

The Buddha Meets Moreno

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We are Trainer Educator Practitioners who have worked extensively with J. L. Moreno's Triadic system. Over the past 8 years, we have developed an approach that integrates the Triadic system with meditation, mindfulness training, and compassion practices. We find Moreno's system to be an effective milieu for introducing and exploring these practices with others. Moreover, we have been using and teaching meditation, mindfulness, and compassion practices to deepen the personal experience of the three components of the Triadic system. In this paper we will describe this integration and how it can be used as a tool for transformation.

Our efforts evolved from our own training and experience in the Triadic system. Both of us have taught and used the Triadic system in various settings, including mental health settings, hospitals, graduate schools, and in our own private practices. Both of us have engaged in committed mindfulness, meditation, and retreat practices. Jacquie has studied with Tara Brach and has completed Tara's 2-year teaching program that focused on Vipassana meditation. Jaye received her certificate from the Institute of Meditation and Psychotherapy in 2013. Jaye studies Vipassana meditation with Susan Morgan and is a student of other Tibetan meditation practices, specifically the study of innate love and wisdom practices with Lama John Makransky and Tsoknyi Rinpoche. Working together as we do, it has been natural for us to join our learning and experience. They come together in our workshop entitled "Time In."

We feel privileged to have been exposed to these ancient traditions and teachings. Here, we can only hope to offer a small portion of them. We honor our teachers and their lineages.

While our approach may have therapeutic value for participants, treatment has not been our primary goal. Rather, we want to provide an entry point for those

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who are curious about these practices and traditions. Some participants in our programs have no experience meditating and others are quite experienced. Experienced practitioners are often curious about the enactment and action exploration that so rarely occur at traditional meditation retreats. On the other hand, people involved with the psychodrama community have expressed curiosity and perceive meditation as a complement to their own therapeutic training.

BUDDHIST ECHOES IN THE TRIADIC SYSTEM

The Triadic system, as it has come to be known since its conception by J. L. Moreno in the early 20th century, comprises three fluidly overlapping disciplines: sociometry, group process, and psychodrama. The system provides a framework for personal growth as well as therapeutic group process. In addition, it provides a process for examining the relational world. It allows one to actively examine a current experience as well as reexperience and reevaluate a past experience in the present moment.

J. L. Moreno's work expresses several central Buddhist ideas. For instance, Moreno addresses the dilemma of duality. While Buddha viewed the idea of a self, separate from the other, as an illusion, Moreno collapses the duality through the "encounter." Several lines from a poem entitled "Invitation to an Encounter" (Moreno, 1946) express the drama of deep role reversal—of compassionate, reciprocal contact.

A meeting of two, eye to eye, face to face,
and when you are near I will tear your eyes out
and place them in place of mine
Oh, and you will tear my eyes out
and will place them instead of yours,
then I will look at you with your eyes
and you will look at me with mine.

(Frontispiece)

"Suffering originates when we try to grasp or accelerate into fight-or-flight patterns rather than experience movement that dances with what is occurring" (Caldwell, 1996, p. 16). Moreno often talked about the connection between our suffering and our lack of spontaneity or, otherwise expressed, our imprisonment within constructs. "Spontaneity propels the individual towards an adequate response to a new situation or a new response to an old situation" (Moreno, 1953, p. 42). Similarly, Buddha taught about the illusion of a reified, fixed, and unchanging self, as well as the deluded reactions of attachment and aversion as the source of suffering. Both teachers were diagnosing suffering as a symptom of constriction and rigidity. In other words, a lack of spontaneity and the inability to release that to which we cling, whether it be a role, a belief, an attitude or a habituated behavior.

Moreno (1953) was adamant that psychotherapy should have no less than all of humanity in mind. This echoes the Bodhisattva vow: "May I attain

Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.” These are expressions of a larger view of humanity and of our deep interconnection.

While the Buddha gave us the four noble truths and the eight-fold path, Moreno conceived the Triadic system. Both systems provide the opportunity for us, if we so choose, to examine our experiences deeply, with attunement and responsiveness. Both lead us to greater freedom from habitual patterns of behavior and thinking, allowing us to live our lives with fuller, freer creativity and spontaneity.

