

# **Buddhist Insights into Coping with Divorce: Lived Experiences of Two Women in a Pilot Study**

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## **Abstract**

The current pilot study examines how two women are dealing with divorce through Buddhist teachings. It has been conducted by means of face-to-face, in-depth interviews, together with visual art, and various levels of triangulation for enriching data and enhancing trustworthiness. The emerging data (grouped into nine emergent themes and three super-ordinate themes) indicate that Buddhist philosophy has inspired the informants not to harbour anger towards their

ex-spouses, but to accept life changes, and convert their crises into self transcendence by means of the bodhisattva path of serving other people, which gives meaning to their distress. Although this cross-case project involves a small sample size, the research outcomes offer insight into divorced spouses and human service practitioners dealing with their own stressful challenges or with clients who have gone through divorce. Equally significant, the present study exhibits the applicability and practicality of Buddhist philosophy in contemporary contexts.

**Keywords:** cross-case study, four immeasurables, karma, law of dependent origination, qualitative research

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## Introduction

Statistical data reveals an increasing trend in divorce around the world<sup>1</sup>, including Asian countries: for example, Korea<sup>2</sup>, Thailand<sup>3</sup>, the Philippines<sup>4</sup> and China<sup>5</sup>. The rate is as high as over 50 divorces per 100 marriages in many countries<sup>6</sup>, giving rise to negative impacts on families and children, and relevant social costs<sup>7</sup>. It also takes a toll on the divorced individuals themselves as marriage dissolution is a stressful life experience<sup>8</sup>, particularly when it is replete with anger and conflicts<sup>9</sup>, presenting during the in- and post-divorce periods<sup>10</sup>.

Studies have reported that cultural and religious factors play important roles in divorce decisions<sup>11</sup> and religious coping strategies can impact the mental health of the divorced spouses both positively and negatively<sup>12</sup>. Of the total world population 6.7–7.1% are Buddhists<sup>13</sup>, and while Buddhism and its practices are considered to be a means to deal with trauma such as marital disruption, relevant research is limited. Encouraged through marital therapy, clients enhance mindfulness and present-centred awareness using Buddhist meditation<sup>14</sup>. When they can detect negative emotions early, such as anger, anxiety, guilt, hurt feelings, sorrow, and regret; spouses can minimise the distress caused by those negative moods<sup>15</sup>, and thereby produce more agreeable divorce agreements<sup>16</sup>, and maintain better connection with one another<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Park and Raymo (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Bhassorn 1995, Dommaraju and Jones (2011).

<sup>4</sup> Dommaraju and Jones (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Wang and Zhou (2010).

<sup>6</sup> NationMaster.com (2013).

<sup>7</sup> Amato (2000); Wallerstein and Lewis (1998); Amato (2010); Kim (2011).

<sup>8</sup> Holmes and Rahe (1967); Amato (2010); Cheung (1999).

<sup>9</sup> Wolfinger (2011).

<sup>10</sup> Rappaport (2013).

<sup>11</sup> Furtado, Marcén, and Sevilla (2013); DiFurio, Lewis, and Timothy (2012).

<sup>12</sup> Webb et al. (2010).

<sup>13</sup> Index Mundi (2013); The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2012).

<sup>14</sup> Gehart (2012).

<sup>15</sup> Yau, Bley, and Dea (1994).

<sup>16</sup> Baitar et al. (2012).

<sup>17</sup> Hoerberichts (2004).

## Buddhist-Influenced Interventions for Couples and Divorce

Mindfulness-centred approaches can be incorporated into various models of matrimonial counselling to strengthen compassionate caring, empathic interaction, romantic affinity, marital quality, spousal attachment, and sexual satisfaction<sup>18</sup>. An eight-week programme of mindfulness-based relationship enhancement<sup>19</sup> (MBRE), with an emphasis on non-judgemental attention, strengthens the dyadic relationship of couples, and prevents marital dysfunction. Empirical evidence extracted from the above research supports the efficacy of mindfulness-based methods on increased acceptance between partners, individual relaxation, autonomy, relatedness, relationship satisfaction, insightful capability, and spiritual fulfilment; yet literature on the long-term durability of therapeutic effectiveness remains unavailable. Furthermore, while mindfulness in emotionally focused couple therapy can reduce acute conflicts between spouses, and restore mutual attachment by intensifying a warm awareness of each other<sup>20</sup>, its long-term effectiveness has not been examined in terms of the on-going collaborative practices between partners.

Apart from mindfulness-focused interventions, using the Noble Eightfold Relationship Matrix<sup>21</sup> to investigate marital relationships, distressed couples achieve insights and explore different ways of improving harmony. A three-phase remedial measure appears to be helpful in the reconciliation of couples affected by extra-marital affairs<sup>22</sup>, but this programme design does not seem to be directly linked to Buddhist theories. In contrast, by adopting acceptance and commitment therapy for distressed couples, two case studies have examined the correlation between intervention and the improvement in marital relationships<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Jones et al. (2011); Block-Lerner et al. (2007); Gambrel and Keeling (2010); Wachs and Cordova (2007); Gehart and McCollum (2007); Johnston (2012); Birnie, Garland, and Carlson (2010); Carson et al. (2007); Barnes et al. (2007); Brotto and Heiman (2007).

<sup>19</sup> Carson et al. (2006, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Beckerman and Sarracco (2011).

<sup>21</sup> Ginsburg et al. (2010).

<sup>22</sup> Warren et al. (2008).

<sup>23</sup> Peterson et al. (2009).

Conversely, Amato<sup>24</sup> argues that marital dissolution provides a chance for divorced individuals to leave an aversive environment and to gain a second opportunity. Assuming that individuals affected by divorce receive counselling, the estranged family members may have an easier time starting their new lives.

