

Shaken by an unexpected separation, blindsided by a custody dispute, betrayed—the pain of divorce can bring us to our knees. What if there’s a way not just to regain our footing but to step onto a new emotional path?

# A Better Way to BREAKUP

BY GABRIEL COHEN

**J**oe Hall’s\* 11-year marriage ended after his wife had an affair with the father of their daughter’s best friend. When they began discussing the terms of a divorce, he remembers, “there were some minor squabbles over personal items, and who would live where, but the one thing we consistently agreed on was 50-50 custody of my daughter.”

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*\*Last name has been changed.*

*Circus Romance* »  
Duy Huynh »





*Imago Theatre*   
Duy Huynh

For a year, the 43-year-old IT specialist had to endure seeing his wife’s lover at school functions in their city in central Pennsylvania. He would give the man dirty looks and think about how he was carrying around a potentially very damaging weapon: the other man’s wife didn’t know about the affair.

And then one night, Hall’s wife sent him an email saying that she had decided she wanted majority custody of their only child. For Hall, already devastated by the affair and the divorce proceedings, “that triggered the worst panic attack I’ve ever had. I got tunnel vision and thought I was having a heart attack—I actually felt like I was dying.”

Several nights after that email, in the middle of a dark parking lot, Hall bumped into the man who had seemingly destroyed his marriage. “I had fantasized about this moment countless times and thought of all the different ways I could emotionally hurt him,” Hall recalls. “I told him

I had a few things I had to say. He looked at me like he had been anticipating this moment as much as I had, although I doubt he was looking forward to it.”

What Hall did next utterly astonished the other man, as it amazed me when he emailed me about the incident.

### **THE FIRST THROES**

Hall shared his story with me because he had read my book about how I survived the breakup of my own marriage

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back in 2005. During that traumatic time, I learned that divorce—like a bad medical diagnosis or a loved one’s sudden death—is not just one isolated, contained event; it can shatter our sense of how the world works and send us scrambling for new meaning.

When my marriage suddenly ended one balmy June evening, I was stunned, confused, irate, and deeply sad. I had no idea how to even begin to process that churning internal storm, but I stumbled across a Buddhist talk on how to deal with anger and the book *When Things Fall Apart*, by Pema Chödrön. I expected esoteric religious teachings but found a practical psychology that focused on processing difficult feelings.

I was comforted to learn how to not judge myself for feeling like such a mess, and I began to see my anger and sadness, not as something imposed on me by my ex-wife, but as natural feelings that were stirred up and intensified by the way I was thinking about her and our breakup. The essential Buddhist “good news” was that, instead of struggling to make myself feel better by changing other people—and while I was at it, the whole damn world—I could find peace by working on myself.

For starters, I could give up some of my unrealistic expectations. I had grown up on pop songs about everlasting love. I had a fairy tale wedding on the Brooklyn waterfront, and I teared up as my wife and I recited “Till death do us part.” One Valentine’s Day, I gave her a picture of two rocking chairs side by side, to show that I believed we’d grow old together.

The loss of my marriage was painful, but I added to my suffering by refusing to accept change. When I opened my eyes to the world around me, I saw that change is not an exception: it’s the rule. I began running in nearby Prospect Park and noticed how dramatically it altered with each passing season, as flowers blossomed and leaves fell. That’s the way life works: babies are born, people die, whole civilizations rise up and disappear. Instead of accepting my own changing reality, though, I was obsessed with regrets about the past and fantasies about the future.

Meditation helped me see that, and I worked on letting go of that useless hamster-wheel rumination about what might have been, but I still didn’t want to surrender my anger: I felt wronged, and expressing anger seemed to offer release. It took me a while to see that my sense of righteousness was a trap. Like a river in flood, my anger was carrying me in the opposite direction from what I ultimately wanted: happiness and peace of mind.

## JUST BREATHE

Long Island attorney Wendy Samuelson sees people caught in the grip of such difficult emotions every working day. “When clients come in, they’re often in shock,” she says. “They can’t believe they’re in a divorce lawyer’s office. And

# Meditation for Healing

**THE ATTORNEY** Wendy Samuelson uses this recitation with her clients to help them let go of anger and to cultivate compassion and forgiveness. Say the prayer once for yourself, and then repeat it, substituting the name of your ex for *me*.

Light before me  
Light behind me  
Light at my left  
Light at my right  
Light above me  
Light beneath me  
Light unto me

Light in the eyes of those who see me  
Light in the ears of those who listen to me  
Light in the hearts of those who think of me  
Light in the hearts of those who speak of me

Light restore me to health  
Light be always in my heart  
Light be within me  
Light establish me forever  
Light be around me and preserve me  
Light be before me and lead me  
Light be within me and give me life  
Light be near me and rule me  
Light be beneath me and fortify me

I love the Light in those whom I may have  
offended, knowingly or unknowingly,  
May the light be with them  
So be it  
So it is  
It is done

*Adapted by Dr. Joseph Michael Levry from an ancient Christian prayer.*



*The Optimistic Gardener*   
Duy Huynh

sometimes they're so angry that they can't see what's best for themselves."

Some lawyers encourage anger and confrontation, but Samuelson believes this is unproductive. "Clients may be so focused on getting back at their spouse that they don't focus on what they need. To get a settlement, they have to be in a reasonable, mindful place, not just airing dirty laundry or hitting the spouse over the head."

