

Part Four: From Brokenhearted to Wholehearted: Learning to Breathe Again

Chapter

“It’s been a long, a long time coming, but I know that a change is gonna come.”

–Sam Cooke

When it comes to a broken heart, the only way out is in. There is no way to fool the pain; it persists in the face of impeccable logic and willful vows to move forward. This brief (7-day, Friday to Friday) program is a way for you to begin to make friends with your broken heart, to move toward it rather than distance yourself from it. Although it can feel uncomfortable at first, this is actually the way to regain balance and draw strength from it instead of letting it defeat you.

One of the problems with heartbreak is that it tends to relentlessly speed up your thought processes (and subsequent actions). It’s easy to become so freaked out that your mind comes up with strategy after strategy to quell the pain you’re feeling: you should hate him, you should hate yourself, he’s incapable of love and doesn’t deserve you, it’s critical that you speak right away, it’s critical that you never, ever speak to him again, the solution is to start a massive weight loss program, quit your job, move to a new town, get him fired, throw out all his stuff—and on and on and on... All this speed leads to even more speed until you’re throwing everything you’ve got at this problem but, like tossing pebbles against a tidal wave, nothing actually stems the flow. Instead of further complicating matters with further complicated strategies, our program begins on a weekend by releasing all strategies and quieting the situation down by simplifying your mental environment through meditation, journaling, and hanging out at home.

The following days, Monday through Friday, will be about introducing some forms to your every day life that are meant to further pacify emotional turmoil. They include meditation and journaling, and also a daily gratitude ritual wherein you offer appreciation to your ex for whatever good he may have done you during the course of your relationship, and then, on the final day, a simple ceremony to release this person from your life. By the end of this week, you will have begun to let go and move forward, with kindness toward yourself and him. After all, until some kindness is included, you haven't moved on.

When I was struggling with a broken heart, I worked every strategy known to mankind to get the pain to stop. I tried a lot of things that didn't help: getting drunk, using affirmations like "I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine" when I was not, not, not, and throwing myself into work. I devoured every women's magazine article that listed 5 ways to get over a broken heart or 7 ways to move on for good—but advice like "keep busy," "pamper yourself," "make a list of all the things you disliked about him," "avoid negative thoughts," and the ridiculous "have a good cry every now and then" just did not cut it. "Keep busy" turned into "clean out your closets while pretending to be insane." Pampering myself turned me into a dipsomaniac with too many new clothes that I thought might tempt him back. Listing his bad qualities only reminded me of all his good ones. Pretending I could control my misery by putting icky thoughts aside was unbelievably claustrophobic and, ultimately, a lie. And have a good cry every now and then? How about ever now and every then? All of this "advice" made me feel like I should have a nice, neat system for handling my big emotions until they turned into trained pets on a leash. Uh, no. The ladies in the magazine articles may have been

burning the midnight oil at the office while wearing the perfect blouse and pencil skirt, dabbing every now and then at their eyes with a monogrammed hankie, but I was channel surfing on the couch in my house at 4 in the morning, wearing sweat pants and a bra, blowing my nose into a paper towel cause I'd burnt through all the Kleenex long ago. It seemed that no one was writing anything that could tell someone like me what to do. So I'm going to share with you what I did instead. After a lot of hit and miss efforts, I figured out a daily routine for myself that enabled me to explore my deeply painful feelings and give them expression. I'm going to suggest that you try this routine yourself for one week. If, at the end of that week you've found none of this helpful, abandon ship. Whatever you have found helpful, please keep doing.

Instead of trying to distract myself through busy-ness, self-indulgence, or wacky affirmations that were more wishful than positive thinking, I allowed my feelings to simply be as they were, at which point they began to lead me down a path to wisdom. My broken heart became my greatest spiritual teacher and I emerged from my little experiment a way stronger person who was both more vulnerable to love and less afraid of it. SWEET.

All the things I'm going to suggest to you are things I still do. And since becoming a Buddhist meditation teacher, I've learned many more ways to meet my feelings head on and turn even the nastiest ones into wisdom. So without further ado, let's check these things out. I'm going to lay them out for you in a 7-day program that is best done from a Friday to a Friday. My website has additional audio instruction and also examples of how to put these tools into play. Visit susanpiver.com/wobh/TK