The available literature, nevertheless, contains little about divorce management related to Buddhism, except for Prend's six steps for divorce counselling<sup>25</sup> to soothe painful feelings. In her first step ("accept the way things are"), Prend<sup>26</sup> initially explained vicissitudes, and transience, namely, the law of dependent origination, and convinced clients to accept phenomenological changes as representing the facts per se. She subsequently facilitated them ("choose the road less travelled") to make the best choice with the least amount of harm. In the third stage ("see the big picture"), she helped clients to expand their views by realising the delusive reality of the empirical world, in which any event was a part of one's whole life; and by understanding cause-and-effect (*hetu-phala* 因果) and karma (action 業), according to which the current event was affected by previous events and would also impact the future consequences. Listening to their inner silence through meditation in the fourth phase ("listen to silence"), clients could experience their internal feelings without self-criticism, and develop inner and outer awareness. The difficult fifth stage ("give generously") was to train clients to be forgiving and generous, which is close to the idea of generosity (*dāna* 布施), an ingredient of the six perfections (*pāramitā* 波羅蜜多). Prend<sup>27</sup> also proposed a loving-kindness (*maitrī* 慈) practice, through which clients could eliminate resentment and develop compassionate care towards their ex-spouses. Consequently, in the last step ("strive for enlightenment"), clients could attain enlightenment of the truth that an occurrence, such as a divorce, was merely a phenomenon, which can lead clients to let go of distress more easily.

In spite of adopting Buddhist doctrines, Prend<sup>28</sup> illustrated her approach using only a case example, in which the divorced couple were non-Buddhists, and little information was supplied on how she formulated these steps. The present

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<sup>24</sup> Amato (2000).

<sup>25</sup> Prend (2008).

<sup>26</sup> Prend (2008).

<sup>27</sup> Prend (2008).

<sup>28</sup> Prend (2008).

pilot study explores the experiences of two Chinese Buddhists who have coped with divorce and converted crises into personal transformation. Their outcomes potentially offer references and insight into the application of Buddhist teachings to reach a “good divorce”<sup>29</sup> and minimise the suffering of family members<sup>30</sup>.

## Basic Buddhist Teachings

Buddhism, having originated in India<sup>31</sup>, includes a set of philosophies encompassing worldviews, life views and nature of sentient beings. It perceives that the nature of beings is constantly changing and, therefore, has no fixed form. The former relates to impermanence<sup>32</sup> (*anitya* 無常) and the latter to voidness<sup>33</sup> (*sūnyatā* 空性). This nature arises because all beings are generated by a combination of conditions<sup>34</sup>, which is known as the law of dependent origination<sup>35</sup> (*pratītya-samutpāda* 緣起法).

Buddhism also takes the view that life is affected by karma<sup>36</sup> (action 業), a continuing effect which reflects what one has done in the past, whether in this present life or in his/her past life. Good behaviour leads to good karma, and bad behaviour to bad karma, giving rise to the Buddhist idea of self-responsibility.

In regard to the nature of human beings, Mahāyāna teachings ascertain the *bodhicitta*<sup>37</sup>, the root of a bodhisattva<sup>38</sup>, who devotes herself/himself (an ordinary person) to altruistic activities<sup>39</sup>, namely the bodhisattva path<sup>40</sup> (*bodhisattva-mārga* 菩薩道). Mahāyāna followers strive to be bodhisattvas, as demonstrated by the participants in this study, despite the difficulties they faced in their lives.

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<sup>29</sup> Ahrons (1994: 3).

<sup>30</sup> Amato et al. (2011).

<sup>31</sup> Hsing-Yun (2006).

<sup>32</sup> Suzuki (1938/1981).

<sup>33</sup> Conze (1953).

<sup>34</sup> Hsu (2012).

<sup>35</sup> Gethin (1998).

<sup>36</sup> Suzuki (1938/1981); Reichenbach (1990); Akizuki (1990).

<sup>37</sup> Hsing-Yun (2006).

<sup>38</sup> Mizuno (2003).

<sup>39</sup> Conze (1953).

<sup>40</sup> Harvey (1990).

## Research Design: A Cross-Case Analysis

The present research uses a cross-case study, defined as a “second level of analysis”<sup>41</sup>, compares different cases and synthesises the findings<sup>42</sup> that present a similar phenomenon as to “what they show”<sup>43</sup> in diverse circumstances<sup>44</sup>. By comparing the commonalities and disparities<sup>45</sup>, a comparative study not only deepens the understanding of the participants’ lived experiences<sup>46</sup>, but also yields a “pattern clarification”<sup>47</sup> and specific context trends, which unveil indicators of a phenomenon<sup>48</sup>. This multi-faceted approach permits greater potential for the generalisation of symbolic and subjective meanings<sup>49</sup>. These characteristics enable the present research to justifiably use a cross-case study to explore the narratives of two divorced Buddhist informants, something which appears to be unavailable in the extant literature.

### Sampling and Case Selection

The current research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Faculties, The University of Hong Kong, and employs purposive sampling. Electronic mails were sent out, sourced from databases from the researcher’s personal contacts, an alumni association and departmental contacts from a domestic university. In addition, an event page was opened on facebook to recruit potential participants. Finally, two women (dharma names: Che Wai 慈慧 and Chi Sim 智嬋) were selected to participate in this cross-case study, for the following reasons: first, the selected participants were Buddhist lay followers prior to their marital discord; second, they were divorced; third, they were emotionally stable (as reported in their self-administered questionnaires) and could participate in the data collection

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<sup>41</sup> Minogue et al. (2010: 569).

<sup>42</sup> Lasker and Guidry (2009); Yin (2012).

<sup>43</sup> Thomas (2011: 141).

