

# **Divorcing Well**

## ***Bringing Buddhist Practice to Divorce Counseling***

**By Ashley Davis Prend**

Divorcing well? Divorcing peacefully? Is such a thing even possible? Let's face it, divorce often generates mutual recrimination and fury, which can lead to ugly, expensive court battles, particularly when children are involved. During a divorce, both partners can become their own evil twins, more intent on inflicting punishment on each other than on ending their tattered marriage.

As counselors and family therapists, we want to spare our clients all this pain by preserving and improving their marriages. But when the marriage obviously can't be saved, many therapists focus on helping the partners achieve what's widely called a "good divorce": a split as humane, rational, and nondamaging as possible.

Increasingly, therapists recognize that even after a marriage ends, most couples continue to be linked together. While the death of a marriage is undoubtedly painful, it doesn't have to be pathological. If handled well, it can even become a rich opportunity for emotional and spiritual growth.

Yet, to a couple neck deep in the kind of reciprocal fury that only two people who once loved each other deeply can feel, the idea that their divorce could be an opportunity for transformation is as crazy as it is undesirable.

Is there any way to stop the antagonism? Beyond helping these self-declared enemies shed their feelings of anger and vengeance, is it possible to encourage them to be more openhearted and kindly toward each other? I've drawn six -simple, uncomplicated steps from Buddhist -philosophy to help hostile spouses cultivate a spirit of nonviolence, generosity, and compassion toward their ex-partners. Counterintuitive as it seems, practicing these steps can help people find the kind of inner wisdom and peace that acts as an antidote to their self-destructive and aggressive impulses.

Inherent in this approach is an expectation for people to connect with their higher nature—what Buddhists call their "Buddha-nature"—even when they're in pain. Using Buddhism as the backdrop for understanding the loss and transformation embedded in divorce, the process helps clients move past their knee-jerk emotions to a more enlightened place.

The six steps are:

1. Accept the Way Things Are
2. Choose the Road Less Traveled

3. See the Big Picture
4. Listen to Silence
5. Give Generously
6. Strive for Enlightenment

Taken together, they constitute a method that can create subtle internal shifts and powerful behavioral changes. While it's preferable for both partners to embark on them simultaneously, it isn't a prerequisite for doing divorce well. The client need not embrace Buddhism to benefit from this approach either.

Divorcing well doesn't mean that there'll be no conflict, pain, or challenging situations. It simply means that the divorcing couple, or one member of the couple, chooses to use the process for personal and spiritual growth, thereby launching them both on a healthier trajectory.

I first met Ryan and Beth when they came in for marital therapy, shortly after their 10-year-old son had died of bone cancer. Understandably, they were devastated by their loss which, as is often the case, had exacerbated preexisting tensions in their marriage.

Ryan, a prominent doctor, spent many hours at work, and Beth had always complained that he was away from home too much, didn't help enough around the house or with the kids, was too tired to have sex, and didn't pay enough attention to her. Feeling overworked and underappreciated, Ryan retreated from what he perceived as Beth's harassment, responding with evasions, sullen silence, and even more distance.

Not surprisingly, they got little support from each other while mourning the loss of their son. Over several months, I helped them process their grief, but I couldn't do much to help them turn toward each other in their pain. When we ended our work together, I sensed a veil of bitterness still hanging between them. So, several years later, when Ryan returned alone for treatment and told me that Beth had asked for a divorce and full custody of their daughter, Hilary, I wasn't surprised.

**Step 1: Accept the Way Things Are.** What did surprise me was Ryan's adamant resistance to the divorce. He was fighting the legal process and feeling betrayed and belligerent. I think part of this was because, on some level, he had been satisfied with an emotionally distant, but stable and dependable, marriage. More than this, he feared change. Like many of us, he found it difficult to let go of old patterns, even if they'd brought him little happiness.

Ryan was active in a liberal Protestant church and found that the language and rituals of his faith were sustaining to him and yet . . . he was clearly open to learning from other spiritual paths. A central tenet of Buddhist teaching that

immediately spoke to him was the Eastern perspective on change: the truth that nothing is permanent is not only understood and accepted by Buddhists, but actively embraced. Whether accepting or resisting it, change will continue to occur, and, therefore, they feel that rejecting this fundamental truth brings nothing but suffering. Conversely, accepting the inevitability of change brings peace and wisdom.