When a client is irate, the first order of business is not to listen to them rage; it's to help them calm down. "Some people don't know how to do that," she says. "It's a skill you have to learn." Samuelson found that skill in her own practice of yoga.

One woman was so distressed, she asked for Valium; instead, Samuelson led her through a simple breathing exercise. Since then, she's offered the technique to many clients, teaching them to close their eyes, shift their inhalation

from their chest to their belly, and follow a pattern of slow breathing.

"It's remarkable how something so simple can help people calm their anger, anxiety, and fear. I feel that if they did those exercises every morning for a week, they'd feel a major shift in their anxiety level. They'd be more able to see the big picture."

Samuelson says that mindful breathing doesn't just help her clients. "It helps me stay calm, too, and not internalize their stress. It's a small thing," she says, "but so powerful."

#### **AWAKENING TO PAIN**

Calming the emotional waves that threaten to swamp us makes a great first step, but we can't achieve healing if we suppress or deny our difficult emotions. If we want to lessen our suffering from divorce or other traumas, we need to take the counterintuitive step of mindfully paying attention to

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the feelings that give us the most pain.

Doing just that helped Jenny Douglas weather the end of her 15-year marriage—and gave her the tools she would need to recover emotionally. It was during a 10-day vipassana meditation retreat that she finally acknowledged she was deeply unhappy, and she realized she had been numbing herself to escape those feelings. Not long after she returned, she and her husband made the decision to part.

“Our culture teaches us to distract ourselves with drinking, eating, texting, or whatever, but I didn’t want to do that anymore,” says Douglas, a writer and entrepreneur. “I wanted to be present and know what was really there. That was a key shift in the road. I decided that whatever came up—loneliness, rejection, fear of growing old alone—I’d sit with it and become a bit of a spiritual warrior on my own behalf.”

To build a community of support for herself and others, Douglas created The Brooklyn Cottage, a salon of sorts that meets in her home, offering group meditation sessions and workshops on topics like divorce recovery, meditative drawing, cooking, and public speaking.

Turning to face our most difficult emotions—like anger, regret, and fear—is deeply painful, she acknowledges, but adds that we must move through them in order to reach a place of equanimity and peace.

“Running from fear makes the fear bigger,” she says. “When you let everything in, everything becomes workable. There’s nothing like divorce to gird you with grace if you take the opportunity to meet all of its material directly.” We need all of our emotions, she argues—warm feelings like joy and comfort, but also the painful ones. “It’s the suffering that opened my heart and connected me to others,” she says, “and I’m grateful for that.”

For anyone going through a tough divorce, anger is likely to be one of the most challenging emotions. But, Douglas says, we can defuse anger just by looking at it with mindful attention. “I see so many other divorced people who seem to get stuck there,” she says. “In meditation, anger becomes just another emotion to work with. The way out is to treat it with kindness and curiosity, as just another experience you’re going through. I ask: what can I learn about myself from having this really intense feeling? It doesn’t become the king of all emotions. You let it pass through you, and you don’t have to react.”

That’s a key point: it’s normal and OK to feel anger now and then, but acting on it and letting it control your behavior tends to make situations worse. The alternative is to pause, breathe, acknowledge it, and give it time to pass. And with

mindfulness, we can choose to base our actions on patience and compassion instead.

Which brings us back to Hall and that dark parking lot.

### “I WANT TO APOLOGIZE”

There’s no easy route to changing how we think, feel, and behave. Decades of impulsive, emotional reactions have worn deep neural grooves into our brains, and it takes a lot of work to replace anger or depression with patience and compassion. But suffering through a divorce or other emotional trauma may give that goal a special urgency.

Hall was ready to try something new. “I realized that my scientific approach to life was well and good,” he says, “but it didn’t provide the tools to handle something this deeply emotional.” Just a few days before he found himself confronting his wife’s lover in a parking lot, he had finished reading my book—his first encounter with Buddhism since a world religions course in college. This alternative approach of mindfulness and compassion still felt new and unfamiliar, but in that moment, he had a flash of insight.

“I’d like to apologize,” Hall told the other man.

“What?”

“I want to apologize for making you the focal point of anger that should have been directed at myself,” Hall said. “I realize I contributed to my damaged marriage before you ever showed up.”

At first, Hall recalls, the man didn’t know how to respond, but then, nervously, he began to talk. “He told me about how he was at his lowest point: his wife found out about the affair, without my intervention; his new business was failing; and a slew of other things that I never would have known if I had acted angrily toward him.”

Hall says he deliberately didn’t tell other man “I forgive you,” because expressing forgiveness to a person who hasn’t asked for it can be a passive-aggressive way of signaling blame or asserting dominance. Instead, apologizing to the man gave him a feeling of release.

“I felt so free,” Hall recalls. “I never had a vow with this guy—my vow was with my wife. I had a lot of anger that was kind of misplaced.”

Several days later, the other man apparently told Hall’s ex-wife about what had happened. She softened and agreed to a 50-50 custody arrangement. “Driving home from that meeting with my wife,” he says, “I cried, thinking about how powerfully things had worked out.” —S<sup>CH</sup>

**Gabriel Cohen** is the author of *Storms Can’t Hurt the Sky: A Buddhist Path Through Divorce*. He wrote about the science of imagination in the March/April 2013 issue of *Spirituality & Health*.