<sup>44</sup> Minogue et al. (2010); Rihoux and Lobe (2009); Thomas (2011).

<sup>45</sup> Brooks (2009); Lijphart (1975); O’Kane (2004).

<sup>46</sup> Miles and Huberman (1994).

<sup>47</sup> Miles and Huberman (1994: 175).

<sup>48</sup> Miles and Huberman (1994); O’Kane (2004).

<sup>49</sup> Schneider (1999); Miles and Huberman (1994).



process during the period of interviews; and lastly, they were open to reflecting and sharing their experiences of divorce and their coping strategies.

## Data Collection

Six sessions (three sessions for each informant) of face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews totalling 335 minutes were conducted in Hong Kong in Cantonese, a Chinese dialect. Moreover, self-created visual art, a kind of “performative representation”<sup>50</sup> produced by the informants, supplied “beyond text-based evidence”<sup>51</sup> to enrich data collection and analysis, and allowed for the informants’ active involvement<sup>52</sup>. These “self-contained images”<sup>53</sup>, taken as part of the primary data<sup>54</sup>, not only enriched individual presentation, re-presentation, re-formation and re-shaping<sup>55</sup>, especially in regard to emotions<sup>56</sup>, but also allowed better connection through meaningful expression between the artwork presenters, and the researchers and readers<sup>57</sup>.

After the interviews, the informants were invited to independently create their visual art in their leisure time, for which they were free to choose themes to express their current feelings, emotions, and attitudes<sup>58</sup>. In two months, Che Wai made a string of knots (refer to Figure 5) to denote her present difficulties, and wrote a postscript explaining her artefact. Chi Sim used a photograph (refer to Figure 4) to narrate her current life, and orally elaborated on her work.

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<sup>50</sup> Bell (2006: 44).

<sup>51</sup> Bell (2006: 31).

<sup>52</sup> Allen (2012); Yi and Zebrack (2010).

<sup>53</sup> Walker and Moulton (1989: 158).

<sup>54</sup> Wilson et al. (2003).

<sup>55</sup> Bell (2006); Dowdall and Golden (1989); Cooper and Yarbrough (2010); Gude (2008).

<sup>56</sup> Carlson, Engebretson, and Chamberlain (2006).

<sup>57</sup> Walker and Moulton (1989).

<sup>58</sup> Merrill and Andersen (1993).

## Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and were transcribed verbatim into Chinese, and the transcriptions were independently coded by two analysts (the researcher and a peer analyst) later using ATLAS.ti 7<sup>59</sup> (refer to Figure 1), a computer-assisted programme for qualitative data analysis<sup>60</sup>. The two cases were analysed separately to understand the participants' lived experiences<sup>61</sup> following an identical six-step protocol<sup>62</sup> in each case. The first step of this protocol involved over-reading the raw data<sup>63</sup> to help the analyst to bracket off a quick reduction of data. The next step was a free textual analysis to gain familiarity with the data, explore the semantic content, and primarily to understand the context of the participant's concerns. In the third stage, the data were reduced and "emergent themes"<sup>64</sup> were developed by mapping and re-organising the relationships and patterns within the exploratory information. Subsequently, the themes were connected in order to identify "super-ordinate themes"<sup>65</sup>. The bracketing of ideas in the fifth phase drew from a single case, which then began the initial steps for a new single case. The last stage involved listing the similarities and differences between the cases, reconfiguring and relabeling the super-ordinate themes in order to move on to a theoretical level. Although some scholars propose to separately report each case<sup>66</sup>, this research presents a joint account of the convergence and divergence of the informants' data to reveal a fuller picture of their narratives, which illustrates the symbolic interactions in their specific culture.

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<sup>59</sup> Cheng (2014d).

<sup>60</sup> Friese (2012); Barry (1998); Konopásek (2008).

<sup>61</sup> Eatough and Smith (2006); Shinebourne and Smith (2009).

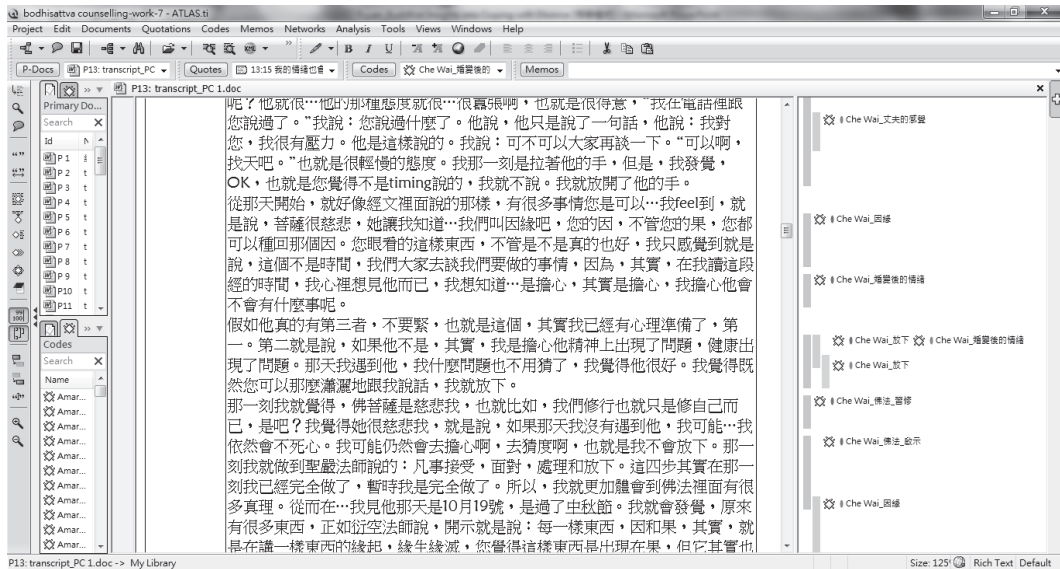
<sup>62</sup> Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009).

