

**Insight Improvisation:
Integrating Mindfulness and Meditation with Drama Therapy**
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The following excerpt is from a pre-publication version of the chapter which may have some small textual differences from the final, published version.

In addition, I have added a couple of color illustrations to this PDF.

If you have comments or questions about this chapter, please feel free to contact me—you can reach me through the Insight Improv website: <http://www.insightimprov.org>

And thank you for your interest in Insight Improvisation. I hope what you read in the pages that follow is of benefit to you and others.

Warmly,

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December, 2020

CHAPTER 15
**INSIGHT IMPROVISATION:
INTEGRATING MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION WITH DRAMA THERAPY**

Joel Gluck

Why combine mindfulness and meditation with drama therapy? At first glance the two seem very different: drama therapy is an expressive, embodied form of therapy; mindfulness and meditation appear to be inward-directed, contemplative approaches to understanding oneself or achieving greater peace of mind. Perhaps it is because of these very differences that the two are so complementary. Drama therapy—and theatre, for that matter—can benefit from the perspectives offered by mindful awareness, and can take on new and useful forms when combined with meditation.

Insight Improvisation, the approach described in this chapter, is not the only drama therapy methodology that cites the influence of mindfulness and meditation. Johnson references Buddhist philosophy in describing Developmental Transformations (Chapter 4), and meditation is part of DvT training programs (D. R. Johnson, personal communication, March 13, 2018). Various kinds of meditation are used in Linden’s Omega Transpersonal approach (Chapter 9), and others have combined theatre and meditation with psychology, healing, or self-exploration (Frýba, 1989; van Itallie, 1997; Raucher, 2017; Worley, 2001).

Insight Improvisation (or Insight Improv, for short) is a drama therapy approach that combines elements of meditation, authentic movement (Pallaro, 1999), theatrical improvisation, psychodrama (Chapter 16), and self-revelatory performance (Emunah, 2015). In Insight Improv, the therapist is witness to the client’s unfolding, spontaneous, mindful process, an improvisational drama called a *psolodrama* (Gluck, 2006, 2007, 2012, 2017)—originating in the client’s body, senses, emotions, inner imagery and roles, rather than in a presenting issue (as in psychodrama and similar approaches) or in the interplay between client and therapist (as in DvT).

For several reasons, in particular its client-led nature, Insight Improv is not recommended for all populations (as discussed below). For those it is appropriate for, it has demonstrated the potential to address a range of issues, including working with uncontrolled anger (Gluck, 2012); anxiety and stress; relationship, family, and career-related issues; and understanding challenging thought and behavioral patterns.

