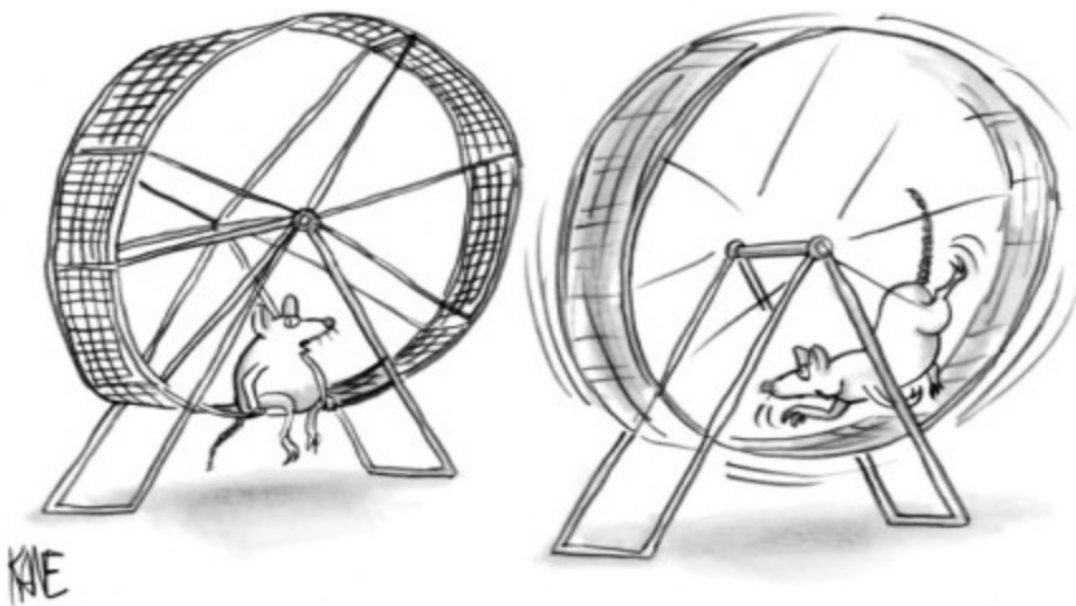


SESSION 2 – Working with barriers

**‘If your mind isn’t clouded by unnecessary things,
this is the best season of your life’**

WU-MEN



“I had an epiphany.”

Everybody who attends these classes has made an enormous commitment, to attend the classes in the first place, to make time for and complete the home practice. This session is about exploring the thoughts and feelings that may have come up during the first week of practice, along with any barriers that may have prevented you from doing some or all of the homework.

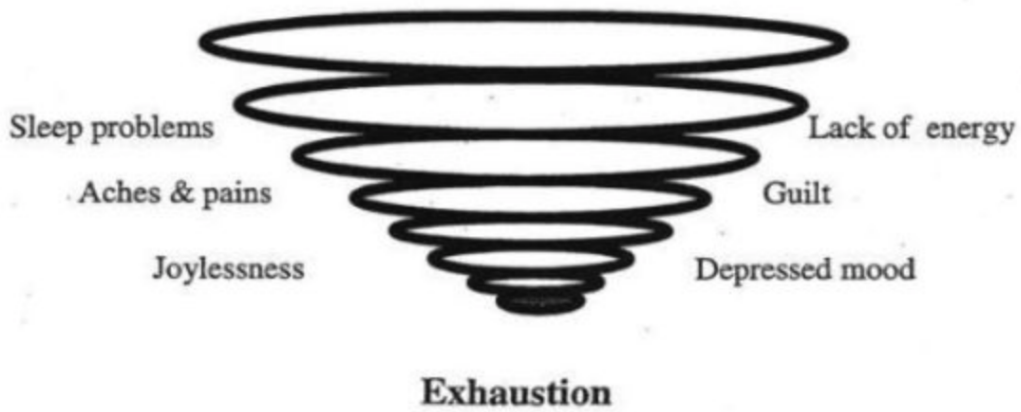
These barriers can be practical, physical, emotional or social. Their arising allows us to see them through the lens of mindfulness. Is this a barrier that I need to *do* something about? Or is it a thought or feeling that I could observe and let go?