<sup>63</sup> Ayres, Kavanaugh, and Knafl (2003).

<sup>64</sup> Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009: 91).

<sup>65</sup> Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009: 107).

<sup>66</sup> Miles and Huberman (1994).

**Figure 1: Using a Computer-Assisted Programme for Qualitative Data Analysis**

## Rigour

Multiple methods of triangulation were employed to strengthen the trustworthiness of data collection, analysis and interpretation. Different levels of member-checking were conducted to ensure data accuracy and data analysis reliability. First, frequent checking with the informants during the interviews enabled the interviewer to correctly understand the informants' interpretations. Second, transcriptions were sent to the informants for proofreading to ensure accurate documentation. No major alterations to the transcriptions were required by the informants. Third, the analysis results were discussed with the informants, and they agreed to the data interpretation (refer to Figures 2 and 3). Fourth, the connotations of the self-created visual art were personally articulated by the informants. Apart from these steps, a peer analyst participated in the data analysis, achieving an inter-rater reliability of 91%, in order to minimise analysis bias on the part of the researcher.

Figure 2: Che Wai's Analysis Map

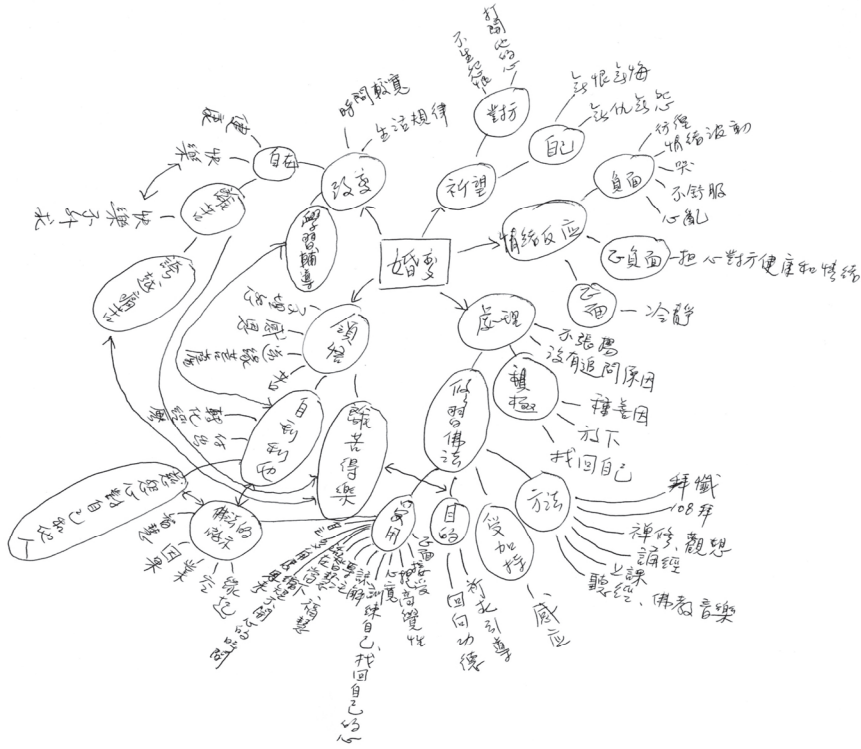
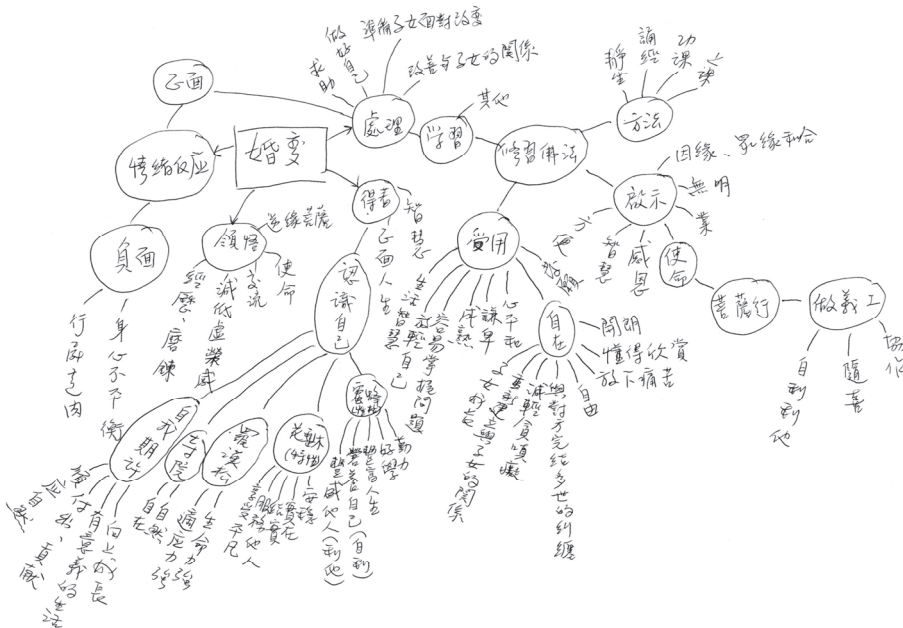


Figure 3: Chi Sim's Analysis Map



## Findings and Analyses

Emerging data from the current cross-case study drew out nine emergent themes and then finally resulted in the identification of three super-ordinate themes as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Results of the Present Project**

Super-ordinate theme	Emergent theme
Reactions to divorce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional reaction</li> <li>• Adjustment to post-divorce life</li> <li>• Interpretation of marital failure</li> </ul>
Current life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practising the bodhisattva path</li> <li>• Worry-free state</li> </ul>
Insights on Buddhist doctrines gained from the experience of divorce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Law of dependent origination</li> <li>• Wisdom</li> <li>• Compassion</li> <li>• Living in present moment</li> </ul>

### Profiles of the Informants

*Che Wai.* Che Wai is a middle-aged Chinese woman, who is now living with her son. During her marriage of more than 20 years, she always felt satisfied in her intimate relationship with her husband until one day he suddenly left home without a word. Not being pressured to explain, her husband kept silent but nevertheless occasionally returned home for periods of time. All the while Che Wai was patiently awaiting a chance to discuss it with him. Seeing no improvement after two years, she decided to divorce him.