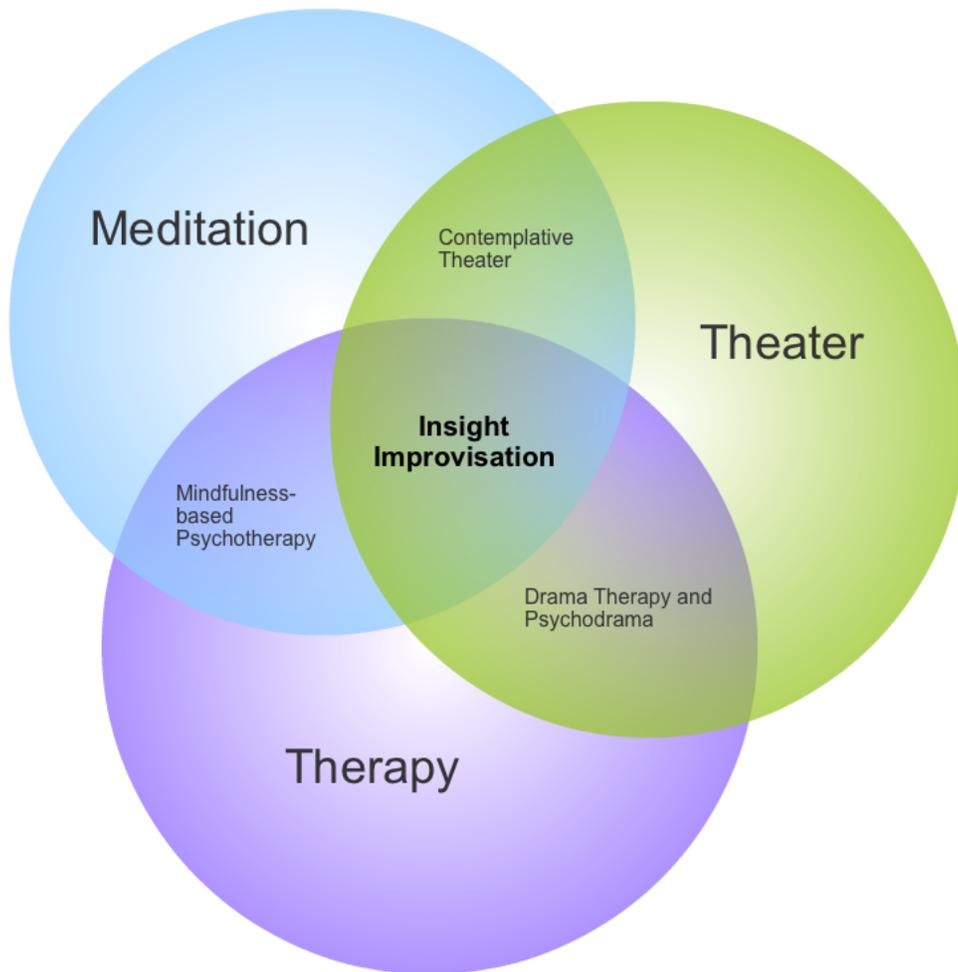
THE METHOD

Insight Improvisation gathers roughly 50 different techniques and variations, organized into three categories (Gluck, 2017):

1. Meditation and Active Meditation
2. Contemplative Theatre
3. Contemplative Drama Therapy

Therapists and trainers certified in Insight Improvisation are comfortable drawing from this wide range of techniques. This chapter focuses on the third category, and in particular the smaller set of Insight Improv concepts and methods most relevant in individual drama therapy with a client.

The core of the Insight Improv approach in individual drama therapy is a technique called *psolodrama*, which combines meditation, authentic movement, psychodrama, and solo



performance. An Insight Improv therapy session typically begins with a verbal check-in with the client, followed by a psolodrama of 15 to 30 minutes, and ending with a sharing process and closure.

As in authentic movement, in psolodrama there is a mover—called the *psoloist* (the client role)—and a *witness* (the role of the therapist). The psoloist enters the space empty—letting go of any plan—and closes their eyes. Relaxing into mindful and choiceless awareness, they open to the body and senses. They begin with authentic movement, following movement impulse, letting the body—rather than the mind—take the lead.

They then begin to speak aloud what they are noticing—what is coming in through the five senses as well as mind-objects (a technique called *shared vipassana*). As images arise, they can describe them as well as embody them. The psoloist then notices what role or character their movement or body position reminds them of (a technique called *role stream*), and enters roles through moving, making sounds, and speaking. The psoloist can explore a role as long as they like, or let it go at any time. They can also begin to allow roles to speak to one another (*scene stream*), reversing roles at any time to create dialogues and scenes. All of this is occurring primarily with eyes closed, to help the psoloist tune into the imaginal reality they are creating.

Up until this point—during what are called *entryway practices*—the psoloist is improvising freely, with no particular purpose but to follow authentic impulse. To transition to psolodrama proper, the psoloist now adds two elements: a purpose, which is to actively explore the issue/theme/challenge/conflict arising in the drama, and a set of tools that consists of the five psychodramatic roles (protagonist, auxiliary ego, director, double, and audience). Using these elements, the psoloist develops the scene (much like a good psychodrama director), following the emotions of the drama and seeking fuller self-expression and understanding. Eventually, the psoloist finds their way toward resolution/closure.

The psolodrama is followed by a sharing process between client and therapist. The client may find new insights and/or cathartic emotional expression within the psolodrama itself; often the sharing process helps concretize new perspectives and understanding.

Psolodrama is an advanced technique that requires educating and training the client as well as providing a sound therapeutic container within which the work can occur. Typically, over a series of sessions, the therapist leads the client through a progression of concepts and exercises—including three forms of awareness, practiced through sitting meditation; traditional psychodrama; and the four entryway practices—before teaching psolodrama. Throughout this progression, the therapist works actively and consciously to remain open to and aware of the client's process, with the goal of providing a safe, nonjudgmental, supportive context for the work.

