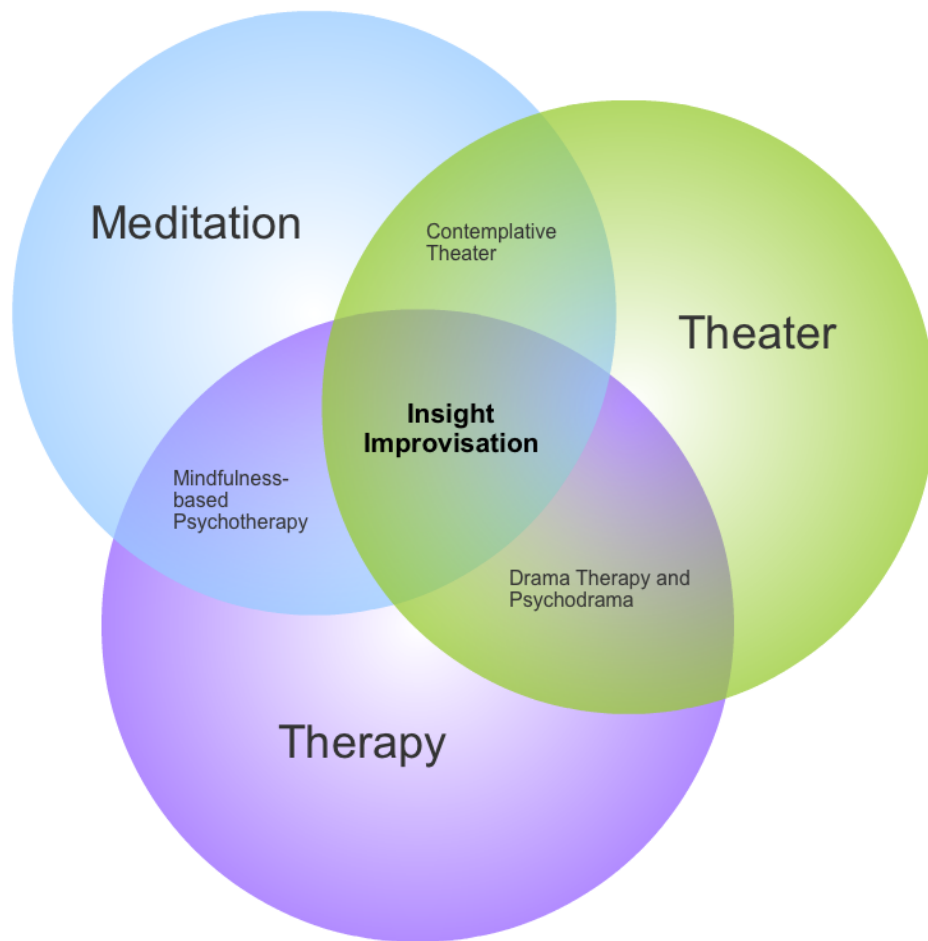
partners and groups—with the skills and concepts underlying meditation, including mindfulness, choiceless awareness, and lovingkindness.

As one practitioner put it: *“By being experienced in the body via meditation, movement and theater methods, Insight Improvisation opens up participants to an intersection of creativity, therapy, and spirituality which can illuminate and enrich their lives.”*

As an art form, Insight Improvisation differs from most forms of scripted or improvised theater (Blatner, 2007) in that it replaces the focus on “performance”—that is, presenting an artistic work for an audience—with a focus on the actor’s mind-body experience. The art that results from an Insight Improvisation activity is a byproduct of the performer’s process of being mindful, moment by moment, of his or her own body, senses, thoughts and feelings, as well as his or her relationship to others onstage or in the audience. Insight Improvisation helps one access intuition, drawing upon the inspiration of each moment, and creating freedom from the pressure of “performing.” In fact, often in this work the improviser will work with his or her eyes closed to better tap into subtle sensations and inner imagery. What gets communicated to an audience or witness is authentic, self-expressed, and unexpected.

As a form of therapy, Insight Improvisation combines meditative and theatrical practices for the purposes of personal healing, learning, growth, and transformation—one could call it “contemplative drama therapy.” Over the last few decades it has become evident that experiential techniques are among the most powerful in addressing the effects of trauma (van der Kolk as cited in Hudgins, 2000, p. 230), and in helping patients shift challenging patterns of thought and behavior. Among the most favored experiential

approaches are mindfulness—as seen in John Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (1990), and in Marsha Linehan’s Dialectical Behavior Therapy (1993)—and creative arts therapy—ranging from Jacob Moreno’s psychodrama (Moreno, 2000) to the proliferation of expressive arts methods used today. Insight Improvisation is one of a number of new approaches that combine creative arts therapy with mindfulness/meditation (Rappaport, in press), tapping into the power of creativity and self-expression, while inviting practitioners to look deeply within themselves. This marriage of contrasting approaches creates a unique vehicle for self-exploration and self-discovery.



## Whom This Book is For

Insight Improvisation is for anyone who would like to deepen his or her own self-awareness; better understand his or her own body, mind, emotions, and personal patterns; and find new ways of being, playing, and creating in relationship with others.

This book is both an introduction to Insight Improvisation and a practical guide for anyone who would like to practice the form, facilitate a group, or teach it to others.