What thoughts or feelings came up for me about taking time to do the practice for myself? Were the barriers real or imagined?

‘Compassion for others begins with kindness to ourselves.’ – Pema Chödrön

In today’s society, there’s an urge to keep going, and a sense that our personal well-being and good mental health are not worth looking after. ‘Indulgence’ is the word for it. The ‘exhaustion funnel’ describes how we are pulled into exhaustion when we fail to care for our own emotional needs. The concept was developed by Prof. Marie Åsberg at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm.

Exhaustion funnel



The top circle represents how we are when we lead a balanced and healthy life. As things get busier many of us tend to give things up to focus on what seems “important”. The circle narrows, illustrating the narrowing of our lives. But if the stress is still there, we give up more – and more. The circles narrow further. Notice that very often, the very first things we give up are those that nourish us the most but seem “optional”. The result is that we are increasingly left with only work or other stressors that often deplete our resources, and nothing to replenish or nourish us. It is often committed and conscientious people, who are likely to burnout. The reality is that we all need a respite to nourish and refuel.

All things pass – Lao Tzu

All things pass
A sunrise does not last all morning
All things pass
A cloudburst does not last all day
All things pass
Nor sunset all night
What always changes?
Earth..sky..thunder
Mountain..water
Wind...fire...lake
These change
And if these do not last
Do man’s visions last?
Do man’s illusions?
Take things as they come.
All things pass.

The breath as an anchor

The present is the only time that any of us have to be alive – to know anything – to perceive – to learn – to act – to change – to heal.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, 'Full Catastrophe Living', Piatkus: London, 1996

Why the breath?

Firstly, the breath is probably something that you take for granted despite the fact that you cannot live without it. You can live without food for weeks, without water for days, but you cannot survive without the nourishment that the breath provides for more than a few tens of seconds. The breath really is life.

Secondly, there is an important way in which the breath does not need us to make it happen, The breath breathes itself. If it was up to us to remember to breathe, we'd have forgotten a long time ago. So turning in to the breath can be an important antidote to the natural tendency towards believing that we have to be in control. Attending to the breath reminds us that at the core of our being, something is happening that depends very little on who we are or what we want to achieve.

Thirdly, the breath provides a natural, gently moving target to focus on in your meditation; it grounds you in the here and now. You cannot take a breath for five minutes ago, or for five minutes time. You can only take a breath for now.

Fourthly, the breath can be a sensitive monitor for your feelings. If you can sense more clearly when the breath is short or long, shallow or deep, rough or smooth, you can begin sensing your own internal weather patterns, and choose whether and how to take skilful action to look after yourself.

Finally, the breath provides an anchor for your attention so that you can see more clearly when your mind has wandered, when it is bored, or restless or when you are fearful or sad. It teaches you how to observe your thoughts and feelings, rather than getting caught up in them.



A THREE-STEP BREATHING SPACE

1 Acknowledging

Bring yourself into the present moment by deliberately adopting a dignified posture. Then ask:

‘What is going on with me at the moment?’

Notice and acknowledge your experience, instead of turning away. Accept all your experiences in the body, emotions and thoughts, and stay with them for a few moments, allowing any negative feelings or experiences to be present.

2 Gathering

Then gently focus your full attention in to the breathing. Experience fully each in-breath and out-breath as they follow one after the other. The breath can function as an anchor to bring you into the present and to help you tune in to a state of awareness and stillness.

3 Expanding awareness

Expand your awareness around the breathing to the whole body, and the space it takes up, as if your whole body is breathing. Have a sense of the space around you, too. Hold everything in awareness.

This sequence is rather like an hour-glass. Wide focus, followed by narrow focus, followed by wide.

Enough

Enough. These few words are enough
If not these words, this breath.
If not this breath, this sitting here.

This opening to the life
we have refused
again and again
until now.
Until now.

David White: Where many rivers meet