COMPONENTS OF THE OUTER AND INNER PATHS

Sociometry

Sociometry, the study of interpersonal choices, may also be viewed as a process of charting the relational choices each of us makes in groups of all sorts. Robert Siroka, PhD, founder of the Sociometric Training Institute, likens sociometry to an MRI in the way it generates a three-dimensional map of self-awareness and relational awareness. A central concept in sociometry, now often recognized in the therapeutic communities as “relational mindfulness,” is that we are drawn to different individuals through intuitive and explicit understandings of what we may have in common with others, and likewise, how we may be different. “The Law of Social Gravitation states that, people from one community will move toward people of another community in direct proportion to the amount of attraction given and received; and in inverse proportion to the rejections” (Moreno, 1956, p. 476). Using sociometry we examine countless aspects of similarity or dissimilarity vis-à-vis ourselves and others. The power of sociometry is its ability to clarify our interpersonal connections within a group and to guide us to those who can help us. It is the bridge between the inner and the outer path.

Psychodrama

Psychodrama comprises a theory of development, a methodology, a philosophy, and a body of techniques. The techniques include doubling, role reversal, mirroring, sculpting, scene setting, and others. Psychodrama and the other experiential action methods differ from so-called “talk therapies” in that they shift the work’s mechanism from “tell me” to “show me.” Psychodrama is the expressed enactment of feelings, perceptions, mental processes, and relationships. By means of the enactment, psychodrama cultivates presence through spontaneity.

Group Process

Gregory Kramer (2007) observed in *Insight Dialogues*: “Many of our stresses in life arise in relation to other people; much of our imprisonment, fear and longing have to do with relationships.” He then asks: “How would we treat

people if we recognized their kinship with us, bearing the sameness of the hurts in our hearts?" (p. 15).

We come prewired for relationships. Consequently, we are capable of acting as therapeutic agents for each other. In the group, a select and protective community, we share universal suffering. Here we can come to the realization that, instead of isolating us, suffering connects us. The group becomes the safe "holder," not only sharing the pain and the burden, but also encouraging examination and learning.

Meditation

Meditation practice trains our mind/body/heart to relax, quiet, and ground. In one of her teacher training classes, Tara Brach (2012) described meditation "as a training of mental attention that awakens us beyond our conditioned mind and habitual thinking." In this state of mindful awareness we learn to observe our thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations without engaging them. And when we do engage, we simply notice that. The intention of this practice is to create or to move toward creating, a kind and caring internal environment where repressed and unprocessed material can be safely revealed. We become intimate with our inner life and learn to meet ourselves just as we are.

(It is important to note that there are many meditation practices coming from many traditions—for example, Vipassana, mindful awareness, concentration, loving-kindness, calm-abiding, guided visualization, and others. Each person should experiment and find the practice and teacher that works and supports them best.)

Mindfulness

Mindful awareness, in the Tibetan tradition specifically, means paying attention with vigilance. (For the purpose of this paper, we use mindfulness and mindful-awareness interchangeably.) Mindfulness-based experiential therapy also emphasizes attention with vigilance, (Drenpa), in the here-and-now. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013), a pioneer in mindfulness, defined it as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally" (p. 2). Dr. Dan Siegel (2012), with a more "relational" attitude, described mindfulness as "paying attention to what is inside us, around us and between us" (p. 6). As Brach (2012) described it, the Buddha taught many strategies for cultivating these pathways of clarity, openness, and ease of presence, but he considered the practice of mindfulness to be of central importance. "Mindfulness is the intentional process of paying attention, without judgment, to the unfolding of moment-by-moment experience" (p. 31)

(We recognize that not all readers or participants in our workshops will be comfortable with our use of the word "mindfulness." We might also express mindfulness as "focused attention" or "concentrated attention.")

The importance of mindfulness practice is that it can enhance our awareness of habitual thoughts and patterns of response. Lacking this awareness we automatically, involuntarily reenact unhelpful and painful responses,

remaining entangled in our reactivity. Mindful awareness helps us to wake up to these deeply habituated and encoded patterns. It creates an ever-so-slight gap between stimulus and reactivity. In that gap, we can begin to work more skillfully.

Mindful awareness can be cultivated in many ways. We use breath, points of contact, and concentration on sensations as tools to support mindfulness. In mindful awareness training we learn to be with what we are experiencing as we are experiencing it, with the intentionality of holding the experience with kindness. This intentionality is essential. Together, the elements of the Triadic system and meditation support our capacity to be present in the moment, with full embodied contact. Meditation helps us deepen and inform the action (the enactment or active investigation on the stage). Likewise, the action can also deepen and inform the meditation.

Mindfulness also promotes grounding, an antidote to our feelings of isolation, fear, and trauma. The story goes: As Siddhartha sat under the Bodhi tree in his quest for enlightenment he was confronted by Mara, the lord of death or the trickster god. Mara wished to stop his quest for enlightenment. Beautiful women and threats of all kinds advanced toward him. He sat still and did not engage. Doubt was Mara's final weapon, questioning his very right to exist. Mara shouted at Siddhartha, "Who do you think you are?" Siddhartha reached out his hand to feel the support of the earth and the earth bore witness. Mara disappeared. As the morning dawned Siddhartha became the Buddha.