1. Meditation. This is the total cornerstone of the program and for working with heartbreak as a spiritual path. We won't be meditating *on* anything and there are no visualizations or affirmations—the meditation practice I suggest is Shamatha, the simple breath-awareness practice explained in Chapter __. Appendix __ has simplified Shamatha instruction that you can and should review before each practice session, just to refresh your memory.
2. Journaling. Every morning I wrote in my journal for three longhand pages. I still do this. This kind of writing is sometimes called “free writing” or “morning pages,” the phrase coined by Julia Cameron in her wonderful book, “The Artist’s Way.” It is simply 3 pages of stream-of-consciousness writing. The idea is to pick up a pen and paper (best to not use computer for this) and write down whatever comes to mind, as it comes to mind. There is no censoring, editing, or revising. You never have to read these words again and it totally doesn't matter if they make sense, are brilliant, profane, whiny, or mundane. Whatever they are, they are.
3. Writing the Story. Writing a story is different than journaling. I'm going to suggest that you write the story of your relationship—but from a third-person perspective. From the day you met until the day you parted, what would the story be if you were writing it as if it happened to someone else? I'll make suggestions for how to do this below.
4. Loving kindness meditation. As mentioned earlier in the book, Loving kindness meditation is about connecting with what is most painful in your life and simply wishing yourself well—and then expanding that to wish that all who suffer from

what is causing you pain. It's very intimate and extremely powerful. During this program we're going to practice traditional loving kindness, but with some suggested tweaks that are meant to soothe a heart that may feel bereft of love. Close to the end of the program, you're going to practice loving kindness for the one who broke your heart. I suggest that this is the most healing exercise you can possibly do.

Preparation

During this week you will invite your broken heart to show itself as a step toward healing and strengthening. However it would be very easy to turn into a pity party rather than an act of empowerment. The former is pure self-indulgence while the latter is a sacred and soulful act. How can you figure out which one you're doing?

Before getting in to the specifics, I want to outline the three steps you can take to make any endeavor a sacred act. They are: making offerings; requesting blessings; and dedicating the merit. Let's look at each of these three steps and then review how to employ all three to create a week of sacred introspection and healing.

Making Offerings

What does this mean? What constitutes an offering? And to whom are you making offerings? These are the questions.

An offering is something made out of respect. Our world does not actually teach us how to respect properly. "Respect your teacher." "You're not respecting me young lady." These things usually mean some version of "do what I say because I'm bigger and

tougher than you.” Respect is often tinged with fear and resentment. Obviously that’s not the kind of respect we’re talking about here. This is the respect that spontaneously arises in the presence of something greater than your self. You don’t have to try. It feels wrong not to respect, like showing up on your wedding day in regular clothes or leaving your baby’s name up to chance. Some moments are important and you don’t have to figure out why. They command respect automatically.

There are several levels on which you can make offerings.

Outer Offerings. There are objects that are traditionally used in making offerings, no matter what the wisdom tradition and they tend to center around the senses: things you can see, smell, taste, touch, or hear. Images of respected figures, flowers or scented candles, sweets, beautiful fabrics, and music are often included in sacred spaces, not simply because these are lovely things, but because they are pleasing. A shrine or altar is a way of focusing the energy of these offerings, so a table covered in brocade holding a candle and a photograph is a very simple way of showcasing your offerings. It’s not important to make your altar table the most beautiful in the history of the world. What is important is that it be clean and heartfelt. So to begin this program, please create such an altar in your home.

Inner Offerings: If it were as simple as sticking some pretty objects on a table, making offerings would be simple indeed. However there are two other aspects in making sacred offerings. An inner offering comes about when you make a genuine connection with yourself. It isn’t so much about whom you’re making an offering to. It’s not necessary to decide, am I offering to God, Buddha, my higher self, the powers of good, or what have you. This is not required. What is necessary is to touch in with

exactly who and what you are right this moment, and offer that. Anything else is a bit conceptual. For example, as I write this, I notice that on this particular morning, I am actually quite agitated. I have no idea how to say what I want to say. I notice myself becoming frustrated and then despairing. Okay. No problem. Today, what I offer is my agitation, frustration, and despair. It feels good to do this. The way to make this offering is to feel my feelings as accurately as I can and then say quite simply to myself, “I have no idea how you can use this stuff, but I offer it for the benefit of myself and all beings. Please use it as you will.” And then let go. I’ve made offerings very similar to this countless times (I offer my crankiness, I offer my pettiness, I offer my self-judgment, I offer my sneezes, tears, and longings for cupcakes.) I’ve offered my emotions. (I offer my longing for love and anger at my husband. On other days, I offer my love for him.) I’ve offered the very best of who I am, on those days when I feel those things. (I offer my insights, tenderness, and deep goodness.) You can offer your whole heart. You can offer your broken heart, that it may be used to benefit all. Somehow.

