AN INTRODUCTION TO EMBODIED MINDFULNESS

Jamie McHugh, RSMT

“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

“Thinking and visualizing are actions, they are behaviors every bit as much as throwing a baseball is a behavior. And like repeated physical actions, repeated mental actions get entrenched in the brain. Scans of the brains of long-term meditators with an MRI found increased cortical thickness over areas associated with attention and sensory processing - thickness that was positively correlated with years of practice…” - Jeff Warren

Somatic Expression® - Body Wisdom for Modern Minds is an integrative approach to the art and science of human movement. Somatic Expression is informed by traditions centered on the wisdom of the moving body, such as Dance Therapy, Somatic Education, Indigenous and Expressive Dance, as well as current research in the fields of mind/body medicine, neuroscience, somatic psychology and trauma studies. In Somatic Expression, you research and resource your own body from the inside out with the five essential somatic technologies nature has given us as human beings: breath, vocalization, contact, movement and stillness. By undertaking these fundamentals of the thinking body (soma) and bringing them out into action (expression), you develop an intimate dialogue with your inner ecosystem, increasing your capacity to incorporate more comfort, ease, pleasure and grace into daily life.

A specific application of Somatic Expression to contemplative sitting practice is what I have come to call Embodied Mindfulness. It was developed to make stillness more easily accessible for people challenged by traditional meditation forms. The rigors of these traditions, both in duration of practice and in their conceptual understanding of the body, can be incompatible with the demands of modern life and the nature of the contemporary body. Traditional meditation practices were designed at a time when people were strenuously involved in basic survival tasks. They squatted, walked, pounded, and pulled: life was bodily-based with lots of repetitive activity. There is a big difference between the body of a hunter-gatherer - or even an agriculturalist - and that of a modern human, sitting in a cubicle or at home scanning a screen for hours at a time. With these more sedentary habits, tensions accumulate and solidify, and a narrow range of movement is employed. Given these changes in lifestyle and
behavior, it is reasonable to update the practices and methodologies of the past to accommodate the changing nature of the human animal. For example, to be a witness to your breathing as it is – this concept made much more sense in the past. Variations in activity throughout the day created constant fluctuations in our breathing. Now, with the diminishment of ordinary physicality in urban life (as opposed to the specialized varieties people are choosing), our breathing capacity is not utilized, challenged, nor as varied as it was even a hundred years ago. Consequently, we need to be more proactive in an intelligent and informed manner to consciously evoke diversity in use and counteract the effects of disuse. With our breathing, that means more variation in diaphragmatic action, and restoring the “baby breath” to the adult soma. Let the breath not only be what it is, but also coax it into being what it doesn’t know how to be. Be a witness to your breath and also play with it: deepen it, widen it, slow it down or speed it up.

Another way to update tradition and ease people into a daily practice is to titrate the amount of time. For example, the traditional Vipassana and, by extension, the MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) prescription to sit daily for forty minutes is not realistic for many. People often end up abandoning their practice altogether – more often than not with some shame and self-judgment. “I am not disciplined enough.” “I don’t have enough time to meditate.” I have heard many variations on these themes over years of teaching. I find there is much more value in consistency - sitting for ten to fifteen minutes a day instead of practicing every now and then for a longer duration. Whatever we unconsciously repeat is what we become. Whatever we consciously practice, we also become. When the practice of stillness is part of our daily rhythm, it becomes metabolized; over time a felt state of ease can become a reliable trait. In fact, a research study from University of Wisconsin-Stout discovered that ten minute daily meditation sessions produced the same discernible changes in the brain as that of forty-minute sessions.
Origins of Embodied Mindfulness

40 years ago, I began meditation after taking a course as a college freshman on the science of consciousness, which primarily consisted of the theories of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The Maharishi - the creator of Transcendental Meditation, or TM - became very popular after various luminaries, especially the Beatles, went to India to study with him. As a result, TM became the first popularly practiced form of Eastern meditation in the West. This form of meditation revolves around the repetition of a Sanskrit mantra (secretly given to the practitioner during initiation) for twenty minutes twice a day.

A mantra is a specific Sanskrit word or phrase repeated over and over internally (and sometimes vocalized) to occupy and focus the mind, and is found in a variety of traditional contemplative practices. “Om Mane Padme Hum” is a Tibetan Buddhist mantra. The prayer “Hail Mary”, when repeated over and over with rosary beads, is a Catholic version of a mantra. As in other meditation practices, you also sit in an upright position in TM, yet you don’t have to sit in the traditional cross-legged lotus position on the floor; you can sit in a chair.

