

AN INTRODUCTION TO EMBODIED MINDFULNESS - THE ART OF STILLNESS

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Somatic Expression® - Body Wisdom for Modern Minds is an integrative approach to the art and craft of embodiment. Informed by traditions centered on the wisdom of the moving body, such as Dance Therapy, Somatic Education, Indigenous and Expressive Dance, as well as evolving research in the fields of neuroscience, somatic psychology and trauma studies, Somatic Expression is focused on making the intelligence of the body accessible, easy and understandable to the modern mind. The practitioner researches and resources the body from the inside out through the five indigenous somatic technologies nature has given us as human beings: breath, vocalization, contact, movement and stillness. In this exploration, the practitioner develops an intimate dialogue with the inner ecosystem bringing more comfort, ease, pleasure and grace into daily life. These somatic technologies are each initially featured in the foreground, and then brought together equally with the other technologies to create a synergistic whole. **Embodied Mindfulness** highlights the technology of stillness. Bridging Eastern contemplative traditions and Western contemporary somatic disciplines, Embodied Mindfulness was designed to make the experience of stillness an easily accessible occurrence, especially for those challenged by traditional meditation forms.

As a somatic movement therapist, I have encountered in many traditions beliefs about the body as an obstacle to transcend instead of an ally to befriend. These ideas along with the resulting conflict for many people between being spiritual and being a body bother me. Are these attitudes actually embedded in ancient teachings, which had a very different notion of “the body” than we do today? Or are these attitudes due to individual interpretations? Whatever the cause, the end result is the body gets short shrift in many approaches to meditation. We are given lots of conceptual, mind-oriented information, and then often rudimentary instructions about what to do with our bodies before we are expected to maintain an unmoving position for 30 minutes or more. It is unsurprising that many people are quickly confronted with either physical or mental discomfort, and we find ourselves in a dilemma between either adhering to the rules of meditation practice or respecting the needs of one’s body.

Over the years, I have witnessed people struggle with, and often times abandon, a meditation practice when they felt like they couldn’t keep up with the perceived rules and regulations of, as one student named it, “the proper way to meditate”. These perceived rules partly reflect a mostly unconscious personal narrative of what people associate with stillness - “be still”, “go sit in a corner until you can behave”, “stop moving so much” are some of the common early injunctions that have surfaced in inquiry with various

students. These same injunctions can easily get mixed up the perceived rules of traditional teachings, for example, those that adamantly insist on “sitting with the discomfort”.¹

What various people have named “the proper way to meditate” is often composed of these rules:

- 1) Duration: Practice should be either 20 minutes in Transcendental Meditation™, or 40 minutes in Vipassana and its secular offshoot Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).
- 2) Sitting posture: You should “sit up straight” in a chair - or on a cushion with your legs crossed and your hands on your knees with thumb and forefinger touching
- 3) Absolute stillness: Do not move – let the discomfort pass on its own
- 4) Adherence to focus: Focus on your breath and stay present – don’t let your mind wander
- 5) Passive allowance: Witness the breath as it is – do not change it

If this is what is required to meditate, there will be a higher probability of distress right off the bat and less chance of success. Who wants to adhere to a discipline that makes them immediately feel uncomfortable? As a student wrote about her experience of mindfulness meditation in an innovative eating disorders clinic:

“One aspect I have found bewildering in a treatment program so endorsing mindfulness and meditation is we we’re never given a simple and concrete practice template. The young ones here (late teens to mid-20’s) interpret it all as having to “sit still” - and it rarely “embeds” because there’s fire in the belly and ants in the pants.”²

Given what is known about the complexity of the mind-body relationship, let’s consider these questions:

Is the traditional method of sitting practice the optimal means for making stillness readily available to everyone?

Can we update the practices and methodologies of the past in order to come to terms with the new nature of the human animal, both within its inner ecosystem and the outer environment it inhabits?

Can we be kind, understanding and generous to all parts of our selves - particularly our bodies - in the quest for a transformative stillness?

These questions are part of what has guided the development of Embodied Mindfulness.

Origins of Embodied Mindfulness

*“To stop your mind does not mean to stop the activities of the mind. It means your mind pervades your whole body.”
– Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Master*

40 years ago, I began my journey with meditation after taking a college course “The Science of Intelligence”, which revolved around the theories of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the creator of Transcendental Meditation, or TM. Years later, I shifted into Vipassana (or Insight) meditation. The sensory attention to the body offered through Vipassana added a different dimension of awareness to my practice, particularly since beginning TM I had become a dancer and a teacher of movement. Vipassana

effectively brought the two worlds of movement and stillness closer together for me. A few years later, I met my most recent teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen monk who has made mindfulness practice much more accessible for people in the West by folding practice into daily life activities, such as “Washing the dishes meditation” or “Eating Meditation”.³

