“Finding ‘Happiness’ through Meditation: Just another Gendered Construction?”
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Research on happiness and the brain is exploding in our current decade; women’s magazines are brimming with lists of the 10 steps to inner peace; websites proclaim the 5 secrets to happiness; and a resurgence of ancient religious meditation practices with a contemporary twist are emerging on the scene. Many of these center upon practices of meditation, rooted in centuries-old religious practice. A number of assumptions are embodied in this contemporary obsession with happiness, including that the imperative to be happy is a good one, that it is important to be happy as well as to make others happy, and that our conceptions of happiness are culture and gender-free.

This paper incorporates feminist cultural studies and feminist and queer theology, including examination of the intersections of religion, race, class and gender, to critique contemporary notions of “happiness.” Just like contemporary definitions of happiness, religious traditions lending credence and providing historical practices of meditation toward happiness come with their own assumptions as to what characteristics and qualities should be cultivated in order to reach true happiness. These practices have historically at times led persons of non-dominant identities to seek happiness through securing the happiness of others, while maintaining a subservient role in society.

This paper examines the ambivalence and the complexity of “happiness,” and whether meditative techniques reinforce expectations that are disempowering for some, and how, if possible, they can forge life-giving practices toward true health and well-being.