This is easier said than done, however, mainly because every change, especially a divorce, is, in essence, a little death, and human beings predictably react to death—and to endings—with anger and depression. The five stages of grief in response to death and dying first articulated by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross—shock, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—I believe apply to the divorce process. Anger is typically the most noticeable response to the grief generated by divorce.

Ryan felt betrayed by Beth's decision to leave the marriage, and angered by her aggressive steps against him. One day, he came into my office in a rage, and yelled, "She had the locks changed so I can't get into the house. Can you believe it?! I feel like breaking the door down. She had no right to change the locks without my consent."

I noticed that Ryan's breathing was shallow and his face was reddening. "Let's stop right now," I said. "I want you to tell me how your body is feeling. Just tune in for a minute, scan your body, and tell me what you notice."

He looked a bit confused but obliged and responded, "My chest feels tight."

"What about your breathing?" I prompted.

"Uhhhh, short . . . tense."

"Anything else?"

"My throat feels tight, too . . . and I'm hot. Is it hot in here?"

I then asked him to focus on his breath, following and counting each breath until his breathing was slower and steadier. Although it may seem odd to start a breathing exercise with a client who's obviously upset, I knew it would help calm him down.

I believe that deep, focused, slow breathing is one of therapy's greatest underused tools. Specialists working with panic-disordered or phobic individuals know how powerful deep breath work can be for calming the central nervous system.

Ryan isn't an angry person in general, and after he vented and used the breath to calm down, I explained to him that usually anger is an easier emotion to tolerate than pain, but that in reality, anger is a mask to cover the deeper emotions of

grief and despair.

I pointed out that one thing that was so frustrating for Ryan regarding the changed locks was that he wasn't in control of the situation. When I asked him when he'd felt that way before, I knew the question would lead him back to his son's death, and that mourning the death of his marriage was retriggering his grief for his child.

Life as Ryan had known it was over. Accepting this ending, this profound and irrevocable change in his life, was the key psychological task facing him. I suggested that he start to integrate into his days a physical practice of letting go and accepting reality, no matter how painful. One way of doing this is a simple breathing technique of internally chanting a word on the in-breath and another on the out-breath. I asked Ryan to inhale the word *let* and exhale the word *go*.

He found that doing the chant when he felt mounting tension helped calm him down. Such a simple technique hardly seems powerful or grandiose enough to help people do something as monumental as accept change. Yet it releases the tight physical grasp we keep on ourselves—on our desires and expectations for the way we think things should be—and helps our minds and bodies flow with life's natural rhythms.

After a few weeks of conscious breathing whenever something seemed out of control and upsetting, Ryan found that his feelings of rage at Beth and sense of betrayal began to abate.

**Step 2: Choose the Road Less Traveled.** Once clients begin to feel themselves accepting reality as it unfolds, they need to choose how to accept it. One option is to accept what's happened with bitterness, animosity, and a determination to punish the ex-spouse. The road less traveled, however, is a commitment to cooperation, a decision by spouses to put the children's needs above their own, and a desire to maintain a healthy relationship with each other.

While Ryan had decided to take the road less traveled, he found that staying on it was the challenge. At first, things progressed smoothly. After attending a court-mandated "Kids First" seminar required in most states for divorcing couples, he seemed enthusiastic about trying out what he'd learned: that couples shouldn't insult their ex, fight in front of the children, or use the children as pawns

However, Beth's ongoing antagonism began to erode his commitment to that path. For instance, she undermined their visiting agreements regarding Hilary, and then sent sarcastic e-mails accusing him of not caring about his daughter. Ryan fell into every trap, easily taking her bait and repeatedly arguing with her and being nasty.

I asked, "Do you like who you become when you relate to Beth?"

"No, she brings out the worst in me," he said.

"Or rather, you let her. You know," I added, "If one person changes the dance steps in a relationship, the entire dance pattern begins to change, maybe not at first, but certainly over time."

So he and I began to experiment with ways that he could change the dance. I asked him to preface his remarks to Beth differently: to start every sentence with a kind phrase and then bridge it with a *however*. For example, his wife had agreed in mediation to refrain from scheduling appointments for their daughter during "his" time, but she invariably forgot. Rather than just blow up at her, he said, "I know it must be frustrating to try to schedule this dentist appointment when your work schedule is so packed. However, we agreed that you'd schedule this type of appointment on "your" time. I've already made other plans for that day, and so I won't be able to take her to the appointment."

What begins to happen when people really work with this step is that they find that taking the peaceful path becomes gradually less difficult and more natural; it becomes not so much a question of trying hard as of just being.