Che Wai had been interested in Buddhism, particularly in karma (action 業), from her adolescence. While she was pregnant, she became a vegetarian and chanted, believing that this would benefit her baby. She stopped these practices after her son was born, although she continued to attend dharma talks. She resumed chanting when her younger sister attempted suicide, and found that it helped in her sister's recovery from serious injuries.

**Chi Sim.** Chi Sim is a middle-aged Chinese woman. She got married in her early 20s but the marital relationship was not as strong as she had expected. The couple's relationship showed continual improvement after her son was born until a family financial crisis, on account of which her ex-husband frequently left Hong Kong for business. From then on, Chi Sim rarely communicated with him, and could not endure to his behavioural irregularities; and she eventually had no choice but to end her marriage. After her divorce, she continued to raise her son and daughter alone.

Chi Sim stopped studying Buddhism after her daughter was born, and resumed her study after her children had grown up. In spite of this interruption, she recalled that what she had learned from Buddhist teachings implicitly guided her life during her worst circumstances. She also believed that she had learnt Buddhism in her past lives.

## Reactions to Divorce

**Emotional reaction.** The emotional responses of the informants included crying, anxiety, agitation, worries, and uneasiness; just like other people going through marital dissolution who show emotional instability<sup>67</sup>. Chi Sim “was just an empty body as numb as a walking corpse”, and Che Wai was particularly fearful and disoriented. They visited social workers for help but found the services unhelpful. Instead, they engaged in Buddhist practices, involving meditation, chanting, repentance, and attending dharma talks, to calm themselves down. As a result, they were no longer angry at their ex-spouses when they began to view divorce differently.

**Adjustment to post-divorce life.** The informants reacted positively to managing these life challenges because of religious support. Chi Sim considered her children most and minimised the harm to them stemming from being in a single-parent family. Inspired by Buddhist wisdom, she made efforts to improve her mother-child relationship by equipping herself with improved communication and parental skills.

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<sup>67</sup> Fink and Shapiro (2013).

Che Wai kept a low profile regarding her marital adversity and did not put pressure on her husband; rather, she was worried about his physical and emotional health. By following Buddhist teachings, she sharpened her interpersonal skills believing, as she stated “I must reform myself first. I can help others [specifically my husband] become aware of themselves only after I have become aware of myself.” Crediting Buddhism, which guided her to be stronger and more resilient, she developed her intrinsic resources so that she could manage future changes and also contribute to the benefit of other people.

***Interpretation of marital failure.*** The chain of cause-and-effect (*hetu-phala* 因果) due to karma (action 業) is a leading interpretation of life experiences from the Buddhist perspective. Having undergone hypnosis and having talked to her ex-husband, Chi Sim realised the power of karma, for example, her belief that her ex-husband hurt her because of negative interactions in their past lives. She believed that they did something wrong to each other in their previous lives. This was like a debt brought forward to this life, playing the key role in this divorce and producing a karmic effect. She confessed:

Perhaps, I owed him, and he owed me in various ways. I think this (divorce) is to repay him (the debt)... [I] feel good because I've completely repaid him. That is, there is nothing left in our relationship. In terms of relationship, I have repaid him.

Chi Sim perceived that those accumulated grievances were carried forward and manifested in this life and regretted them, “If I had known Buddhist teachings [in my past lives], I could have handled it (negative interaction) better”; hence, she began to study Buddhism more diligently. This resulted in the divorce, through which she paid off this debt, which in turn set her free from complaints.

In spite of her hurt feelings and anger at her ex-husband, Chi Sim deemed divorce to be a growth experience, and treated her ex-husband as her bodhisattva (a person who is dedicated to helping people), in that he helped her to sharpen her capabilities to cope with life's difficulties. She explained with ease, “He (her ex-husband) indeed is a great bodhisattva [for me]. If it is not he, I will not be so strong or mature as now.”

Similarly, Che Wai did not probe into the reasons for her ex-husband's abrupt departure but believed in the underlying cause-and-effect principle. As she related her understanding:

A bad consequence is incurred not by just one cause, but by many main causes and conditions. What I have to face now must be due to something I did poorly in the past. Hence, I have to do Buddhist practices to rectify my behaviour first.

Moreover, Che Wai strived to contribute to the good of other people as a practice, which would lead to good fruition in the future by creating constructive causes. She then gradually adapted to her new life and asserted:

I don't know what will happen tomorrow, but I'm preparing myself for it. What I do today is to prepare myself for tomorrow. ... I won't complain, nor will I allot blame to anyone. I act positively; that is, I face the problem.

Nevertheless, Che Wai recalled:

I don't hate him, but that doesn't mean I forgive [him]. ... I'm not that good as to really forgive and understand him. But what I can do is not to blame him or hate him. ... [I wish] we all can try to live without regret, complaint, or hatred.

Letting go of blame, she was thankful for her ex-husband because:

He is my teacher, who makes me understand impermanence. He is also my bodhisattva, who teaches me how to better apply what I learn, Buddhist teachings and meditation, to life. Additionally, he facilitates my viewing of the four noble truths connected to suffering.

Che Wai is currently satisfied with having more time for Buddhist practices and with her increased ability to look after herself.



