



## CapeWomenOnline - Where Cape Women Shine

Your local venue for the women of Cape Cod to share their ideas, experiences and resources while inspiring each other in their life's journey

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## Holistic Health



Summer 2013

**Publisher's Note:** Welcome to the Department of Meditation, where you are treated to the ageless wisdom and inimitable wit of our very own meditation guru, Constance Wilkinson, psychotherapist and card-carrying Buddhist.

Constance welcomes your feedback and questions about meditation at [triptych2@gmail.com](mailto:triptych2@gmail.com)

### The Department of Meditation

Never Vanilla

by Constance Wilkinson

We're changing Cape Women Online seasons once again, and the Department of Meditation, Etc., was feeling decidedly antsy about what to write in this here summertime column. DoM,E felt that she had begun repeating herself, and was hesitant to repeat the drumbeat:

*Looky here, O readers, meditation is a habit that brings benefit, assuming you actually do it and don't just read columns about it, and here are all these respectable scientific studies that say so, don't take their word for it, don't take my word for it, why don't you just try making it your own habit for a bit and see what happens, meditation costs nothing, you don't even have to leave the house, you don't need to own a zafu (a kind of special meditation cushion), you don't need to wear special clothes (something loose? Something in a silky special puce?), you don't need to sign up for a special program (ouch! \$\$?), you don't need to tell anyone you're doing it (no, really, I am!), you can do just five minutes in the privacy of your own wherever, just five minutes, five, everyone has five minutes, do they not?"*

Yadda yadda; blah di dah, blah di dah, et cetera. Because, well, you know, I've already said that, have I not?

So, DoM,E sought assistance, gentle readers, and received it, courtesy of the kindness of a particular gentle reader who had a burning question about meditation.

And an excellent question it was:

*"Is it possible to meditate on an issue you want clarity about, rather than emptying the mind? If so, how would this be approached? I suspect it would be quite different from the method of trying NOT to think."*

Great question.

Let us analyze.

Two phrases stand out: "rather than emptying the mind" and "the method of trying NOT to think."

Have I previously discussed the importance of following the technique? If I have, I have not done a good enough job of it - yet. I'm pretty sure I've said something like, oh, practicing a specific meditation technique is like following a cake-making recipe: if your goal is to make a vanilla cake and you add chocolate, not vanilla, your vanilla cake will never come out vanilla. Never. Never ever.

It is the same with meditation. You really need to follow the technique if you wish to obtain the resultant benefits. If you keep adding chocolate, your vanilla cake will never come into existence.



## The Center for Change

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If you noodle around with meditation instructions, and just do any old thing and call it "meditation," you're not meditating at all, you're just noodling around. (Not that there's anything wrong with that. Nor with chocolate cakes that wrongly think themselves to be vanilla.)

Let's review the instruction for the simple kind of sitting meditation I've been suggesting readers try. There are obviously thousands of different methods, from myriad traditions; this one follows a Tibetan tradition, shamatha, and is a useful technique, which, when followed precisely, will bring about a number of useful changes.

However, if you don't follow its recipe precisely, and noodle around doing chocolate not vanilla things, you will obtain a chocolate, not a vanilla, cake of meditation.

"Sit on a chair or a cushion on the floor. Keep your back relaxed and straight, not rigid. Allow your eyes to focus on an object of your choice that you place about six feet away. It should be placed so that when your eyes are resting on it, your eyes are cast slightly down, at about a 45 degree angle.

Place your mind, your attention on the object of focus - a blue flower, let's say. Let your mind rest naturally on the object of focus; breathe naturally. Don't try to suppress thoughts. Don't try to create a thought-free state. Just rest your awareness on the flower, keeping your eyes on it, and relax.

When you discover, as you inevitably will, that you have become distracted from the blue flower and have drifted off, following your thoughts,

say to yourself, inwardly, without judgment, "Thinking, thinking," and gently pick up your awareness, as if you were picking up the needle of an old phonograph, and re-place it once again on the object of focus, the blue flower.

Each time you notice that your attention has been distracted away from the object of focus, label it, "thinking, thinking," and once again re-place your attention on the object of focus. This process will happen many times.

You are working on training your mind to begin to notice distraction, and to build a habit of undistracted (or less frequently distracted) attentive awareness."

Let's return to the question at hand, keeping in mind these crucial instructions:

***Don't try to suppress thoughts.***

***Don't try to create a thought-free state.***

Do you recall the two phrases that stood out in gentle reader's question? She mentioned "rather than emptying the mind" and "the method of trying NOT to think."

This is precisely why meditation instruction, and even this here column, is of importance - I can be helpful to this meditator by pointing out that she has been unknowingly adding chocolate, not vanilla, to her meditation cake.

It is a common misconception about meditation that it involves emptying the mind, intentionally trying not to think, suppressing thoughts, trying to create a thought-free state.

Generally speaking, the more you try to force thoughts to stop, the more mind will fight against you, as if you were squashing one end of a balloon - squashing one end just makes the air go to the other end until it pops.

So, gentle reader/meditator: don't do that. If you've been doing that all along, don't worry, just don't do that anymore. Just let your mind relax in its natural state, and then practice the technique outlined above.

Oh, and as to the other part of your question?

"Is it possible to meditate on an issue you want clarity about?"

You can certainly use your mind contemplatively to create clarity. I wouldn't label that as meditation, but it's an appropriately creative use of mind. Contact your unconscious; let it know what it is you'd like to work on, being open to whatever insights may arise.

Concentrate on the subject before you sleep at night, and keep it loosely in mind throughout the day. See what happens, naturally; notice what arises. Generally, something interesting will.

Constance Wilkinson, LMHC, MFA is a licensed psychotherapist who uses a mindfulness-based, solution-focused approach to help reduce symptoms of dysregulation, as well as to develop clients' personal goals and strategies to achieve them. She is trained in EMDR, clinical hypnosis, EFT, and expressive arts.

She has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College in creative writing and an MA in clinical mental health counseling psychology from Lesley University. Since 1978, Ms Wilkinson has been practicing meditation and studying with distinguished Tibetan Buddhist refugee teachers in the United States, India, Nepal, and Tibet.

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