**Step 3: See the Big Picture.** Seeing the big picture means gaining perspective and realizing that any event or period of time, including divorce, is only one piece of the overall puzzle of their lives. While clients may believe that their situation is dire or intolerable, we can help them expand their frame of reference by having them imagine what things might look like in 5 or 10 years.

In trying to help Ryan gain perspective on his situation, I asked him to write a list of 10 things that were better about his divorced life than his married life. He was able to think of 20 things, including not getting yelled at every night when he came home, not being criticized for being unaffectionate, enjoying his one-on-one time with his daughter, and being able to watch football on the weekend without being hassled. His new life was perhaps more complicated as a divorced man, but it clearly had its upside.

Becoming aware of improvements in his life was part of Ryan's healing, but "seeing the big picture" can also include a farther reaching vision. According to the Buddhist concept of rebirth, Ryan and Beth were joined in working out the vast moral law of causation, or karma. The main point of karma is that every human life is part of a vast, inconceivably complex pattern.

Ryan was able to see that, even though his union with Beth had been unhappy, it had produced two wonderful children who were absolutely meant to be born. Furthermore, his son's life and death had influenced many people and continued to do so through a scholarship legacy in his name. By engaging in this exercise, he could glimpse the idea that he didn't make a mistake in marrying Beth, but that both the marriage and divorce were part of an endless process of learning and growing.

Because it's often so hard to gain this long view when caught up in the emotional turmoil of the immediate, I frequently ask clients to write a letter to their future

self—say, their self in five years—describing their current troubles and asking for guidance from this future, presumably wiser, self.

His future self assured him that Beth would calm down, find a new man, and stop pestering him so much. Not only that, but he'd meet a nice woman. Ryan found this letter-writing quite amusing and fun to do. It helped him see that life is full of chapters and that reality has many unseen and unimagined dimensions.

**Step 4: Listen to Silence.** Trying to stay true to a higher intention of integrity, strength, and cooperation in the face of daily emotional upheavals is no easy task. If people don't take the time to tune in to a quieter, inner voice of wisdom, they're sure to be thrown off track by the tide of external pressures. A daily, or at least regular, practice of sitting mindfully in silence allows us to be in the moment without judging it or ourselves, without trying to control or change anything—which has a deeply calming and centering effect on the mind and body.

When I suggest sitting in silence, many people are nonplussed. Are they just supposed to sit and think about their to-do list or what they're going to make for dinner? While there are many different styles of meditation that may focus on an image, a mantra, or a breathing technique, I recommend a simple meditation practice that I call "ABC," which incorporates several key elements. One should spend up to 10 minutes on each letter, moving sequentially from A to B to C.

**A.** Be Aware of the mindful moment: listen to the sounds around you, feel your body on the chair, scan your body for tension, notice the air temperature on your skin, watch your mind naturally jump from thought to thought, labeling the process "thinking."

**B.** Breathe: notice the breath moving in and out of the body, and how the body pauses between each in- and out-breath, observing the process, or literally counting the breaths.

**C.** Center: let your attention drop into the center of your body and imagine a vertical core of light within yourself, connecting to this centered, anchored place. I suggest that clients repeat a word, a mantra —perhaps *peace* or *love*—as a way of focusing the mind and staying in the core space.

Ryan was extremely resistant to the idea of formal meditation. Although we tried the ABC technique in my office, he found it difficult to still his body and focus his mind, and felt anxious in a process that made him feel as though he was "doing nothing." So I suggested that he try a walking meditation.

He committed to taking a 20-minute walk several times a week in his local woods. We discussed how to make it not just an ordinary stroll, but a focused walk, a mindful activity, a contemplative act.

I suggested that he notice every sound, step, and smell in acute heightened detail. And when his attention turned to his thoughts and feelings, I said he

should try to let them pass like clouds across a clear sky. So, when he had a negative thought about Beth, such as "She's so annoying. I wish she'd quit harassing me for more money," he might take a deep breath and let the thought pass. This habit of detached observation made him feel more centered and less hooked by his thoughts.

His walking meditations gave him "big picture" help, too, since he realized that his squabbles were pretty irrelevant to the woods around him.

**Step 5: Give Generously.** This step can be the hardest for people who are feeling hurt or angry. Why should they be generous to this jerk, this creep, this lying, no-good spouse? Well, because being generous is what will free them from their own bitterness.