Feet on the ground, seat in your seat, feeling the sensation of the temperature in the room, counting breaths. These are a few examples of concrete and physical mindful awareness tools that help to stabilize and steady us, particularly when we are dealing with difficult feelings and/or situations. Staying grounded, like the Buddha, allows us to remain in the role of director of our own movie. Grounded, we can watch our reactivity to our own Maras, without engaging them or being consumed or hijacked by them. And in the inevitable moments when we have been hijacked, we notice and find our way back our groundedness. We have become more response-able.

MINDFULNESS AND COMPASSION ARE JOINED

Mindfulness asks, "What is occurring?" Compassion asks, "What do I need?"

Compassion begins with direct contact with our vulnerability. Direct contact includes our recognition of our own suffering as well as our desire to alleviate it. Paul Fulton (2013) wrote in his chapter in the book *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy*, "Compassion for ourselves can arise as we open to our own suffering. The mere presence of suffering is not enough, however. Consider how many people become hardened by devastating loss or hardship. Mindfulness offers a way to change our relationship to suffering by letting go of our need to reject it" (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2013, p. 68). Learning how to be with suffering as it is, learning to make space for the suffering, learning not to reject suffering. These are mindfulness practices. These are also acts of kindness and compassion toward ourselves. We are learning how to be more at ease with suffering and then attend to it with care. We are learning to be more at ease with dis-ease. Here is our opportunity for growth.

OUR APPROACH

As we have said, we integrate the Triadic system with Buddhist teachings and mindfulness and compassion practices. Our work also focuses on growing our capacity to be compassionate, nonjudgmental witnesses. This focus is emphasized in all of our enactments. We often invite participants to step out of the action and become the observer. Rather than catharsis, our intentions are awareness and spontaneity. To accomplish this, we emphasize slowing down as well as lean-ness of speech while sharing. That is, we encourage participants to pay more attention to direct experience and less to story and narrative.

There is a famous quotation, often attributed to Victor Frankl (2006): “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom.” Our Sunday afternoon workshops, called “Time In,” devote space in our lives where we can slow down and pay attention to what is happening in our inner lives. Typically, each session begins with a brief, arriving meditation, a statement of group values, a stated intention relating to the topic, then a longer meditation that focuses and investigates the topic of the day. The structure may vary. For example, we may spend more time on a sociometric warm-up that relates to the topic or we may engage in dyadic exercises that focus on listening and speech related to the topic. There is always time for brief sharing. Those who would like to bring their internal experience forward are invited to participate in a psychodramatic exploration. Often we will use sociometric selection to reveal where in the group there is the most energy or support. Most enactments are short. Subsequent discussions often interweave the facilitator’s personal understanding of dharma. We continuously move back and forth between the external and the internal. Rather than de-roleing at the end of each action exploration, members are encouraged to find some aspect of themselves that connected them to each role that has been presented on the stage.

The guiding intention of our decision not to have participants de-role at this point, is beautifully expressed in the following portions of a poem by Thich Nhat Hahn.

Please Call Me By My True Names

I am the twelve year old girl,
 Refugee on a small boat,
 Who throws herself in the ocean
 After being raped by a sea pirate.
 I am the pirate,
 My heart not capable of seeing and loving.
 Please call me by my true names,
 so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
 so I can see that my joy and pain are one.
 Please call me by my true names,
 so I can wake up
 and the door to my heart

could be left open,
the door to compassion.

(Hahn, 1999, p. 72)

Each of us knows aspects of the pirate as well as aspects of the girl on the beach. This poem encourages us away from dualistic thinking and moves us in the direction of compassion.

A postenactment meditation, if used, allows participants the space to reflect and integrate their thoughts and feelings as well as to reflect on actions taken or not taken. Again, this pause helps us to ground as it slows us down. It clears our minds and gives us time to step away from the experience while remaining engaged. Our intention here is to help the following discussions to be more discerning, insightful, and helpful.

ON THE STAGE AND IN THE CHAIR: UNTANGLING THE TANGLE

In the Triadic system, difficult situations are examined in the here and now. A member of the group takes the role of “investigator.” She chooses other members of the group as auxiliaries and supports. They will help her in her investigation of the tangle in the scene. Through role reversal and other techniques, the tangled moment is reenacted, intensified, and explored. Other responses become available. This is the corrective experience. The conserved, reified self begins to loosen. The investigator becomes more spontaneous and now has a choice in his or her response. Perhaps the response will be more skillful.

