



Editor'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

Department of Meditation

by Constance Wilkinson, LMHC, MFA

Winter into Spring

Let me go backwards.

A few days ago, I learned that Cassia Berman had died. She was a talented poet and person who I'd met years ago in the writing program at Sarah Lawrence College. Just six weeks earlier, I had found Cassia on Facebook; I friended her after having had absolutely no contact with her for decades.

She was living in Woodstock, was still writing, and was a healer, practicing Qi Gong. I was very glad to have found her, and thankful for the medium that had allowed me to re-connect. Three weeks later, Cassia learned she had lung cancer, and three weeks after that, she was dead. Fini.

Six weeks ago, as I was re-finding Cassia, my 90-ish Greek ex-mother-in-law was deep in the process of dying. Anne was a wonderful person, the very embodiment of kindness. My daughter and I and my husband (second husband, not her son) loved her very much, and visited her as often as we were able.

Through her example, I changed. I changed my relationship to cooking. I gave up my until-then long-term New England pinchpenny grocery shopping habit after observing Anne driving halfway across Queens, every week, rain or shine, to shop for lamb in Astoria, because it was important to get the very best food for her family. Not the cheapest food, the best food. Not the most expensive food, the best food. I learned that from her, and I changed.

Her dying was quite long, difficult, and, of course, sad. She finally died on February 15.

Six weeks before that, Tibetan teacher Thinley Norbu Rinpoche died at the age of 80, in California. Though I had not seen him in person in twenty years, his death was to me a devastating loss, and arguably the very most painful separation of the three.

When my daughter and I lived in Kathmandu, Nepal, we had been able to go to Rinpoche's house on a regular basis, twice a month, on the Tibetan 10th and 25th days. At Losar, Tibetan New Year, we would visit and come away with piles and piles of kapse, sort of a crunchy twisted cruller. I remember my little daughter playing on his front lawn. I remember his incomparable presence, what he taught, and how he taught it.

We moved to New England from Nepal almost twenty years ago and most of the teachers I knew there I haven't seen since. Somehow those separations didn't sadden me; I knew that everyone was still out there, existing, somewhere. Rinpoche once wrote, "If we believe in the continuity of mind, then love inconspicuously connects us to the ones we love with continuous positive energy, so that even tangible separations between people who love each other do not reduce the tangible power of love."

I believed that then, and I do now, and yet his loss was devastating. Merely a change in category: present to absent. Alive to dead. How could that be so hard to bear?

How to come to terms with death? With three deaths?

Okay, okay, so sad, but what does any of this have to do with meditation? People die. Animals die. Plants die. Ants die. That's just how it is. We already know we are impermanent. We know our whole world is impermanent. Phenomena arise, remain, and pass away. Sentient beings are born, they live, they pass away.

Thoughts arise, dwell, and pass away. So?



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So the more we practice meditation, the more we become completely familiar with this process, as natural as the waves that come rolling in, that break into surf on the shore, and then recede into the sea. Thoughts arise, dwell, and disappear – substance-less.

But so what? Big deal. Who cares?

Big deal because we are working with mind when we meditate.

We are working with mind when we're not meditating, but mostly we fail to know that, or notice that. Mind is present continuously, and affects us continuously, whether we know it or not. Thoughts are present, arising, and dwelling and passing away, regardless. If we follow our thoughts, in distraction, we stumble through life, in oblivion. The more we can work with mind, the more present we are – in life.

When we are present, we carry in our present awareness the enlightening notion that we are all living in time, that time is passing, that sooner or later, this life will end, this body will remain no longer. With that awareness, sharp and clear, as a motivating force, we can shake off our sloth, our doubts, our cowardice, our hesitations, and make of this life what we will and what we wish, so we can be without regret at the moment of death.

As Chogyam Trungpa said in his book **Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism** (Shambhala Books, Berkley, 1973), "The whole practice of meditation is essentially based upon the situation of this present moment... For this reason, it is a very effective way to live. If you are completely aware of your present state of being and the situation around you, you cannot miss a thing."

He continues, "Seeing things as they are requires a leap, and one can only take this so-called leap without leaping from anywhere... you only arrive at the other shore when you finally realize that there is no other shore. In other words, we make a journey to the 'promised land,' the other shore, and we have arrived there when we realize that we were there all along."

Okay. I get that. We can arrive where we've been all along, in the present moment, as it is, awakening.

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.

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