

Resting in Stillness - Caroline Kleindienst, MA, RSMT

“What breath said.

It’s all right here. This breath holds everything. This ease, my belonging. A homecoming. Both push and glide. Gathering, to subside. This breath, a beloved friend. The center. The refuge, the beginning. And end”.

(Participant’s poem after a sit during my Somatic Meditation- Embodied Mindfulness online class, 2017)

My personal experience with Embodied Mindfulness

The first time I experienced the meditation approach that Jamie McHugh would continue to develop as Embodied Mindfulness was during a weeklong “Embodying Nature” retreat at Sea Ranch, California in 2010. I came to apprentice with Jamie after graduating from the Tamalpa Institute (Movement- Based Expressive Arts Therapy), where he taught. My intention was to learn about his somatic approach to working in nature and exploring awareness of the moving body in communion with the natural world.

As an Austrian native, growing up in the conservative, Roman Catholic Austrian countryside, I have always been intrigued by the “exotic idea” of traditional eastern meditation practice. Because of this curiosity, I tried different kinds of traditional meditation practices at various meditation centers, such as Shambhala meditation teachings, Zen practice, and Vipassana. I never truly found a doorway into a deeper sense of my body and myself during those meditation approaches.

At the Embodying Nature retreat we gathered each morning indoors to explore our inner landscape through Embodied Mindfulness practice before we ventured outdoors for our exploration in the natural environment. Experiencing the Embodied Mindfulness sits guided by Jamie felt very different. I remember my hands making contact with my belly, exploring different lengths of inhale and exhale, and the shape shifting sounds of hey- o- a- hi. I felt alive and I had permission to express myself, to follow the natural response and the impulses of my body.

At the traditional meditation centers, I often had a feeling of constriction, as well as the sense I had to repress natural impulses and longings for movement that would arise during the sits. It felt like my thinking mind told my breath and my body how to be in stillness and what to do - mainly through telling them to be still and to shut up. Through the Embodied Mindfulness approach I feel that my body and my breath is sensed and opened so deeply that it just knows naturally how to rest deeper and explore the intervals of stillness and movement. My breath informs my mind, not the other way around.

On the third day of the Sea Ranch retreat I remember lying in my bed in the evening. Before I fell asleep I felt the movement of my diaphragm rising and falling in the most natural and calming way. I think this was the first time I became aware of the permanent presence of this inner sensation, of the nurturance and support that it can give me. I was in awe and felt touched by this discovery.

Remembering

I remember the breath in the cave

The child in me remembers

At the place where everything starts

Supported by my breath

I can be awake

I can fall into my breath
I can rise with my breath
It is inside of me
It was always inside of me
(Sea Ranch, 9/21/2010)

In 2013 I started to study Embodied Mindfulness more intensively. I began this training program during a time of personal transition. I was in the middle of a divorce and grieving the death of a beloved family member, as well as experiencing health challenges. The training program and the practice of daily stillness became a powerful anchor in my life. Through establishing a practice of only ten minutes a day followed by open exploration time, I was able to reconnect to the present moment with more ease. I found this a powerful tool to relieve anxiety. Fritz Perls defines anxiety as the gap between the now and then. He says, “*If you are in the now, you can not be anxious, because the excitement flows immediately into ongoing spontaneous impulses.*”⁽¹⁾ The daily sits and explorations encouraged me to be in the here and now, to open my senses and reconnect to a childlike state of curiosity and creativity for inquiry. Looking at my life situation through this lens made my challenges feel more manageable and I could taste the possibilities and potentials that were in front of me rather than being afraid of them.

The daily practice encouraged me to listen more deeply to my body. I learned how to read the needs of my inner landscape and started to make plans and life changes accordingly. The focus on my breath combined with the powerful tools of self-contact and sound supported self-soothing during times of feeling overwhelmed by my emotions, as well as by my physical challenges. Over time and through practice, by repeatedly bridging my inner landscape and my outer environment with breath, sound, movement, and stillness, I cultivated a sense of connection and deep belonging.