By the time I met Thich Nhat Hanh, I was diversifying my study of movement through two different, yet complementary somatic approaches: Body-Mind Centering® and Continuum.⁴ Somatic practices are united by their emphasis on learning from the inside out. This is essentially the same with any meditation tradition - you can listen to endless talks and read many books but ultimately meditation depends upon personal practice. The primary emphasis on subjective, personal experience in somatic approaches makes it an inquiry instead of a set solution; material is presented as a hypothesis to try on and sort out in one's own way. The discipline of Body-Mind Centering has two branches of inquiry: Developmental Movement (the biological patterns of movement hardwired in all humans that unfold in utero and in infancy) and Body Systems (each system of the body – such as lymph, muscle, bone, etc. – possesses a specific movement quality and unique state of mind). The inquiry of Continuum is based on biomorphic movement, i.e., non-ordinary ways of moving that connect us to other life forms. This movement is primarily accessed by variations in breathing and vibratory vocalizations, in tandem with micromovements and spacious intervals of stillness, or “open attention”. Inspired by these two somatic approaches and Thich Nhat Hahn’s influence, I began to augment *awareness* of my body’s sensations with somatic *responses*. I gave myself permission to punctuate the stillness with various actions, such as lengthening the back of my neck, increasing the duration of the inhale, opening my lips on the exhale, etc. This rhythm back and forth between *receptive* attention and *active* participation brought a new dimension both to my practice and my teaching. People who insisted they could not meditate were pleasantly surprised and deeply moved by their capacity to experience stillness in a new light.

Initially, I referred to these practices as somatic meditations, but soon realized people had too many associations with the word “meditation”, not only in their minds but in their bodily habits as well. I've observed many people can switch on a dime from comfort and ease in their moving bodies to a rigid position in meditation. All you have to do is say “we are going to go inward while sitting”, and people automatically begin to sit up “straight”, more often than not holding their spines in place while pushing through the lumbar spine and tightening their lips. As a result, I eventually changed my terminology to name these practices embodied mindfulness and the art of stillness. From the outside, the sitting practice appears to look the same, yet there is a divergence in both the underlying intention and the methodology. The Embodied Mindfulness practices can be viewed as simply a way to grow the brain map of your body by refining your inner sensing and your fine motor movement in a relaxed, easy state of awareness. Just as

a superb pianist or surgeon through repetition cultivates fine motor articulations of their hands and fingers, so too do we upgrade the virtuosity of our bodily intelligence through these somatic practices.

The Art of Stillness

“There is a point where, in the mystery of existence, contradictions meet: where movement is not all movement and stillness is not all stillness; where the idea and the form, the within and the without, are united; where infinite becomes finite, but not.” - Rabindranath Tagore

What is stillness anyway? If life is movement, isn't stillness death? There is a wide spectrum of motor actions from movement to stillness, just like there is an expansive range between sound and silence. And just like silence, stillness is never absolute. As long as we are alive, our heart is pulsing, our breath is flowing, and our muscles are firing. Stillness does not have to be a form of paralysis, an end-state accomplished by tightening, bracing, holding, or any other action that unnecessarily inhibits movement. Stillness can be “breathing rock” – a combination of stability and flow where our inner capacities for sensory receptivity and active reflection can emerge effortlessly.

In traditional meditation practice, you sit upright, close your eyes and watch the breath or repeat a mantra. The somatic intention of these actions is to stimulate “relaxation” - the parasympathetic response of the autonomic nervous system. The parasympathetic relays a message to the psyche: *you are safe here - you can let down your guard, draw attention inward and be receptive*. The mind needs the body to settle before it can open up and reveal itself. Yet the high set points of muscle tone, sensory activation and cortical thinking of the sympathetic response of the autonomic nervous system needed for modern life might linger longer than is comfortable. This “fight or flight” sympathetic response implicitly relays a different type of message to the psyche: *you are in danger here - you have to keep your guard up, scan the environment for danger and be defensive*. The body translates the need for protection into either heightened muscle tightness (hypertonicity) or a dissociative checking out (hypotonicity) – and neither state facilitates ease and presence. Yet to switch from the movement of doing into the stillness of being is a big quantum leap – and can leave many people in the dark. How do I become inwardly still without either being overwhelmed by thinking, or by drifting off and checking out? Making the transition from so much action and busyness to “nowhere to go, nothing to do” is much harder than it appears. My intention is to ease people into stillness by meeting them where they are at – with all of their complexity, striving, and yearning, their overactive cortexes and underutilized bodies.

Furthermore, when we direct people to stop moving, close their eyes and become still, we are effectively asking the human animal to disregard its instincts for survival, and the human being to ignore his or her memory. It is “unnatural” to sit with eyes closed, especially in a roomful of strangers. The physical distress

arising in a position of stillness can be symptomatic of this psychic agitation. It can also simply be due to how we are structurally sitting. More often than not, I imagine, it is a confluence of the two. Given this chicken-egg situation, how do we take both factors into account and shape our teaching accordingly?