A few years after beginning this daily practice, I became curious about Zen, primarily due to its aesthetic and its emphasis on connection to the natural world. In Zen practice, there is no internal mantra; you sit with eyes partially open and focus on a spot in front of you. The point of focus is the mantra. After some months, I decided I preferred an inner focus for sitting and returned to my TM practice. In 1987, I was introduced to Theravada Buddhism (Vipassana), where the repetition of words is replaced by a specific sensory mantra, the most common two being a focus on the breath entering the nostrils or a focus on the movement of the breath in the belly. In the years after beginning TM, I had become a dancer and a teacher of movement, so Vipassana effectively brought the two worlds of movement and stillness closer together for me. A few years later, I met my current Dharma teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen monk. The formal sitting practice he taught unified verbal and sensory mantras. For example, you would start internally repeating these words as you were sensing your breathing: “breathing in, I know I am breathing in; breathing out, I know I am breathing out.” After
some time of coordinating the statement with your breathing cycle, you would condense the words to:
In-Out. In-out. This format was repeated in hundreds of different meditations, each with a different
theme and focus. This method of meditation planted the seeds for Embodied Mindfulness.

Around the time I met Thich Nhat Hanh, I had been diversifying my study of movement with two
different, yet complementary, somatic approaches: Body-Mind Centering® and Continuum.³ 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. – has 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 type of 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 influences, I began to include not only awareness of my body’s sensations in
sitting practice, but also gave myself permission to punctuate the steady-state stillness with somatic
interventions: lengthening the back of my neck, increasing the duration of the inhale, opening my lips
on the exhale, etc. Both receptive attention to sensation and active participation with somatic
interventions brought a new dimension to my practice. As a result, I stopped calling what I was doing
meditation and simply called it the practice of stillness. Partly, this name change was to respectfully
differentiate the practice I was doing and teaching from the great meditation traditions, but also partly to
demystify the practice of stillness and take contemplative practice out of the domain of religion and
spirituality, and more into the realm of planetary membership. With the neutrality of the term,
unencumbered by pre-conceptions about meditation, it is hopefully easier to approach stillness simply
as a state of being and as a biological reality we share in common with other bodies of nature. I can
become still, like rock, tree or ice. Just like I can move to generate a different state of mind and
perception, I can become still. This idea is reflected in one of my favorite meditations from Thich Nhat Hanh:

Breathing in, I am mountain; breathing out, I feel solid. In-mountain; out-solid.

Breathing in, I am a flower; breathing out, I feel fresh. In-flower; out-fresh.

Breathing in, I am still water; breathing out, I reflect all that is. In - still water; out-reflecting all that is.

Breathing in, I am space; breathing out, I feel free. In-space; out-free.

Somatic Stillness

Stillness, along with breathing, vocalization, contact, and movement, are all intrinsic aspects of our animal body and, by extension, our psyche. We are both a body and a mind, or a soma. The soma is “The Thinking Body”, as one of our somatic ancestors, Mabel Todd, titled her seminal book in 1936. Redefining ourselves as somas brings into question the arbitrary and unwieldy division often made between movement and stillness, as well as between body and mind. For example, we often think of “getting into our body” with stretching or dancing. Yet why not use attention and stillness as a departure point, gradually letting the small dance of the body emerge, little by little, breath by breath? Blurring the lines and re-conceptualizing our body/mind as a soma changes the strategies we use to become more embodied. An example of getting into our somas relevant to this discussion about mindfulness practice is conscious sitting. When we ordinarily sit, there is not much attention to how we sit outside a cursory awareness. In consciously sitting, after initially closing your eyes and noticing the movement of your breath, you bring attention to your alignment in relationship to the above and the below - internally and externally. Where am I in myself, and where am I in space? Do I sense myself in front or behind my centerline? Do I even have an awareness of where that centerline is? After rocking a bit forward and backward, and side to side, on my sitz bones, and letting the movement awaken bodily feedback, I can feel where center is for me - in this moment. (And that sense of center will continue to change throughout the duration of my practice period!) As I continue this self-inquiry, am I allowing my pelvis to be supported by the chair so my weight can settle? Do I have enough lower back support behind me so
the back of my belly can relax, and be moved by my 360-degree diaphragmatic breathing?

This inquiry creates a more informed process of alignment than merely "sitting up straight". Lining up your bones to activate the muscles around your spine and coaxing the central diaphragm into full pulsations - an outward expanding and inward condensing - throughout your whole torso ultimately enables structural equilibrium. These and other actions not only increase core strength and muscular efficiency, but also instigate psychological equanimity: balanced body structure and easy breath flow support a balanced and centered psyche. That's why Buddhists for 2,500 years have spent so much time sitting upright! But you don't have to be a Buddhist to sit mindfully - you only have to be a conscious human being with a vertebrate structure aligning itself in the gravitational field.