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

Theoretical Bases

The purpose of theatre, as Hamlet admonishes the players, is to hold the mirror up to nature (Shakespeare, 1996). Meditation has a parallel purpose: it allows us to reflect on our reality, right here and right now. As the Buddha observed, nature—our reality—is constantly changing: as human beings we must learn to accept illness, aging, death, and all of the other stages and changes life presents us (Goldstein, 2013).

meditation + active
meditation

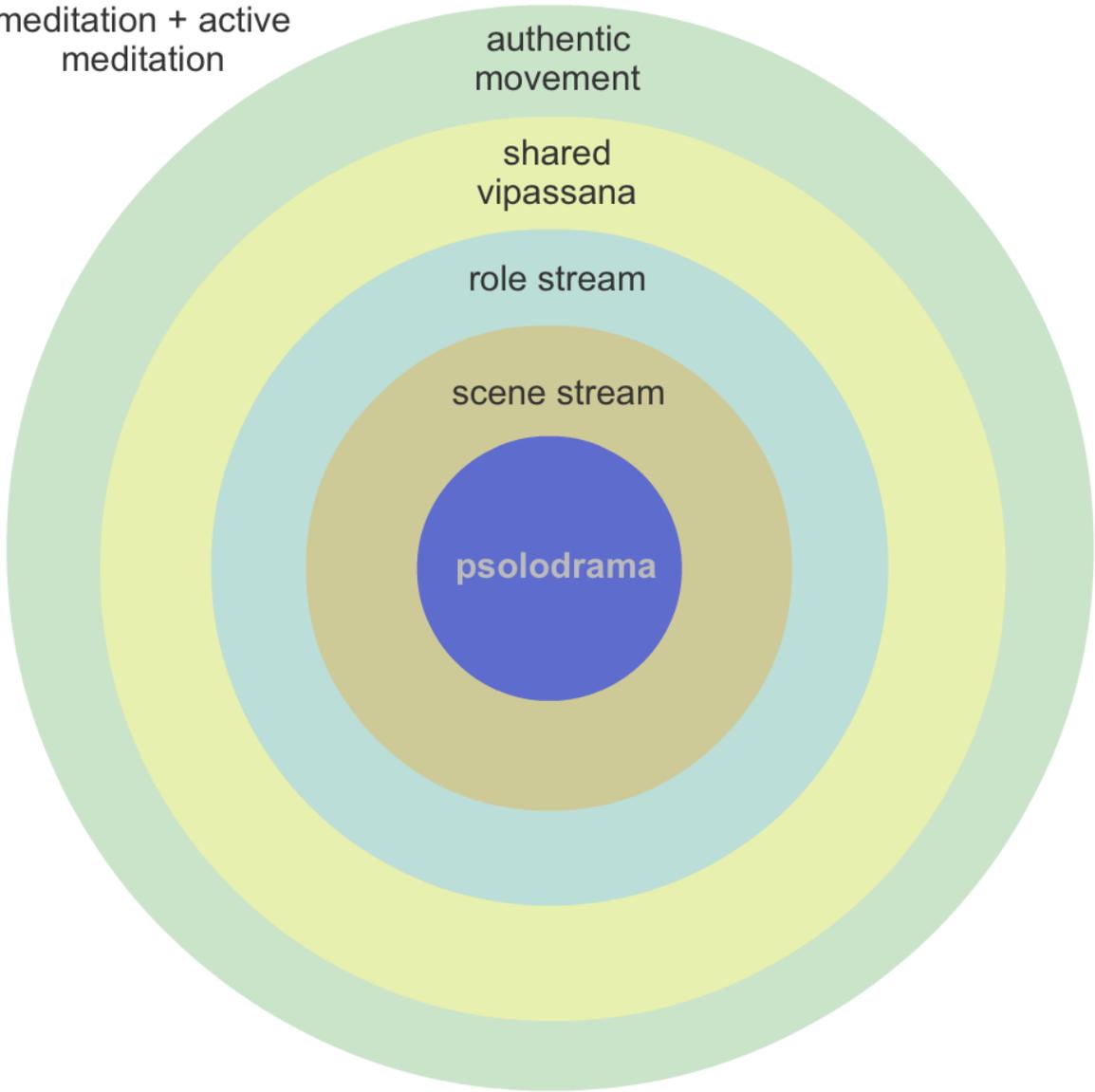
authentic
movement

shared
vipassana

role stream

scene stream

psolodrama



Aligned with this reality, Insight Improv views human health and growth as ever-changing, non-linear processes, and psychotherapy as an exploration, rather than a structured progression toward a fixed, ideal end-state. The psolodrama method is an expression of this view; it is unplanned, instinctual, letting the client discover moment by moment what they most need to explore.