Embodied Mindfulness uses familiar aspects of traditional practice, such as breath and alignment, to cultivate stillness as well as various resources one might not think of as being either movement or stillness, such as subtle vocalizations, micro-movements, and self-contact. These *somatic activations* are self-directed, voluntary motor actions in tandem with sensate awareness that change both states of mind and body (e.g., a wiggle of the toes, a pursing of the lips, a deep inhale through the nose, etc.). These subtle activations are not distractions nor are they overly stimulating, yet provide many possibilities for more internal comfort and ease. This self-permission to respond as a body by changing breath flow, experimenting with self-contact, or even expressing the exhale as a sound vibration can make the prospect of stillness less daunting and more enticing.

During a 10-20 minute daily practice of Embodied Mindfulness, somatic awareness and response take center stage. You alternate receptive attention to inner information (being with what is) with active somatic responses (changing what you want). This rhythm between witnessing and modifying, and between acceptance and change, provides more choices for bodily engagement and psychic freedom. One's personal rhythm and preference determine when to be a receptive witness and when to be a directive participant. We meet the practice from where we are in this moment in time. Do I feel comfortable in myself? Do I feel enough support? It is this felt sense that determines when, and to what degree, you actively modify breath or posture.

Initially, all these choices can feel overwhelming, especially for those new to using the felt sense as a guide. The complexity of choice is balanced out by the simplicity of repetition with a *somatic mantra* – the home base we return to over and over. Building on the traditional concept of mantra (from Sanskrit meaning “mind liberation”), a somatic mantra repeats a motor activity, such as a specific breath, a form of contact, a vocal sound, or even a kinesthetic (moving) image, as a point of focus and stabilization. A somatic mantra calms the mind, which creates more ease in the body. If the mind is overly chaotic, the body will be distressed. Similarly, if the body is chaotic, the mind will be distressed! Just like a traditional mantra, somatic mantras redirect the mind from its ruminating patterns so we learn to oscillate between the *stability* of focused attention and the *mobility* to follow what arises. As needed, let go of the mantra and follow the mind wherever it wanders in the wilderness of the internal landscape. If you wish, direct attention to what is trying to emerge: is there a thought, feeling or sensation that wants to come forward and be noticed? Does it want to be witnessed, engaged or even ignored? In this approach, no judgment is implied with any of

these choices. We are all at different places in ourselves and in our lives at this particular moment in time – it may be a ripe moment for deeper inquiry or not given what is going on. And as needed, return to the mantra and get back on the path. If the practitioner is easily overwhelmed when sitting in stillness, for example, these concrete tools help modulate and control how much information is let in at any time so you can access the inner landscape without a lot of muss or fuss! This permission to choose creates safety and lessens expectation of how one should relate to their inner content. You find your zone of comfort and your groove, like setting off on an easy hiking trail where you can easily get into the swing of things without being prematurely challenged by the terrain.

Initial Sitting Practice ⁵

“When your back becomes straight, your mind will become quiet.” – Shunryu Suzuki

In daily life, little attention is given to the action of sitting, with not much more attention in traditional practice outside of a cursory awareness and an idea of sitting up straight. In giving attention to your skeletal structure in sitting, it is easier to stay present without accruing stress and strain. But what does it actually mean to have a “straight back”, especially since our spine is a series of curves? Is it necessary to push through the lower back to maintain uprightness? What inner coordinates can be sensed and imagined? These questions - instead of the directive to “sit up straight” - initiate an active process of somatic self-inquiry essential to a sustainable practice. And creating the appropriate environment to support this uprightness is important too. Since the chair is the modern environment we primarily inhabit in our waking hours, it makes sense to learn how to make peace with this environment by collaborating with it in our stillness practice.

As you sit in a chair, start with the question – am I getting enough support to sit upright with ease and comfort? If not, what can I do with my body, and what can I do with the environment of the chair? Try moving your pelvis so it is snug up against the back of the chair. If that is too far of a distance to go, place a cushion between the back of the chair and your lumbar spine so your back is well supported. Are your feet making contact with the floor? If not put a folded blanket or a cushion there. Since we are all various heights, it is not surprising that a one-size-fits-all chair would need adaption. Be like Goldilocks - don't be content with your first solution; experiment until you find just the right configuration!

Once your feet are in place, take a few full breaths to let your weight drop down through your sitz bones not only into the chair, but beyond – think down through the chair. Then, rock on your sitz bones forwards, backwards and side to side. The movement stimulates bodily feedback so you can feel where center is for you in this moment. That sense of center will continue to change throughout the duration of the practice

period as your somatic sensibility becomes increasingly clearer.