The two informants relinquished their anger towards their ex-spouses and were thankful for “these adverse bodhisattvas”, the ones who hurt them but escalated their personal growth.

## **Current Life**

*Practising the bodhisattva path* (*bodhisattva-mārga* 菩薩道). Despite showing various responses in the different phases of divorce, the informants were living richer lives as bodhisattvas. Chi Sim is enjoying her current life, as reflected in her visual art, a photograph (refer to Figure 4), having divorced eight years ago. She was as peaceful as if she was staying in a temple, and was working hard like a bee for her children, clients, other people, and herself. This has created a meaningful life for her, from which “I learn more than I offer. ... It greatly widens my vision. ... [I] can view various things from different perspectives.” She was continuously learning and practising Buddhism to make herself strong like a Buddhist pine, which is strong and upstanding. She also contributes to others’ lives, metaphorically like a sturdy and durable palisander chair, on which travellers might freely take a seat whenever they need it. From this, she has dedicated herself to the benefit of self and other from her bodhisattva practices.

**Figure 4: Chi Sim's Photograph – A Temple, A Bee, A Tree, and A Chair**



Source: Cheng<sup>68</sup>

In contrast, Che Wai had recently divorced, and had not completely recovered from her distress, as could be observed from her string of knots (refer to Figure 5). She felt exhausted trying to “unfasten the knots”, indicating her lack of understanding of her ex-husband’s startling departure. However, she believed that under the law of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda* 緣起法) misfortune is always changing and that hope still exists. She thus made an effort to create favourable conditions around herself, gave blessings to herself and her ex-husband, and prayed for the conversion of the deadlocks into “as-one-wishes knots”. Overcoming such hardships, she let go of her distress, and now takes care of other people, and attains self-transcendence, because:

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<sup>68</sup> Cheng (2014b: 180).

The main objective of learning Buddhist teachings is to benefit oneself as well as others. ... I just want to do what I can offer. I think I already become happy when making contributions to others.

**Figure 5: Che Wai's Handcraft – Knots**



**Worry-free state.** Worry-free is the state of mind of being at ease and free from miseries. Chi Sim achieved the worry-free state when she applied Buddhist teachings to her daily life. First, she eliminated the negative interactions with her ex-husband which had accumulated in their previous lives, and then felt free. Second, she reduced the three poisons (*tri-doṣa* 三毒), namely demerits, including greed (*rāga* 貪), hatred (*dveṣa* 嗔), and ignorance (*moha* 癡). By decreasing her desires, she began to enjoy a simple life. Third, she was full of contentment because of her improved mother-child relationships.

Compared with Chi Sim's contentment, Che Wai was still learning ways to adapt to her divorced life, such as through meditation. She also perceived that a worry-free state comes from inner contentment and the transformation of the sadness that changed her lifestyle. This shed a light on her parenting skills on account of which she relaxed her control over her son, and sought to improve their relationship.

### **Insights of Buddhist Doctrines Gained from the Experience of Divorce**

*Law of dependent origination.* The law of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda* 緣起法) is the fundamental tenet of Buddhism associated with the concepts of interdependent conditionality and impermanence. As Che Wai related in her experiences, "The law of dependent origination, the nature of voidness, nothing is absolute. Impermanent!" Impermanence (*anitya* 無常) and the nature of voidness (*śūnyatā* 空性) provide her with the hope that:

Voidness is an outcome of the dependent origination, without ending, without inception. ... As long as there is the arising of conditions, there will be dissipation of conditions, and dissipation also implies arising. ... I won't say my divorce is a regret for me. I can only say it's the ending of certain conditions. I can say this relationship has ended, but it doesn't mean that my relationship with him can't begin again. ... For example, with what I have experienced and learnt, I can commit myself to another relationship, such as doing community services...

Che Wai realised that life's difficulties might not be absolutely disastrous but can also present opportunities for experiencing real life. She mindfully created a favourable environment by her skilful use of impermanence (*anitya* 無常) and voidness (*śūnyatā* 空性) so that she was able to overcome the fear of uncertainty about the future, explaining:

I gradually let go of my attachment... [I] re-manage the favourable causes and conditions around me. ... I don't see the certainty when viewing everything that had happened. The problem is in me. I was sowing some seeds by what I was doing.

Accepting impermanence (*anitya* 無常), the informants could tackle the problems of life, and change their mindset so as to make fewer complaints about their misfortune. They are no longer afraid of vicissitudes and express no worries about the unknown. This helps them to be worry-free.

**Wisdom.** Buddhists are liberated from suffering when attaining wisdom (*prajñā* 般若), which refers to deeply and thoroughly realising the law of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda* 緣起法), impermanence (*anitya* 無常), and voidness (*śūnyatā* 空性), thus allowing them to easily manage life's problems. Che Wai adopted the middle-way, the way to practise wisdom by de-polarising the binary mode of thinking, relating that:

[I] don't clinch onto what is right or what is wrong. ... When handling problems, many people always get fixated on what is right or what is wrong. In fact, is there right or wrong? No, there isn't.

Echoing this statement, Chi Sim said, “[I] do my best in different positions and from different dimensions.”

Moreover, Che Wai realised:

Wisdom is about making choices. ... A wise person makes right choices. ... You are wise when you can make the [right] choices.

Che Wai's emphasis on wisdom guided her to make the best choices when she understood the law of dependent origination as the basis for the formation of the phenomenal world. She also recognises that “compassion requires wisdom. ... Compassion is one side of the coin, and the other side is wisdom.” Through compassion, she empathically understood the suffering of other people and transcended her sorrow.