From a mindfulness perspective, the inquiry of the tangle first occurs on the cushion. This inquiry can lay out some of the specific details of the tangle while observing one’s thoughts, feelings, and direct experience in the body. The inquiry is deepened by asking clarifying questions about beliefs, avoidance, and fears. When we include compassion, we ask members what they might need to alleviate their distress. As sociometrists, we also ask, “Who from our social, emotional or spiritual world would be most helpful?”

Both of these approaches have the intention to bring insight and awareness. They teach us to recognize and address our reactivity and pain. We learn to pause before acting. We learn that we can disentangle from habituated patterns and make different, more wholesome choices.

INTEGRATING THE STREAMS

The beauty of the Triadic system is that the three currents inform and reinforce one another. Sociometry maps connections within the group and helps choose the protagonist and auxiliary players in the psychodrama. The group structure provides the safe stage, the supportive chorus, and an appreciative and participatory audience for the psychodrama. This can be regarded quite accurately as the “Sangha,” or community of like-minded travelers.

Sociometry is the examination of our position within a system. It also gives us the structure to examine the choices we make and receive. In our “Time In” sessions, we devote much time to the direct experience of our position within the

group as our position relates to the topic of the afternoon. This is a mindfulness lesson within sociometry. We are learning to be in whatever position we are in, without self-judgment, but rather with kind curiosity. In other words, sociometry provides material for us to work with in our mindfulness practice.

As you must have gathered by now, the heart focus of our work is the growth of the qualities of compassionate presence: acceptance, steadiness, patience, groundedness, and kindness. Psychodramatic enactment, particularly role reversal, and sociometry are particularly important in a forgiveness meditation practice. In the practice of forgiveness there are three inquiries into interpersonal, intrapsychic wounding. In the first inquiry, people are asked to remember someone whom they have harmed knowingly or unknowingly through their own disconnection, ignorance, and suffering. They remember not only what happened but also feel the harm that the other experienced. They then ask for forgiveness. The second step is to remember the ways in which they harm themselves knowingly or unknowingly through their own disconnection, ignorance, and suffering. The third is remembering how they have been harmed, knowingly or unknowingly through another's disconnection, ignorance, and suffering. Then, in some future time, when they are ready, role reversal may be used to connect to the suffering of the one who actually caused the harm. This is not done to condone the other's behavior; rather it is an effort to free our own heart. Each inquiry can have its own sociometry that can be brought onto the stage where it can be physicalized and shared. (This can be a very slow process; each inquiry could be a group unto itself.) Remember that this carries the Buddha's lessons in nonduality, helping us appreciate that it is out of our ignorance and suffering that we cause additional suffering.

THE BENEFACITOR PRACTICE

One of the most profound practices that we introduce is the "benefactor" practice. The Benefactor practice is adapted from Tibetan Buddhist meditation traditions for all traditions and faiths and taught by Lama John Makransky, PhD, a Guiding Meditation Teacher at the Foundation for Active Compassion and an Associate Professor of Buddhism and Comparative Theology at Boston College. It is an example of how the Triadic system informs and is informed by mindfulness and compassion practice.

Makransky (2007) teaches that in order to feel and express compassion, we must first be able to receive it. Unfortunately, many of us have broken receivers. We protect ourselves with hard hearts and ruminations on all that is wrong and bad. Ironically, this perpetuates suffering, causing additional suffering in ourselves and in the world. Fortunately, we can learn to receive. This is one of the central goals of our work. The practice we describe below is particularly adept at repairing broken receivers. It also demonstrates how we can use the Triadic system to support our efforts to receive and express compassion.

Who Is a Benefactor?

The benefactor here "means someone who has sent us the wish of love, the simple wish for us to be well and happy" (Makransky, 2007, p. 22). They are

those who have held you in a wish of love and have quietly extended love to you. They are those who have taken delight in you because you are you. Benefactors can be flawed and imperfect. A benefactor can be a relative, teacher, pastor, professor, mentor, or even a pet who you love to be near. (A place may fill the position as well.) You might find a benefactor sitting next to you in the group. This person may have served you coffee this very day. If it feels joyful, if it makes you smile to think of such a person, to hold their smiling face in mind, then they may serve as your benefactor for this meditation.

The Meditation (As Adapted from the Meditation Taught by Professor Makransky)

Sit in a relaxed way with back comfortably straight on cushion or chair, eyes gazing gently downward. Take a deep breath, hold it in the lower abdomen for a little while. Then release fully as if releasing the breath from all pores of your body at once. Repeat three or more times, and then let everything settle for a little while.

Now allow yourself to experience your benefactor.