Once you have found this initial support and comfort, take the next step: combine awareness of your breathing with belly self-contact. Self-contact adds another layer of somatic awareness to stabilize attention. You can sense under your hands the subtle movement stimulated by the action of your diaphragm. Inhale – diaphragm descends and belly swells; exhale – diaphragm rises and belly settles. In taking these breaths, keep in mind your belly is 360° - there is movement not only in the front of your belly but also in the sides and the back. Let your hands move around and make contact with all these various places - wherever we make contact with our hands, the mind follows and focuses our attention there.

It is easier to be in the present moment when there are multiple sensory inputs to keep the mind occupied – in this case, the interaction between our tactile sense, our kinesthetic (movement) sense, and our bodily sensations (interoceptors and proprioceptors). Breathing and self-contact in tandem with a soft attention and focus creates a felt sense of self-soothing that signals the mind it is safe and can rest. And once these elements are all in place, the magic of stillness can more readily arise.

Reflection

“...neural plasticity seems to show that the more any one of these top-down cognitive habits is repeated, the more consolidated it becomes in the brain. According to Davidson and Lutz in the Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness, “many of our core mental processes such as awareness and attention and emotional regulation, including our very capacity for happiness and compassion, should best be conceptualized as trainable skills.” - Jeff Warren ⁶

Embodied Mindfulness proceeds from the premise that the body is the primary means for settling the mind. We are born into this life as a soma - a thinking body and a sensing mind organized around sense perceptions. We are gradually educated out of our primary senses through cultural conditioning, and it no longer comes naturally for us to think through our bodies. The overall cumulative effect is our bodies gradually transform from expansive playgrounds to confining prisons. Naturally, we then turn to the head to run the show and don't listen as much to the heart and the belly. The imbalance of this “top heavy” orientation parallels the cultural emphasis on “doing”. This is seen in physical practices as well, with top-down directives (telling the body what to do) often not equally matched by bottom-up information (listening to what the body has to say).

A paradigm change has been creeping steadily into culture thanks to years of effort by the holistic health community, now augmented by research from neuroscience and embodied cognition. By putting the body on equal footing with the mind, we change the cultural conversation, and the resulting conceptual platform of what it means to be a contemporary human. What contributes to becoming an embodied being? The

artful coordination of our breath, movement, and mental focus grows our inner senses. Daily practice embeds and emboldens the upwelling of sensory motor information into consciousness, and we come to value the body and its sensory languages as not separate from thinking, but integral to its very existence.

We have evidence from countless research studies, thanks to the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds and the Mind and Life Institute, among others, how the art of stillness changes the brain to be more resilient and less reactive, more receptive and less distracted. These “trainable skills”, as Davidson and Lutz referred to them, can be explored at any stage of life. That is the good news! The bad news is the necessity of committing to daily practice. The older we get, the harder it is to change our preferences, habits, and routines. It is by easing into practice through simple means – whether it is by choosing a specific time of day or only practicing for 5 minutes at a time - that stillness becomes metabolized. There is much more value in making stillness consistently part of our daily rhythm than in practicing every now and then for a longer duration. In fact, a research study from University of Wisconsin-Stout discovered that ten minute daily mindfulness sessions produced the same discernible changes in the brain as that of forty-minute sessions.⁷ *Whatever we unconsciously repeat is what we become. Whatever we consciously practice, we also become.*

In Embodied Mindfulness practice, the goal is not to transcend the body – it is to discover the richness and depth of what the body truly is. *Stillness is a movement*. Just as moving generates different states of bodily perception and grows the brain map of our body, so too does stillness accomplish similar effects. When people speak of “getting into their body”, it is often through large movement such as stretching or dancing. We acclimate to this definition, only paying attention to gross motor feedback and interpreting that physical effort as “embodiment”. Yet, these larger movements can ignore huge swaths of the bodily landscape by not registering the feedback of nuanced sensation. Our body wisdom can express itself through both movement and stillness so we can go beyond the old paradigm of mind-body dualism. In these sitting practices where there is less change and stimulation, there is more spacious attention to detail. We can get into our bodies while valuing comfort and ease over stress and strain. We can have mercy before insight and basic self-soothing before inquiry. And we can construct a new model of contemplative practice that is more inclusive, generous and kind.

Footnotes:

1. Sunlun Sayadaw, page 112-14, quoted in *Living Dharma*, Jack Kornfield, Shambhala (2010)
2. Personal correspondence, June 2013
3. Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA
4. [Body-Mind Centering](#) [Continuum Movement](#)
5. For a series of recorded Embodied Mindfulness practices, go [here](#)
6. “The Head Trip: Adventures on the Wheel of Consciousness” by Jeff Warren, Random House (2007)

7. *“Frontal Electroencephalographic Asymmetry Associated With Positive Emotion Is Produced by Very Brief Meditation Training” in Psychological Science, October 2011, 22: 1277-1279*

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