Professional Application of Embodied Mindfulness

I am a Registered Somatic Movement Therapist (RSMT), expressive arts practitioner, and artist in private practice on Maui, Hawaii. My areas of focus are working with trauma, depression and anxiety, grief and loss, chronic illness, and life transitions. Since 2014, I have been integrating Embodied Mindfulness into my one-on-one and group sessions in somatic movement and expressive arts. These are some examples of my work:

Reclaiming ownership through Embodied Mindfulness

Julie, a 45 year-old woman came to work with me after experiencing acts of physical violence and rape from her former partner. She is also a survivor of violence and emotional abuse during her childhood. By the time she came to see me she suffered from an anxiety disorder. Julie experienced multiple panic attacks per day and had difficulties sleeping, as well as strong anxiety that hindered her from socializing and developing meaningful relationships in her life. Julie’s intention for our work together was to find new resources and tools for self-soothing, as well as empowerment and the reclamation of her body after her traumatic experiences.

I started the sessions using an initial Embodied Mindfulness focus of finding support in a chair. I encouraged Julie to find a way to sit upright while feeling well supported by the chair and having her feet touch the ground at the same time. After relaxing into the support of the chair for a few seconds, Julie started to ask if she was “in the right posture.” We found out that her perception of her posture in a chair while sitting was informed by the belief of having to sit straight. We explored her most comfortable and

supported sitting position using various pillows to adapt the chair for more support and comfort. After more than 15 minutes of exploration I could see a deep exhale moving through her system as she gave herself permission to rest into the support of the chair by using her internal sense of her unique needs at this moment. Moshe Feldenkrais points out that our perception of posture is often misleading because of the aesthetic concept of the word “straight.” He says, “*Any posture is acceptable in itself as long as it does not conflict with the law of nature*”. (2) Reframing Julie’s old belief concept of right and wrong posture opened up new possibilities to rest deeper in stillness and support.

I invited Julie to repeat this exercise of finding support in a chair at home as often as possible. After a few sessions she reported that a feeling of safety came back into her life, as well as a feeling of empowerment, simply by cultivating a habit of adjusting and adapting her environment to her needs. She was able to bridge this simple exercise into the activities of her daily life - noticing in her body when social activities felt nurturing and resourcing, or by leaving a situation that did not feel supportive or safe for her.

I also introduced Julie to the Embodied Mindfulness practice of the Oppositional Breath. This focuses on the movement of the diaphragm descending while the lungs are ascending on the inhale, as well as the diaphragm ascending while the lungs descend on the exhale. This movement of opposites spreads attention out to include awareness of the whole torso. Julie reported that returning to the awareness of the movement of her diaphragm during her panic attacks helped to decrease their intensity. Layered with the tool of self- contact, it also decreased the lengths of the attacks, making them more manageable and less threatening. Self-contact is another powerful practice used in Embodied Mindfulness to encourage awareness. The focus on the sensation of descending and ascending, witnessed by her hands through self-contact, occupied Julie’s mind and helped her to stabilize a *somatic mantra*.

Jamie McHugh emphasizes the importance of the somatic mantras in Embodied Mindfulness: “*A somatic mantra is the repetition of a motor activity - such as a specific breath, a form of contact, or a vocal sound - as a point of focus for freeing the mind of its ruminating patterns. Like traditional mantras it serves as a stabilizer*”. (3)

Returning again and again to the movement of the diaphragm and self-contact helped calm Julie’s mind as well as relax her body. The practice offered a point of stability and a means for returning back home to her body from the state of distress and chaos.

The Embodied Mindfulness practice of the 360-Degree Belly Breath helped Julie explore sensations of pleasure and comfort. This practice focuses on the movement of the belly while exhaling and inhaling, thus cultivating awareness of a 360-degree movement on the front, side, and back of the belly. This breath was very powerful for Julie as it also helped her to shift out of a victim perspective. Through three-dimensional self-perception, she experienced a new sense of ownership for her body and self. She shared that she imagined herself in the center of her breath, which created a boundary to her past traumatic experiences. She became reassured by her new sense of safety, aliveness and vitality. Being present in the center of her breath allowed her to feel active, rather than passive, and hold all aspects of her past life experiences with more ease.

The Creative Breath

One of the great gifts Embodied Mindfulness offers is the open exploration time after each sit. During the open exploration time participants are encouraged to explore and express sensations, feelings, images, and

thoughts through movement, stillness, drawing, or writing. This creates a powerful ground to stimulate creativity and play as well as self- inquiry. Carl Gustav Jung understood very early on the power of creative expression and play.