According to the Buddhist Law of Karma, whatever you put out in the world will return to you tenfold. This same wise message is found repeatedly throughout time, in our own culture: "What goes around, comes around," "As ye sow, so shall ye reap," and even the Golden Rule as taught by Jesus: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you."

But how do we help our divorcing couples rise above their feelings of righteous anger, even hatred? In Buddhism, one of the principle meditative techniques for achieving a state of generosity is called the *metta bhavana* or just *metta*, the practice of loving-kindness. This practice is fivefold:

1. Direct loving-kindness toward yourself
2. Direct loving-kindness toward a loved one
3. Direct loving-kindness toward a stranger
4. Direct loving-kindness toward an enemy or someone with whom you're having difficulty
5. Direct loving-kindness outward toward your larger community, your world

And as you go through each of the 5 stages, you say or think phrases such as:

"May you be happy."

"May you be safe."

"May you be healthy."

"May you be peaceful."

Metta is the great equalizer because it binds us all to the most common denominator of human yearning: the desire to be happy, loved, and protected.

When I first described metta to Ryan, he laughed and said, "You've got to be kidding! She'd sooner see me dead on the street than wish *me* well!"

"It doesn't matter what she wishes for you," I replied. "Metta is about opening your own heart. The benefit is for you."

I asked him to commit to trying the practice every day for 21 days—the time necessary, I've heard, for a new habit to take hold. When I asked, "What have you got to lose?" he agreed.

He decided to practice metta in the car, using red lights as his reminder to offer a loving-kindness phrase. While he found it easy to offer metta feelings toward himself, a friend, a stranger, and the world, he always got stuck when he came to Beth. So in the beginning, he simply thought toward her, "I wish you to be less hostile." I asked him to repeat that during his stoplight mettās. The next week, I asked him "What metta phrase for Beth would you like to work with this week?" And he came up with "I don't wish you sickness."

The next week, I asked him to imagine some of the challenges that Beth was encountering in her life—to try to see life from her perspective. He found he could feel her concern about having to have a root canal and understand that she was stressed about a mutual friend's serious illness. His view began to soften as he saw through her eyes, and he agreed to offer an empathic metta phrase in positive language, "I wish you health."

Although it may seem silly to those who bank on logical and reasoned interventions, in a sense, metta is an exercise that bypasses the brain altogether, going straight to the heart. Ryan found as he worked with metta that his entire inner experience began to shift, and with it, his actions. One afternoon, for example, when he brought Hilary back to Beth's house, he found the front walkway covered with the snow. Almost without thinking, he grabbed a shovel from the garage and started shoveling the walkway and steps to the door.

**Step 6: Strive for Enlightenment.** When the Buddha sat meditating under the Bodhi tree circa 500 B.C., it's said that he finally reached enlightenment—"awakened" to the Truth—realizing that he was connected to all things and that any sense of separation between himself and others was an illusion. Based on this discovery, he concluded that there's no such thing as an enemy, since everyone is truly connected.

In other words, enlightenment is the deep realization that we're all involved in a rich and complex network of relationships that extends to every living being on the planet. Thinking about an ex-spouse (and even a new partner) this way provides a context for unity rather than division, and opens the way to developing a cooperative relationship.

For Ryan, trying to hold onto the fact that Beth was the mother of his children helped him remember that she'd always have a special role in his life. He further

realized that if he talked poorly about Beth to his daughter, he was essentially insulting half of her gene pool, half of her heritage. This point was driven home to Ryan when he saw an art project of Hilary's entitled "My Family": a colorful drawing of Ryan, Beth, herself, and her brother in a cloud in heaven, along with the family dog.

It's hard to be hateful to someone when you know that you're connected in profound ways. And it's also hard to fight with someone when he or she won't fight back. Do Ryan and Beth have an easy, relaxed friendship now? Well no, not always. Ryan continues to see me every other month, just to check in and review interactions with his ex. Staying on the peaceful path is a journey that requires regular vigilance and support.

The last time he was at Beth's house to pick up Hilary for the weekend, they began to discuss the next summer's vacation and camp plans. Ryan knew this had been a sticking point in the past, and he didn't feel they could or should discuss this casually. He suggested that they find a time in the near future to work out the details so that they'd both be comfortable with the arrangements. Beth agreed.

And then Beth said, "You know, Ryan, I pray for you at night."

"How did you respond?" I asked.

"I told her thanks, and I pray for you, too."

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