Envision their smiling face before you. Imagine them expressing their wish of love, their wish for your deepest well being, happiness, and peace. Sense them communing with the fundamental goodness of your being—your deep worth beyond judgment. Feel the joy of holding them in your mind, opening to them and accepting their loving energy.

Now, imagine their energy as a shower of gentle, healing radiance, bathing your whole body—every part of you. Be at ease, open and accepting—like a puppy napping on a sun-drenched lawn, passively soaking up the warm rays. Receive this soft, healing energy into every part of your body; gently, slowly, part by part, letting any area of tension soften under its touch. Allow this tender radiance into every cell, all the way down to your fingertips and toes, sensing the truth that every single part of you is loved.

No matter who you think you are, no matter what you think you deserve or don't, all such thoughts are irrelevant now. Just accept your benefactor's wish for your deep well being and happiness. Trust this wish more than any limiting thoughts of yourself. Receive its energy into your whole being.

(Makransky, 2007, p. 26)

Psychodramatic Work

After the meditation, group members are invited to share and bring their experience onto the stage. A benefactor/auxiliary is chosen, via sociometry, from the group. The protagonist shows the benefactor/auxiliary how to be in the role using a word, gesture, sound, or feeling that describes what was given from the benefactor to the protagonist. The benefactor then embodies the action, offering the gesture to the protagonist. The protagonist receives what is given. This proceeds slowly, noticing any resistance to receiving the benefactor's offering. The protagonist controls the distance or closeness. It becomes a meditation in action. We emphasize the noticing of the felt experience.

We then reverse roles. The protagonist becomes the benefactor and gives what has been received: love, validation, acceptance, or recognition. The one who has received becomes the one who offers. We continue to emphasize noticing the felt experience. After each person in the group completes this exercise, the group sits quietly, eyes open or closed, digesting and paying attention to what is happening inside.

In one of our workshops where we introduce the benefactor practice, one of our members recalled her experience on a 1950s TV show called “The Clubhouse Gang.” The show’s MC and the character Officer Bob asked for volunteers from the audience of children. Many were eager to participate but she was too shy to raise her hand. Nevertheless, Officer Bob chose her and looking at her said, “You are a pretty little girl. Why don’t you come up with me?” This was a benefactor moment for her. As she shared this experience with us, her eyes welled up with tears. She recalled feeling delighted. This woman chose Officer Bob as her benefactor. Later, this woman had the opportunity to deeply and actively examine a scene where she was not pretty or “seen.” Officer Bob then offered her a different message and she had the willingness to receive that message. This was an active reconditioning that pierced through the negative messages and allowed her to touch her innate goodness and beauty.

Makransky gives us a full understanding of the importance of “benefactor moments.” “To receive such a simple wish of love quietly opens our minds to an innate wisdom that recognizes the essential goodness of being: the intrinsic goodness of experience itself, the joy of being alive” (Makransky, 2007, p. 21). “Through daily practice, the meditation of receiving love softens the hard edge of reactivity to self and other, the hard edges of our life. It helps us to acknowledge and rely on the deep goodness within and beyond us” (Makransky, 2007, p. 32).

The benefactor practice helps us to work with the negative messages and patterns that constrict us. These messages tether us to ideas about ourselves as unworthy, bad, weak, or ugly. We reinforce these stories, week after week, month after month, year after year. This practice challenges the power of these stories.

Tsoknyi Rinpoche teaches that “we believe deep down that we’ve lost something precious and are seeking it outside ourselves, never realizing that we are carrying it within us wherever we go.” (Rinpoche & Swanson, 2012, p. 75). Benefactor practice “cultivates within ourselves a place of deep caring, a sense of ‘home’ to which we can always return, be welcome and rediscover the capacity for healing from whatever hurt we’ve caused ourselves and others. Through this healing, we begin to approach a greater potential as human beings than we could ever have imagined” (Rinpoche & Swanson, 2012, p. 76). Recall Moreno’s wish and hope that psychotherapy should have no less than all of humanity in mind.

CONCLUSIONS

This article describes our attempts to integrate Eastern Buddhist psychology and the work of J. L. Moreno into our professional practices. This culminates in our “Time In” series of workshops. Our approach combines mindfulness and

compassion practices with the Triadic system. The Triadic system has given us a rich field where we can explore and practice the themes, brought to us from the East and closest to our hearts: mindful awareness, creativity, spontaneity, loving-kindness, and compassion. We hope to have sparked some curiosity. We appreciate how fortunate we are to have been exposed to the great teachers and their lessons. We want to pass them on in the spirit in which they were given.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase "each other" doesn't make any sense.

Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi

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