Why this works can be explained in one way by Moreno's concept of *act hunger* (1946), one's innate drive to play out a certain role, scene, or drama. The client is naturally, internally driven to expand his role repertoire—according to Landy (Chapter 5)—moving toward greater health by learning to embody and empathize with an ever-increasing variety of roles.

Carl Jung (1958) offers another way to describe this internal drive. We all have hidden parts of ourselves—our shadow—which Bly (1988) pictures as a long bag we drag behind us containing all of those dark things we choose not to look at or deal with: our bad habits, unconscious desires and fears, things we are ashamed of—all of which are ripe for exploration. Mindell (1985) describes these as secondary processes: aspects of the self (such as disturbing bodily sensations, or bad dreams)—or aspects of society or the world (the mentally ill, the homeless, terrorists)—that we tend to view as Other. The client's journey toward health and growth is to listen to and incorporate the messages of those secondary processes, integrating them with his primary process (that which he consciously accepts as “I,” “me,” and “mine”).

Shadow or secondary process material is not necessarily bad; it may simply be something the client is unaware of or tends to ignore, avoid, or suppress in some way, a part of themselves they rarely have the opportunity to express: hidden grief; joy at being alive; the wish to be alone, or the fear of it; a desire to dance or sing, to be silly or rude; an impulse toward social action or leadership; a desire for romance, or for sexual freedom; a feeling of anger toward loved ones, such as one's parents; an anticipation of death. Any of these can be split off parts.

Insight Improvisation as a whole, and the psolodrama technique in particular, are a mirror one can hold up to one's own nature, evoking and reflecting one's past and present state. They provide an open and unfettered opportunity for the client to follow their act hunger, discover secondary processes, and embody and express what they find, as a means of moving toward greater understanding and integration of all their parts.

The Role of the Therapist

A therapist skilled in Insight Improvisation creates a context within which the client feels comfortable, ready, and equipped with tools to conduct this exploration. At the outset, the therapist is an active guide, but over time increasingly takes on the role of witness to the client's process, with three main goals in mind:

1. *Creating a safe and open space.* The therapist works to create a supportive, nonjudgmental environment for the client to relax, explore, and express themselves fully, with emotional authenticity and vulnerability. The therapist creates this container through the quality of their interactions with the client: building trust, structuring the session, witnessing the client, and sharing after the witnessing. Although the therapist may form hypotheses about what may best serve the client, they balance those goals with an attitude of acceptance, letting go of a desire to fix the client, being present to them as they are, and being open to the unexpected. In Insight Improv, the therapist trusts that change and growth happens naturally

when the client is provided a context of support; like a meditator observing an object in the field of awareness, the therapist actively lets go of their own agenda and repeatedly returns to following the client's process.

2. *Fostering awareness.* Insight Improv considers the development of greater self-awareness and awareness of one's relationships with others and the world to be itself a path of healing and growth. Through the development of awareness—using practices such as meditation and improvisation—the client develops the capacity to address dysfunctional patterns and make different choices, or to build on already healthy ways of living.

3. *Promoting autonomy.* Piaget identified moral and intellectual autonomy as the ultimate goals of education (Kamii, 1984). Insight Improv is designed to foster the client's sense of ownership of the therapeutic process. Through practices such as meditation, authentic movement, and psolodrama, the client strengthens their own supportive inner witness, their inner psychodrama director or guide, their ability to follow authentic impulse and experience full self-expression, and their ability to discover new insights in creative explorations—all ultimately increasing their self-confidence, self-reliance, and sense of self-direction.

Awareness and Meditation

Influenced by Eastern thought, and particularly the teachings of Insight Meditation—a name used in the west to describe Theravadan Buddhist teachings and techniques, including *vipassana* meditation (Goldstein, 2013)—Insight Improv is rooted in three forms of awareness, which it actively uses in therapeutic practice:

1. *Mindfulness.* This not only describes present-moment awareness—when we are not lost in thought or distracted—but also the ability to distinguish objects in the field of awareness (e.g., noticing the sensations of breathing, noticing a sound, noticing a distinct thought), as well as the more sophisticated ability to notice our relationship with each object we encounter (e.g., a thought, a feeling, a body sensation), and to be present to the object rather than relate to it with attachment or aversion (Goldstein 2013, 2018).

In Insight Improv, mindfulness is learned by the client through meditation and other techniques (described below), and applied in the therapeutic process to help bring greater focus, concentration, clarity, sensitivity, and acceptance of what is arising in the body and mind, moment by moment. It is an essential factor in the therapeutic process: the greater the mindfulness the client can bring, the deeper their journey.