Those drawn to Insight Improvisation tend to come to it from one of four paths:

**Meditators.** For many in the West, the path of meditation has proven to be a rich spiritual journey. But a regular practice of meditation can sometimes feel dry, disconnected. By building a bridge between meditation and day-to-day life, Insight Improvisation helps meditators bring the insights and the skills they have acquired “on the cushion” into action in the real world through body and voice as well as mind. For those who find sitting meditation a challenge or simply do not like it, Insight Improvisation provides access to some of the same benefits as meditation through myriad forms of active meditation and other, more dynamic activities. I have also seen those new to meditation be inspired to begin a regular practice of sitting after being exposed to meditative ideas through Insight Improvisation.

**Theater artists.** Actors (and performers/communicators in general) often encounter nerves, self-critique, and tension when appearing before an audience. Insight Improvisation can help actors and improvisers break free of habits and the need to “perform” onstage, offering a different paradigm of theater as an act of awareness—increasing one’s ability to be present, relaxed, and open in front of an audience. It also offers techniques for sourcing self-revelatory material, for writing original plays and one-

person shows. For theater instructors and directors, Insight Improvisation provides a new set of tools and approaches for working with actors and helping them perform mindfully with greater authenticity.

**Therapists.** For drama therapists, psychodramatists, and others incorporating improvisation or role-play into therapeutic work, Insight Improvisation offers a fresh approach. With its combination of meditative awareness and dramatic play, Insight Improvisation can help create a safe container within which personal exploration, insight, and growth can occur. It provides a systematic, organic progression of exercises—encompassing meditation, movement, improvisation, role-play, and dramatic enactment—which can be introduced to a client over the course of multiple sessions, inviting a journey of increasing self-reflection and self-expression.

For therapists of all backgrounds, Insight Improv offers new ways to add meditation and mindfulness to more traditional creative arts therapy or psychotherapy approaches. And for non-therapists, Insight Improv provides tools which can be used to engage in richly meaningful peer work, a kind of embodied co-therapy.

**Learners, Leaders, and Communicators of all kinds.** Of course, not everyone coming to Insight Improv is a meditator, actor, or therapist/therapy client. As one person wrote: *“I would like to see you add another category to which I might relate most directly. That would be someone who is curious about life and reflective about living. A seeker into life’s mysteries but without specifically being on a spiritual path. An adult interested in growth, perhaps at mid-life and wanting to open up. Someone working with a life coach.”* Someone in any of these categories may find that Insight Improvisation can help them grow, explore, and enrich their life. By helping one to be more present, aware, and

relaxed in day-to-day communication and interaction, Insight Improvisation can improve one's response to work environments, personal relationships, difficult or reactive emotions, and other life challenges. Insight Improvisation trains individuals to be more spontaneous and flexible, more empathic listeners, and better attuned to their own intuition and inner wisdom—ultimately preparing them for the challenges of leadership and social action in society.

## How to Use This Book

This book is divided into a few big chunks, each with a different purpose in mind. Depending on your reasons for reading, you may wish to focus more on certain parts than others.

**Part One is concerned with meditation and active meditation.** If you are new to these ideas, I encourage you to spend some time learning about meditation and authentic movement, two important foundational practices for Insight Improvisation. Part One also introduces shared vipassana, which is both a practice in itself, and one step in the progression toward psolodrama (discussed in Part Three). There are also some creative, new approaches in Part One, which can help any meditator refresh their practice, as well as offer new ways of meditating with partners and groups.

**Part Two focuses on theater and improvisation.** Filled with ideas and techniques for actors, improvisers, theater instructors, directors, etc., there is a lot in Part Two to play with, from Scott Kelman's "Zen" approach to improvisation, to Jean-Claude van Itallie's storytelling techniques, to original exercises such as The Three States,



Amplification, Role Stream and Scene Stream (the latter two further steps on the path to psolodrama). The focus here is more on performance than in the other parts of the book; however, any of the techniques covered work equally well as forms of active meditation and self-exploration.

**Part Three is about drama therapy, with an emphasis on psolodrama.** This is where the journey through this work deepens considerably. Part Three is focused on combining meditation and theater for personal growth, and contains detailed instruction and examples illustrating how to practice psolodrama—an approach that marries meditative awareness, authentic movement, and psychodrama. The foundations of psolodrama are explored—its roots in relation to other forms of psychotherapy (including the work of Jung, Mindell, Moreno, Perls, and Gendlin). Particular emphasis is given to the role of a supportive witness in fostering another’s growth and learning.

**Part Four concerns application—how to use these ideas and approaches in the real world.** Whereas Parts One through Three are written from the perspective of an individual or two peers taking these exercises into the studio and exploring them, Part Four looks at other ways of applying Insight Improvisation: in individual and couples therapy, in a workshop or class, onstage, and internationally.

At the back of the book you’ll find an appendix listing all Insight Improv activities and their variations, as well as a glossary of terms. The appendix and glossary are good places to turn to if you skipped to a later chapter and missed the introduction of a certain concept or approach.

I wish you a deep and fruitful journey as you find your own way through these pages. My hope is that you sample some of the meditations and exercises, ideally

incorporating a few into your own regular practices. Find a friend you think would be a good witness, meet in an empty room, and try out authentic movement, the three states, shared vipassana, role stream, or even psolodrama. Let me know what you discover!

May you—may we—may all beings—bring the qualities of mindfulness, openness, and lovingkindness into how we live our lives and interact with others, each and every day.

— Joel Gluck  
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