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

Embodied Mindfulness not only uses familiar aspects of practice such as breath and alignment to cultivate stillness, but also broadens the possibilities of action by including subtle vocalizations, micromovements, and self-contact. Your outer container continues to be primarily still in sitting, yet you give yourself permission to punctuate the stillness with these various forms of movement. This differentiates Embodied Mindfulness from traditional practices as bodily awareness and action take center stage; practice becomes more responsive and flexible to where you are in your soma. You can subtly move, change your breath flow, make contact with yourself, or even express your exhale as sound vibration to create more comfort and ease. These and many others actions bring into the foreground the somatic senses of interoception and proprioception. These inner bodily feelings often are unrecognized and remain behind the scenes in ordinary life, whether due to excessive information/cerebral stimulation, having an outer orientation, or muscular tension – not to mention the cultural devaluation of bodily intelligence in general. In slowing down, drawing inward, relaxing and moving towards stillness, you are able to access more of this body wisdom. What is sometimes more effective and sustainable than physical effort or large movement to get into our bodies is somatic instigation - motor action in tandem with sensate awareness and mental focus. (Motor action is
breathing, vocalizing, self-contact, micromovements, and visualizing – any self-directed action through the body that generates a change of sensation/state of mind.) Stillness for the human being is an aspect of movement; as long as we are alive, our heart is pulsing, our breath is flowing, our muscles are firing, etc. So stillness has many implicit gradients of action. And by offering a diverse template for practice that gives permission for these gradients, we ease people into stillness by meeting them where they are at – with all of their complexity, striving, and yearning, their overactive cortices and underutilized bodies. 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’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.”

The Embodied Mindfulness template uses both multi-sensory activities and various points of focus. In addition to attention on how you sit (alignment) and how you breathe (movement), you can also sense and witness your interior with “open attention”. Open attention is a relaxed floating throughout your inner landscape to harvest what is present. Periodically scanning somatically from head to feet, front to back, and center to extremities, for example, gives information about where you are in your structure and what you might want to change to feel more comfortable and aligned. You can also actively respond at times with imagery, micro-movements, various breaths, or sounds, etc. Finally, when, and to what degree, you actively intervene is based on your felt sense. When to be receptive and when to be directive is determined by your own personal rhythm of choice. The exploration of stillness, to be fully integrated, is best done within one’s own timing and on one’s own terms. The old hierarchical prescriptions and demands reflect a different political atmosphere that is at odds with the advent of democracy!

To balance out the complexity of these choices for participation, there is the simplicity of a home base: the somatic mantra. Building on the traditional concept of mantra (from Sanskrit meaning “mind liberation”), a somatic mantra is the repetition of a motor activity - such as a specific breath, a form of
contact, a vocal sound, or even a kinesthetic (moving) image. And just like a traditional mantra is a point of focus for redirecting the mind from its ruminating patterns, a somatic mantra similarly serves as a point of stabilization and concentration. Returning over and over to the 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! Somatic mantras initially get you in the groove and on track in practice so you can settle inside yourself. Whenever you like, leave the mantra and let the mind follow its thinking - or the soma follow its sensing. Go “off the path” and see where it takes you, and then from time to time, invoke the mantra to come back home. This back and forth gives you the stability of focused attention and the mobility to follow whatever arises. By having the choice to focus or to wander without any shame or blame, you personalize practice to suit your particular needs.

**From Somatic Stillness to Freedom in Movement**

In addition to being able to access stillness, and the parasympathetic nervous system’s chill-out mechanism of relaxed awareness, the Embodied Mindfulness practices also re-educate our tenacious movement habits. Sitting comfortably and easily in a chair, with maximum support, is the middle ground between the full relaxation of lying on the floor and the full activation of standing on one's two feet. In sitting, you can focus attention on the movement of your core while the extremities of your legs and arms become secondary. This reduced field makes it easier to explore various articulations of the diaphragm and subtle micromovements, making sitting the ideal position for learning how to breathe fully and fluently. This attention to breathing, and diaphragmatic fluency, is fundamental to systemic change in the soma. You have enough sensory arousal to pay attention and explore, which gives your diaphragm more mobility. Simultaneously, simply by virtue of being in an upright position, the full pulsation of the central diaphragm - and the three-dimensional breathing it creates - connect the head and tail through the centerline for increased structural stability. This head-tail connectivity replicates your original design from nature and early movement experience as an infant; returning to this pattern counteracts the learned adaptations over time that have segmented your spine into parts and your psyche into compartments, which makes movement – and life - more strenuous and less pleasurable.
And it is this combination of increased mobility in your breathing, and more stability in your structure, that sets the foundation for healthy, integrated movement.

“...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 Warren⁵

These “trainable skills”, whether as core mental processes or as core somatic processes, are equally mutable and can be explored at any stage of life. With Embodied Mindfulness practice, we have the opportunity to go beyond the old paradigm of mind-body dualism, and construct a new model for graceful, sustainable aging.

Footnotes:

4. Personal correspondence, June, 2013

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