**Compassion.** Buddhist compassion (*karuṇā* 悲) is a yearning to relieve the distress of other people, and compassion towards oneself is the restoration of one's inner contentment as Che Wai accomplished. She stated:

This is how I treat myself with compassion. When he (her ex-husband) left me, I was very unhappy and very hurt. So I told myself, ‘You must stay healthy. You must stay happy.’ ... That is, I didn’t seek happiness from exterior. This is how you treat yourself with compassion. External things are out of your control, and you have to go back to your inner self, and learn to let go, and be less attached. But it’s hard to do so.

Similarly, Chi Sim testified to the fact that “when you let go of your attachment, you feel worry free, and so do others.” She pointed out that letting go is a form of both self-compassion and compassion (*karuṇā* 悲) to others. Compassion, in practice, results in enhancing interpersonal relationships.

*Living in the present moment.* Che Wai said for herself, “I live in the present. It’s myself that I face. ... Living in the present moment means you act in accordance with the context. I really can do so.” She added:

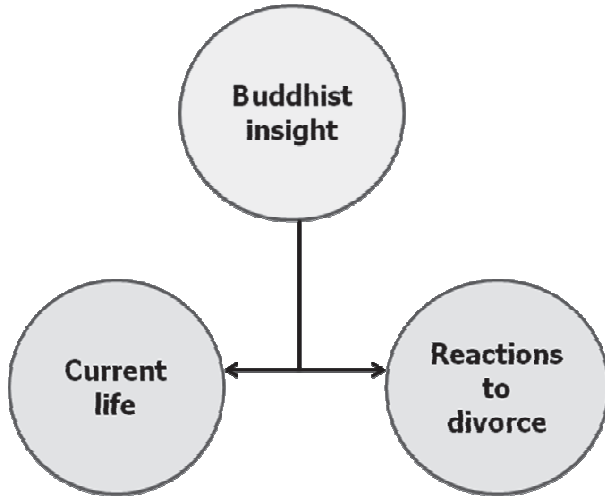
When I feel negative emotions, complaints, or hatred, I will return to my breathing. That feeling is that I need only return to myself. ... Purify yourself, and naturally you will be aware of what you are doing, of your emotions, your behaviour, and your speech.

Living in the present moment has enabled the informants to enhance their awareness of inner and outer environments, and to become stronger in order to cope with life’s challenges.

## Discussion

The accounts of the lived experiences of the participants (Che Wai and Chi Sim) reveal the significance of Buddhist teachings which strengthened them to overcome their vulnerabilities. This can be formulated as a framework (refer to Figure 6) to illustrate the dynamics among the three super-ordinate themes (insights on Buddhist doctrines gained from the experience of divorce, reactions to divorce, and current life).

**Figure 6: How Buddhism Helps the Participants Overcome Their Distress Due to Divorce**



Buddhist wisdom (*prajñā* 般若), which is an important consideration in this pilot study, helped the participants (Che Wai and Chi Sim) gain an insight into how to cope with the afflictions induced by divorce. It pertains to views of the world and life, human nature, and practices, regarding the law of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda* 緣起法), wisdom, compassion (*karuṇā* 悲), and living in the present moment. These teachings substantially influence how the participants reacted to their challenges of divorce and re-developed the quality of their current life. The reactions included emotional management, adjustment to post-divorce life, and interpretation of marital failure. Having tackled the suffering caused by divorce, the participants are living a worry-free state and are committed to serving other people, through which they make meaning of their frustration. Their positive reactions enabled them to enrich their psychological and spiritual quality of life. In addition, their current life reflects how they practise Buddhist teachings and exemplifies how they have reacted to adversity. This research presents the directive capacity of Buddhism towards the reactions to misfortune and their impact on the current life of the participants.

In light of the findings, the concept of the bodhisattva spirit is revealed to add a new stock of knowledge that is conducive to improved divorce management. The limitations of the current research, its implications, and future research directions are then delineated.

## Added Knowledge: Bodhisattva Spirit

Prend's process<sup>69</sup> consists of the major Buddhist doctrines, such as the law of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda* 緣起法), impermanence (*anitya* 無常), voidness (*śūnyatā* 空性), karma (action 業), and loving-kindness (*maitrī* 慈), as reiterated by the informants of the present research. Having overcome their trauma, the informants accomplished significant personal development, which confirms Prend's suggestion<sup>70</sup> to encourage divorced sufferers' innate wisdom to blossom and thereby ultimately achieve intrinsic peace. This consequence not only accords with Prend's definition of divorcing well<sup>71</sup> in a way that is non-damaging, generous, and compassionate towards one's ex-spouse but, more specifically, it enables the informants to further develop wisdom, an inborn feature of human nature, that is, the *buddha*-nature "without defilement"<sup>72</sup>, as Prend<sup>73</sup> notes.

The law of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda* 緣起法) explains how the phenomenal world is formed through causes and conditions, and the impermanent phenomena. Hence, there is no absolute reality in the empirical world<sup>74</sup>, connoting many possible realities<sup>75</sup>. When a crisis arises, risks and opportunities are also present<sup>76</sup>; therefore, for suffering divorcees, a prospective relationship is feasible.

All beings are voidness (*śūnyatā* 空性) and ever-changing in light of the law of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda* 緣起法), where the impermanent body is "like a bit of foam ... a phantasm ... a dream ... a shadow ... an echo ... a cloud ..."<sup>77</sup>. Although there is "no 'I' or 'ego'"<sup>78</sup> due to the "absence of intrinsic existence"<sup>79</sup>, human beings tightly retain their

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<sup>69</sup> Prend (2008).

<sup>70</sup> Prend (2008).

<sup>71</sup> Prend (2008).

<sup>72</sup> McRae (2004: 93).

<sup>73</sup> Prend (2008).

<sup>74</sup> Ricard and Thuan (2001).

<sup>75</sup> Rogers (1980).

