

My Journey with Embodied Mindfulness

1. How it all started

I got to know Jamie's work during the Level II training at Tamalpa Institute in Spring 2011, got another taste over the Easter Break at Sea Ranch that same year, and came back again the following year for his Embodying Nature retreat and leadership training. I am not sure whether I already realized it back then, but Jamie's work was the piece I had been missing in the Tamalpa training, and which enabled me to safely go on those journeys we were regularly going on in that movement-based expressive arts program. Through his work, I've developed a stronger awareness of my physical container, and learned to use and experience my body as a place of safety, solace, support and stimulation. The body, I grasped, is this necessary anchor that allows me to be with what is.

But until 2015 I was mainly interested in Jamie's nature work and saw the mindfulness practice as an enriching by-product. Only when I, by mistake, signed up for the Embodied Mindfulness Module 1 training in Switzerland (thinking I had registered for an Embodying Nature training), did I finally dive into the work. I very well remember Jamie's response when I realized the "mistake": "Maybe your mind is leading you where your body has to go," he said. And this has proven true. I started to experience the physical body as the real foundation and compass of my work.

2. How I incorporate Jamie's work in mine

Jamie's Somatic Expression® approach has been part of my Tamalpa Life-Art-Process® work right from the start. I have been incorporating his breath work in my one-on-one work, starting each session with a ten minute guided somatic meditation. It provides me and my client with a break from the verbal world, and stops the rambling. Most clients' tendency, when they come to my practice, is to continue in the same mode they've been in throughout the day, which is mostly a talking mode. I observe that people, probably due to experiences from psychotherapeutic settings, tend to go into explaining and justifying when it comes to meeting one's story and oneself. There is an inclination to be more in the past than in the present. The somatic meditation helps to focus on the body, the here and now, the essence. I am offering a space and tools so they can come home to themselves.

More now than in the beginning, the Embodied Mindfulness work has become an integral part of my one-on-one sessions and my group work. Whenever I come to critical points while guiding an individual, whenever it is about integrating and/or deepening the experience, or whenever I need to lead people away from a story and back to themselves – all of these moments are when I use Embodied Mindfulness practices.

3. How the work has shaped and changed me as a facilitator and how it has influenced my Life-Art-Process® work

Different to when I am guiding groups, where I have a clear score that I adapt if required, the one-on-one work asks – to a much higher extent - for the ability to follow, to be with what is and to resonate. Embodied Mindfulness has been highly supportive and helps me to navigate the realm of the unknown with much greater breathing space and calmness. I allow the emptiness to be present, and in so doing, am offering this experience to my client as well. Instead of going into my clients' stories (right away), I have started to focus more on stabilizing, building a container, and helping to develop a somatic awareness of the body. The somatic meditation, or elements of it, supports my clients in anchoring themselves in their body and expanding their ability to tolerate what is, to stay with sensations longer, and to become curious about themselves. In general, Embodied Mindfulness helps my clients develop, strengthen, and at the same time soften their relationship with themselves. Consequently, my Life-Art Process® work has changed. I have reduced the “going into story” parts and am focusing more on nourishment, self-care, and the expansion of breathing space. While my work throughout the first couple of years was more focused on guiding people in confronting their issues and going on a “journey“, I am now paying more attention to their body - their home base. In doing this I am reminded of a statement of Jamie's: “Before you journey you need to know how to come home.“

4. How the work has changed and is still changing me as a person

Teaching an eight-week Embodied Mindfulness class in Fall 2018 “forced“ me to take up and stick to my regular meditation practice (until then I had been doing my somatic meditation on and off). I was amazed that already after two weeks I started to notice differences. My emotional edges softened while my tolerance and my ability to love grew. I experienced myself as calmer, more spacious, deeply nourished and softer. My capacity to just be with what is and to rest in my own structure developed. I attribute this to daily granting myself a secure amount of time for my practice. Exclusive time, I realized, has something to do with excluding other things. And if I attend to my practice, spaciousness is created within that is then transferred to the outer world.

We very often cannot change the outside world or present situation but working with our breath offers us a tool to change our inner landscape. If it is getting tight and stressful on the outside, focusing on our breath helps to expand our inner space that subsequently allows us to meet a tight situation with more spaciousness. Slowing down our exhale slows down time, and gives us more time. This sounds paradoxical at first, but the moment you realize that by changing your inner landscape with these somatic tools, the outside world seems to change as well and you can respond in a different way and modulate what is happening.

5. Where else am I applying the work right now?

Apart from teaching literature and languages at a local evening college I also see my students in a subject called “Communication, Learning Techniques, and Presentation“, which is basically focused on character building. In this subject I actively integrate Embodied Mindfulness and start each weekly class with a somatic meditation.

School is mainly about brain and hardly about body, but it is through the body that we can create and experience stability, a sense of home, safety, and support. We can calm and modulate our emotions and actively connect with our resources through breath. All this is strongly needed in the school setting. My intention is to give my students tools to more easily navigate through stressful situations at school and to make them aware that they can actively change their perspective by changing their focus. Despite initial hesitation the majority of the students now value these sessions and some have started to actively practice and apply the exercises in their everyday lives.

6. The potential of the work

The reality for so many people in their everyday lives is exhaustion and overwhelm. Inspired by Jamie's teaching style, I have started to do less in my classes. I leave more time for pauses, and allow for extended integration time. As many people can be pretty merciless and demanding with themselves already, I focus on softening the edges instead of pushing people to the limit.

The Embodied Mindfulness practice supports us in:

- checking in with our feeling body
- liberating the overstimulated mind
- creating connection and becoming aware of it
- developing an intimate relationship with our own body
- building and expanding our capacity for pleasure
- releasing what we've been holding by means of breath, sound, and movement
- building receptiveness
- softening to then become more responsive to ourselves and the world
- opening up to abundance
- experiencing support by yielding to the rhythms of our own body
- traveling the realm of the unknown

7. Final words

I can say for sure that my daily practice has expanded my breathing room – an endangered

habitat as Jamie likes to put it – and subsequently my capacity to stay with what is – the insecure, the unknown, the abundance. Creating breathing space is eventually creating a home so many of us are longing for and so many are looking for in the outside world. When we realize the first person we have to connect with is ourselves, and the first home we have is our body, a liberating, creative force is ignited.