“The dynamic principle of fantasy is play, a characteristic also of a child, and as such it appears as inconsistent with the principle of serious work. But without this playing with fantasy no creative work has ever come to birth.” (4).

I have been using Embodied Mindfulness as a tool for creative coaching sessions. Client Sarah, a female poet and writer, who is also a seasoned practitioner of traditional meditation practice, came to me to reclaim her creativity after a blockage she felt with her writing. Her intention was to find new tools to develop creativity in her poetry. I introduced Sarah to Embodied Mindfulness. She felt especially inspired by the 360-Degree Belly Breath, which I renamed for her as” 360 Degree Creative Belly Breath”. I layered this breath, which focuses on a three-dimensional self-perception with open attention and with exploration time about moments of creativity she experienced in her childhood. During the open exploration time Sarah reconnected to a childlike state of imagination, fantasy and play, using movement, words, and drawing to express herself. Inspired by our session Sarah created three new poems and started working on a new chapbook collection. “Snow Ponies”, the title of her new chapbook came to her during the 360- Degree Creative Belly Breath sit.

Reclaiming Fluidity

I have been integrating Embodied Mindfulness in various workshops in nature, in the studio environment, as well as used this approach in online classes.

I used Embodied Mindfulness in two five-day retreats I facilitated in Hawaii. These retreats also incorporate swimming with wild Hawaiian spinner dolphins and sea turtles. At the retreat we spent the mornings with explorations in the natural environment and afternoons in the studio at the retreat center. For the sessions I created a synthesis of Embodied Mindfulness and expressive arts (Tamalpa Life/Art Process). I started each session with a 25 minutes Embodied Mindfulness sit, followed by open attention and exploration time. The participants would then transition into another medium (drawing, creative writing, collage), and finish with a whole group sharing and/or community ritual.

Several participants attended the retreats with the intention of confronting and healing past traumatic experiences of swimming in the ocean as well as exploring the element of water. Embodied Mindfulness practices, like the Waterfall Breath (which focuses on a movement pathway up the spine at the back of the body on each inhale and down the front of the body on each exhale), supported participants in the exploration of their inner fluidity. People reported that through the image of the waterfall and the sensory response during the exploration time, they were able to imprint a body memory that was connected to water and associated with pleasure. By softening the spine they not only reported sensing the fluidity of the movement, but also sensing the fluidity of their blood, organs, and even bones.

The somatic awareness created by the Embodied Mindfulness sits informed the way that they met the element water in the natural environment. Participants reported that they reconnected to a feeling of safety during the ocean swim explorations, thus reclaiming their fluid self. After a few days, a participant who initially was concerned about participating in the retreat due to her fear of being in the ocean, shared with me: “I just realized I can become ocean myself. The waves are in my breath, each moment, each second. I am not afraid anymore.”



Drawing by group participant G. after EM exploration:” Expanding to the cells, into the muscles, and in the bones.

The Breath of the Ancestors

Recently I started to apply Embodied Mindfulness to my work in family constellations and ancestral consciousness. Family constellations can access the most nourishing and meaningful, but also most difficult dynamics in our family history. Deep-seated trauma within ourselves and our lineage can be accessed, confronted, and released. Accessing those imprints can often feel overwhelming for the nervous system, though, and I have seen generational trauma reactivated by accessing this field. Applying Embodied Mindfulness in this setting supports and nurtures the nervous system. It is an amazing tool for the clients to take a break and return to the breath in the here and now again and again.

The technique of the Grounding Loop is especially useful in this context. The Grounding Loop focuses on our connection to the ground through visualizing a pathway from the ground up the left leg and into the pelvis on the inhale, and then down the right leg into the ground on the exhale. Additionally, the tools of self-contact, and vocalization create an environment of safety and support, an important foundation for exploring the ancestral realms.

In the explorations, following the sits, participants reported communing with their ancestors through breath, movement and sound, and accessing resources from members of the family system, who have long been forgotten. Attending to the breath in this setting has become a tool, not only to rest with more grace and ease in the present moment, but also to make peace with the past, as we embrace the future with more aliveness, support, and permission.

1. Fritz Perls, Gestalt Therapy Verbatim, 1969, p.23
2. Moshe Feldenkrais, Awareness through Movement, 1972, p.66
3. Jamie McHugh, An Introduction to Embodied Mindfulness, 2016
4. Joan Chodrow, Jung on Active Imagination, 1997, p. 13-14