<sup>76</sup> Ho and Bai (2010).

<sup>77</sup> McRae (2004: 83).

<sup>78</sup> Watson (1997: 68).

<sup>79</sup> Ricard and Thuan (2001: 13).



“attachment of self”<sup>80</sup>. This attachment creates suffering caused by the denial of egolessness and impermanence.

In addition, informants emphasised the aspiration of being a bodhisattva in order to help others. A bodhisattva in Mahāyāna practises the four immeasurables (*catvāri apramāṇāni* 四無量心), the Buddhist values and qualities of a bodhisattva, including loving-kindness (*maitrī* 慈), compassion (*karuṇā* 悲), empathetic joy (*muditā* 喜), and equanimity<sup>81</sup> (*upekṣā* 捨). This practice benefits both oneself and others<sup>82</sup>, and is a focus of this spirit of bodhisattva, as emphasised by the informants. However, this was undervalued in Prend’s process<sup>83</sup> even though Prend<sup>84</sup> highlighted loving-kindness meditation as the way for a divorced couple to reduce anger and hatred towards one another.

Practising the spirit of a bodhisattva interactively adopts the above-discussed Buddhist teachings, which differs from the sequential or linear nature of Prend’s process<sup>85</sup>. It encourages flexible divorce counselling to cater to clients’ individual needs, and to facilitate them to view impermanence positively so that they can cope with the challenges of life and contribute to society.

Referring to Prend’s process<sup>86</sup> and the results of the current study, the objective of divorce counselling is to rejuvenate an individual’s inner wisdom and peaceful mind in order that the client may foster his/her own personal growth. These achievements reverberate with Prend’s idea<sup>87</sup> of divorcing well and Amato’s concept<sup>88</sup> of a second chance for well-being. Prend’s divorce counselling<sup>89</sup> relies on Buddhist views; however, it may be re-structured into an interactive design with an emphasis on assisting clients to achieve the spirit of a bodhisattva and, thereby, to attain personal development of freedom from suffering.

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<sup>80</sup> McRae (2004: 110).

<sup>81</sup> Cheng (2014a).

<sup>82</sup> Cheng (2014a; 2014c: 82–83); Cheng and Tse (2014: 22).

<sup>83</sup> Prend (2008).

<sup>84</sup> Prend (2008).

<sup>85</sup> Prend (2008).

<sup>86</sup> Prend (2008).

<sup>87</sup> Prend (2008).

<sup>88</sup> Amato (2000).

<sup>89</sup> Prend (2008).

## Limitations

Regarding the data source, an all female study would incline towards a unilateral view, which might create biased data. Therefore, having involved only two interviewees, this pilot study does not intend to generalise its findings to divorce cases. It then proposes further in-depth investigations into the application of Buddhist teachings to the overcoming of life's difficulties.

## Implications

Despite these limitations, the current pilot study outlines a theoretical Buddhist framework, indicating the interplay among the constituents of such a framework for human service practitioners who deal with divorced couples.

This cross-case analysis has reported high homogeneity of ideology and reactions to life challenges on the part of the informants, plausibly because of their similar faith. Although they had performed Buddhist practices on an intermittent basis, they both agreed that Buddhist teachings had been implanted into their minds, and had directed their positive responses towards life's problems, enabling them to transcend their challenges. This potentially offers an alternative view to assist service practitioners to work through with their clients the afflictions caused by divorce.

Research outcomes also argue that Prend's six-step process<sup>90</sup> could have been a more viable counselling approach, if it had applied its Buddhist elements interactively, as elucidated earlier. Such a modified approach more likely offers the choice for clients to alleviate their suffering.

In regard to methodological implications, this study has attempted to adopt first-hand data (lived experience recounted through individual interviews) to investigate the applicability of Buddhist philosophy to daily life. This application has fulfilled two aims: first, it expands the research methods of Buddhist Studies in order to accommodate the needs of the modern society; and second, it accords with the Buddha's aspiration for the well-being of all sentient beings.

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<sup>90</sup> Prend (2008).

## Future Research Directions

In order to advance this topic of employing Buddhism for therapeutic purposes, this study suggests the use of clinical studies and empirical inquiries to generalise the research results. It also proposes the examination into the effectiveness of this approach in different cultural contexts for both Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

## Concluding Remarks

While just a pilot study, this in-depth investigation details how the two Buddhist women recruited for the project have managed their lives after divorce and what they have learnt from their traumatic experiences. Comparing these two participants, this cross-case study presents strong similarities between them, in particular, the commitment to helping other people, resulting in self transcendence through adversity and afflictions. This discourse not only unveils the bodhisattva spirit that is a feature of Buddhist devotees, but also provides sufferers and caring professionals with an alternative approach for dealing with distress both for themselves and their clients. Equally important, the current project sheds light on the applicability and practicality of Buddhism in contemporary situations.

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# 佛法對克服離婚傷痛的啟示： 兩位女性親身經歷的先導研究

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## 摘要

本先導研究探討兩位女性從佛法中領悟如何克服離婚的傷痛。除了面對面的深度訪談外，本文還採用視覺作品和多項三角測量法，目的在豐富內容和加強學術的嚴謹。研究資料組合成九項初階主題，然後歸納三項高階主題，顯示兩位受訪者深受佛理的啟發，不但沒有怨懟前夫，反而接受生命中的變遷，化危為機，自我超越，以自己的不幸經驗，服務他人，給苦難賦予意義。雖然這跨案例研究的樣本數目少，但研究結果可為離婚者和助人專業工作者提供有價值的參考，如何應對婚姻挫敗的壓力。同樣重要的是，本研究展示佛教哲理在當今處境的應用性和實用性。

**關鍵詞：**四無量心、自利利他、跨案例研究、業、質性研究、緣起法