Inhabiting the Missing Middle

— Notes from my Embodied Mindfulness practice

Heroism could be redefined for our time as the ability to stand paradox.

— Robert A. Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow*

For a long time, I have been much more familiar with the extremes:

Pushing myself too hard, or giving up completely.

Following one method dogmatically and taking it as gospel, or questioning everything my teachers said.

Flowing with imagination to wherever it leads, or relying entirely on logic and problem-solving.

But whenever I stayed at one extreme for too long, another part of me would become dissatisfied, chasing me like a shadow until I eventually swung toward the other side.

I seemed to live with this oscillation: learning one new method after another, entering one space after another, following one teacher after another, and keeping encountering the same sense that something was still missing.

Like we say in Chinese: *too much flour, add water; too much water, add flour.*

But I never stopped wondering: what would it feel like to stay somewhere in the middle? What would it be like to keep making choices and taking action from a more balanced place?

I met Jamie's Embodied Mindfulness with this question already in me.

"Not a good student"

I was definitely not what I imagined a "good student" should look like when I first encountered Embodied Mindfulness.

I joined one of Jamie's workshops, *Tending and Befriending Our Inner Ecosystem*. Due to the time difference, I dragged myself up in the middle of the night, started out sitting, lay down, and probably fell asleep at some point.

By then, I was used to everyone keeping their camera on, if only to let the teacher know: I am still here. So it felt unfamiliar to be in a space where I could be unseen. There was also a lot of silence in the guidance. At that time, sustaining my attention while sitting, without the teacher's attention, was difficult.

And yet, strangely, even though much of the time I did not seem to be “in the practice”, I went on to study Embodied Mindfulness.

The first time I joined the longer series, I did not participate live either. I listened to the recordings each week, and it took me quite a while to find my way in. But gradually, those recordings became something almost indispensable in my everyday life.

I listened when I was sleepy. When my body felt uncomfortable. When my mind was chaotic.

Sometimes I was practicing. Sometimes I simply left a recording playing while I did my own things.

They stopped feeling like classes. They became more like an antidote I could reach for whenever I needed one.

This was unusual for me. I have studied many different methods, but I am not especially good at sustaining one practice. I often become obsessed with a method for a while, and then lose interest.

Looking back, I think one reason Embodied Mindfulness stayed with me was that it was simple, easy to pick up and put down, and not demanding that I stay in one particular way.

The second time, when I took the course live, the spaciousness of this practice became even clearer.

I still wandered off constantly: following a new idea; remembering something I needed to do, and simply getting up doing it; writing; walking around the room.

Sometimes I did a bit of housework. Sometimes an image appeared, and I indulged in it for a while.

Inside the practice, I was allowed to wander, and then come back.

And yet there were always a few very simple, very clear landmarks still there: a simple breath, a moment of self-touch, a movement, a particular way of attending to the body.

They created enough structure that I could leave for a while without losing the way back.

The Middle as Permission

I began to recognize that this permission touched something much deeper in me.

Growing up with a Chinese background, I always had a strong sense that somewhere inside me, a very strict doorkeeper constantly tells me that there is a right way to everything. If I take one wrong step, I have already crossed over into another path and can no longer return. This specter haunts me in every aspect of my life.

This shows up in practice, too. If I wander, I can very quickly feel that I have become "a wanderer", so I have to keep being a "wanderer", doing what a wanderer does — wander. And if I don't want to become that person who has somehow been "expelled" from the practice, then I have to force myself to stay as long as possible.

And gradually I began to see that the possibility of leaving did not weaken commitment.

The permission to wander is important. But the permission to come back is just as important.

Paradoxically, because I knew I could leave, I became more able to enter fully.

Later, when I began teaching this work myself to the Chinese audience, I realized that when students encounter this kind of permission for the first time, it can trigger quite a bit of anxiety and confusion. Permission removes not only restriction, but also certainty. It asks us to stay with our own experience a little longer before someone else names it.

I can feel their anxiety, too, and my immediate reaction is often to add more structure, more instructions, to rescue them from the uncertainty.

Jamie said: **permission requires repetition because it's so unusual. You gotta repeat something at least three times for people to hear it.**

So I began learning to offer freedom without immediately taking it back because someone didn't yet know how to use it.

And this permission was perhaps also the permission for me to trust my own capacity and authority as a teacher.

The Middle as Experiment

Embodied Mindfulness practices often alternates between deliberate action and release: try a breathing pattern, then return to automatic breathing; focus, then wander; move, then become still; follow a form, then enter open exploration.

I remember that, early on, one of the hardest practices for me was condensing the belly on the exhale. My resistance to this movement was vague and shapeless. Merely thinking about it made me very tense.

Jamie said not to endure a practice. And if I really had to endure it, then to **endure with grace**.

To be honest, I did not know how to understand that somatically. My habitual ways were to either force myself through discomfort or abandon the practice completely.

One of my favorite things about Embodied Mindfulness is this instruction:

Try it three times, and then let it go.

The practices or explorations we resist may sometimes be the ones that change us most deeply, including how we understand ourselves. Resistance can come from lack of skill or discomfort, but perhaps also from a much deeper resistance to, or fear of, being changed.

The lightness of "try it three times" reminds me of trying on clothes. I can put something on, and then take it off again. That loosened up something in my resistance.

Trying could simply be a small body-mind inquiry in the moment

So now, when I encounter something difficult, I try to approach it with a "try it on three times" mentality. **Trying something on briefly seems to make my ego feel less threatened by the possibility of losing its identity.** I can get a taste of what it is like to be in a different position without having to become that person. It makes the whole process feel more playful and curious.