2. *Choicelessness.* Choiceless awareness, central to *vipassana* meditation (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 1985), is the quality of openness: openness to all the sense doors (the five senses plus mind objects such as thoughts, inner imagery); openness to whatever arises in the field of awareness, without consciously choosing what to focus on; openness to the unexpected. To be choiceless is to allow oneself to be surprised by moment-to-moment experience, rather than strive for a specific experience (e.g., wanting to have a “good” meditation).

Choicelessness—seen through the lens of improvisation—also means not being attached to a specific outcome (Arrien, 1993), to bring *beginner's mind* (Suzuki, 1970) rather than a planning mindset, to enter empty and not act on preconceived ideas, to let go and allow the process to unfold by itself. In the therapeutic process, choicelessness is also central to the therapist's ability to witness with an open, nonjudgmental attitude.

3. *Lovingkindness.* Balancing the more cognitive factors of mindfulness and choicelessness, lovingkindness centers on the heart, conditioning the mind toward caring and

empathy (Salzberg, 2010). As a form of awareness, lovingkindness offers an alternative lens through which to view oneself and others: mindful self-compassion (as opposed to self-criticism, guilt, or shame) (Germer, 2009) and generosity and support (in contrast to competition, mistrust, or a need to control or feel superior to).

Lovingkindness is essential to Insight Improv as the basis for the supportive mindset or container—the attitude of the witness and what it is modeling for the inner witness (described below)—within which the work can occur.

Early in the therapeutic process, the therapist introduces meditation to the client by leading a short meditation in the session, and encourages the client to try meditating at home if they are interested. Ultimately, three types of meditation are introduced in the process, corresponding to the three forms of awareness: *samadhi* or concentration meditation focuses on a single object, such as the breath, as a way to introduce, notice, and develop mindfulness; *vipassana* or insight meditation opens the awareness to all of the six sense doors (the five senses plus thoughts), developing the capacity for choiceless awareness, greater openness and acceptance; *metta* or lovingkindness meditation is the practice of bringing a caring intention toward oneself, toward others, and toward all beings.

Meditation serves two main purposes in Insight Improv: first, it supports the drama therapy practices by strengthening the client's capacity for mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness (especially self-compassion), enabling the client to enter the improvisational processes with a greater ability to be present, let go, and trust the process; second, meditation has its own benefits that extend beyond the therapy sessions, providing a path for the client to develop greater equanimity, lovingkindness, and self-awareness in their daily life (Germer, 2009; Goldstein, 2013; Salzberg, 2010).

Although one does not need to be a meditator to use Insight Improv in one's therapy practice, a therapist using Insight Improv strives to model the three forms of awareness for the client in all of their interactions, showing up as present, open, and kind.

Performance Mind and Being Mind

Another idea central to Insight Improvisation is the contrast between Performance Mind and Being Mind. *Performance Mind* refers to the feeling most people habitually get when in front of an audience: nervousness, a desire to look good, a need to entertain or be clever. For many, it is the opposite of being centered and relaxed. *Being Mind* is the mind of the meditator: calm, spacious, open, centered. An improviser able to tap into Being Mind is open to and aware of everything. They feel their feet touching the floor; they notice scents, tastes, sounds, bodily sensations, thoughts—and how all of those things make them feel. They are inspired by and incorporate everything that is already there, able to let go of outcome and abandon themselves to process, proceeding with a great deal of freedom, with beginner's mind, not pushing for anything, not trying to impress the audience but instead open to and connecting with them. Because the improviser is relaxed and present, the audience can be, too.

In reality, an improviser is never entirely in Performance Mind or Being Mind, but some mixture of the two. The positive side of Performance Mind is that the improviser can gain a great deal of energy and joy from performing for an audience; the shadow side of Being Mind is that it can be an escape, a way to focus inward to avoid dealing with others.

In Insight Improv, the therapist helps create the conditions within which the client can experience a healthy balance of Being Mind and Performance Mind. Some of this comes

through instruction, as the therapist introduces over time a series of activities, including meditation, authentic movement, and other entryway practices to psolodrama. Along the way, the therapist emphasizes a set of principles—related to the concept of choiceless awareness—including entering empty, letting go of performing (e.g., through working with eyes closed), and Scott Kelman’s admonition: “If you have a good idea, don’t do it” (Oumano, 1992). The nonjudgmental and supportive container created by the therapist’s own witnessing also contributes to the client’s increasing ability to experience Being Mind.

End of chapter preview