The Middle as Non-Action

As someone who loves puzzles — and would shamelessly claim that I am pretty good at them — I have never been very good at "not knowing".

If I notice that a practice or experience is not unfolding the way I expected, I tend to move very quickly into one of two modes:

One is to search through all the methods I know and try to change what is happening.

The other is to begin asking deeper questions: is there a pattern here? Is my body trying to tell me something? Are there synchronicities?

And very quickly I slide from body sensation into imagery, symbols, and stories.

I seem to have spent a lot of energy keeping myself in a state of **always knowing**.

Recently I booked a session with a visceral manipulation practitioner. The practitioner was very experienced and technically skilled, and, like me, had studied many different modalities. Her hands moved quickly over me with confidence and assertion.

Part of me admired how efficient she was and trusted her professionally. But another part of me also knew quite clearly that the therapeutic effect of that particular session would probably be minimal.

I found myself thinking: our bodies, our inner worlds, don't usually trust someone who always knows.

I am afraid of becoming that kind of practitioner myself.

In Embodied Mindfulness, we often rest in **non-action**, and there are long stretches of gaps in instructions.

When I was teaching Feldenkrais, I already thought of myself as someone who uses far more silence than most people — my colleagues have even teased me, asking whether I had forgotten what I was going to say — and yet this degree of spaciousness still made me deeply uneasy.

For a long time, I was confused by this resting in non-action, and by these extended silences.

Then Jamie suggested imagining the state of cellular breathing in Body-Mind Centering, and something began to make more sense to me. For me, imagining cellular breathing is still "an action." But perhaps it is one of the closest actions I know to non-action.

I start to feel maybe that's why this practice can hold so many seemingly contradictory experiences of me, practicing, wandering, walking, stillness, doing.

Non-action is simply something that has not yet become an action I can name, explain, or push forward. It allows me to withdraw, for a moment, the impulse to intervene, interpret, search, and improve.

It allows what is already happening to keep happening, and to keep taking form.

The Middle as a Bridge (through voice)

One central tension in my life has been between the solid, physical body and the deepest layers of imagination and the unconscious.

I can spend hours doing Feldenkrais ATMs, indulging in micro-adjustments of movement explorations, and I can also meditate to leave the body and enter very deep imaginal space.

Once, at the beginning of a session with Jamie, I saw an image.

A boat was moving across perfectly calm water.

From my perspective, I could see both above and below the surface, as well as the line separating the two. The boat was traveling smoothly between these two worlds.

At the time, I was developing a course called *From Breath to Voice*.

When I saw the image, I felt that it was very close to what I really wanted to explore: between what has not yet been expressed and what has already risen to the surface, there is a middle space, a transitional zone.

On one side were feelings, thoughts, enormous amounts of imagery, subtle and complex perceptions. I knew they existed, but they had never fully entered the outer world.

On the other side was expression: finding form, becoming audible, visible, touchable. Something that had existed only inside me beginning to affect another body, the air between us, reality itself.

If I do not express, things remain sealed inside.

But when they do come out, sometimes they come out as harsh, weird, not easy to be passed on.

What I was looking for was that smooth transition: a small stretch of space between the two, where I could breathe, feel, adjust.

When I inhale, the world enters me. When I exhale, I bring something of myself back into the world.

Before voice, there is already breath. Before language, there is already expression.

Before I can speak a complete thought into the world, the body has already been practicing something very simple through breathing:

Allowing what is inside to enter the world with the fullness of myself, and to become perceptible there.

So I increasingly began to think of breath as the most primal bridge between the inner and outer worlds.

My voice course, inspired by Embodied Mindfulness, followed a very simple progression:

Settling inward → establishing boundaries → extending outward

First, returning inward. Feeling how voice exists in the body.

Then, through breath, sound, and self-touch, sensing what is me and what is not me.

Only then allowing the voice to move gradually into space from that inner support.

I used to think of "speaking out" as a kind of breakthrough; now I think of expression as a very fine, continuous process:

The breath goes out a little. The sound follows a little. Attention moves outward a little.

And I can still feel my back body, my belly, the place where I am sitting.

I can make a sound while still hearing what that sound is doing inside my body.

I can extend an invitation for connection toward another person without first leaving myself behind.

Now what?

Over the past two years studying Embodied Mindfulness, the way I teach groups and the way I work one-to-one have changed considerably. I used to find myself being pulled too closely into another person — or moving toward the opposite extreme and refusing contact altogether.

Now I use the method to find a movement between **presence with myself** and **presence with another**.

I can move closer and then come back to feel only my own bones, my breath, my weight. And when I am ready, I can enter contact again.

When I used to think about balance, I imagined a stable position. Find the right point somewhere between the extremes, and just stay there.

Or perhaps balance was like mixing colors: add a little more of this, a little more of that, until the proportions are right.

But the body does not seem to work that way: it inhales, pauses, exhales, pauses. Condense, then release. Focus, and then drift away.

What Embodied Mindfulness has given me is not a compromised midpoint, but a gradually developing capacity to move between polarities — to modulate, to stay, to withdraw, and to return.

I still do not know where I should go. What I know now is that even after I have already set out, I do not have to lose the possibility of changing direction.

At some point, “making the work my own” also began to raise another question in me: how much can a practice change and still remain the same practice?

If I bring in Body-Mind Centering, Feldenkrais, dreamwork, many other methods, and my own teaching instincts, am I still practicing Embodied Mindfulness, or am I already making something else?

I do not yet know. Perhaps this, too, is part of inhabiting the middle: staying in relationship with a lineage without disappearing into it, and allowing my own practice to take form without needing to sever the connection — to keep moving, pause, lose my way for a while, and come back.