Secret Offerings. As we can see from the example above, it’s not difficult to imagine making an offering from an outer or an inner perspective. The secret level is something else. It’s secret from you, too, which makes it kind of exciting and interesting. We all know what it is to make a gesture (say, send a friend in the hospital flowers) and understand the outer reason (she’s sick and needs cheering up) and the inner reason (you love her). The secret reason, however, is not known to you, and that’s why it’s called secret. In this case, it may be that your friend was about to give up hope until the moment your flowers arrived and she was inspired to get healthy. You had no way of knowing what her feelings were or planning for your gift to arrive at the exact right

moment. It just did. Other forces are at work, and for this we can be grateful. So when it comes to offerings, the way to make your secret offering (in addition to the outer and inner offerings) is to do the only thing you can do when it comes to secrets: not know them. Let go of your outer and inner offerings and agree not to trap them by your own expectation of outcome. I offer these flowers (good) because my heart is broken (good) and I want Johnny to come back (nope). Please offer flowers. Please do so because your heart is broken. But leave the outcome up to the gods. Let the secret remain a secret.

Request Blessings

Requesting blessings, as with secret offerings, requires you to give up knowing what a blessing looks like exactly. Requesting of the gods what you think will make you happy (bring Johnny back to me) is like making a reservation at a 5-star restaurant and then asking if you can go back into the kitchen and cook your own meal. Why go out? Instead of cooking your own food, just try to order what sounds good to you. (Please let me feel loved again is better than bring him back to me. Other options include please show me how to heal my heart. I wish to be free of this pain. Please teach me to forgive. These are good, basic requests that will allow a master chef to serve you something that exceeds all expectations.

Requesting blessings is predicated on the assumption that greater powers are at work. This could mean any number of things to each of us. That greater power could be God, a deity, an angel, or the quality of human goodness. It could also be something unnameable and perhaps this is the most trustworthy power of all. It doesn't really matter what you call this greater power. The only thing that seems required is to not quite

understand what it is. Whenever anyone seems to know with too much certainty just what this power is, where it lives, what it thinks, and the primary means of access, I become a bit suspicious. Sure, all sorts of explanations make sense. But the only thing I know is that the moment I think I understand the sacred oneness of existence, I've stepped outside of that oneness and therefore can't be trusted. So when you request blessings, no matter how certain you are of where and whom they come from, let there also be a little bit of not knowing.

Dedicate the Merit

This is the final and perhaps most important of the three steps that create sacred outlook, sacred environment. Dedicating the merit is the strange and radical act of taking whatever benefit you may have created for yourself by making offerings and requesting blessings and then giving it all away. Period. It's really hard to do this. You want to hang on to a tiny corner of goodness for yourself, or at least I do. I mean for goodness sake, why am I doing all of this if not to feel better?? I wish it worked that way—that you could go out and find something that would do you some good, bring it home, and then expect it to benefit you. God that would be so simple. But what seems to work better is to go out and find something beneficial and then share it with everyone. This seems to magnify the benefit of everything except perhaps the last cupcake. So when you are finished with your spiritual practice, take a moment and reflect on whatever good may have been generated and offer it. If it helps, you can imagine all the countless beings in this world that are also suffering from a broken heart right now. Millions upon millions suffer just as you do, feel the agony of acute loss. Ask in whatever way feels right to you

that whatever you do to heal yourself could be used to heal them as well. “I hope my spiritual practice can benefit others” is great, as is “I dedicate my practice for the benefit of others.” Use words that feel natural and honest. Here is a traditional dedication of merit that is used on my Buddhist tradition:

By this merit may all attain omniscience.

May it defeat the enemy, wrongdoing.

From the stormy waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death

May I free all beings.

In between the first two steps (making an offering and requesting blessings) and the third (dedicating the merit) is your spiritual practice. In this case, that practice revolves around making friends with your broken heart and offering it the space to heal. If you were to do the meditations and journaling exercises that comprised the practice without these three steps, they would simply be psychological exercises—not without benefit, certainly. But the sacred aspect is introduced through these three very simple, very precious steps.

Beginning the Program

To prepare, create a place to make offerings. This will be your meditation spot, so there should also be room for a meditation cushion or a chair. A nice chair and small table are ideal, but you could also place a meditation cushion on the floor in front of a windowsill where the sun rises. Or you could dedicate a corner of your desk as the place of offering.

Gather some materials that signify offerings to you. Remember, what you are offering is symbolic of what is precious and ineffable, so choose things of beauty. They don't have to be expensive, but if you choose flowers, make sure they are fresh. If you choose a photograph of something or someone you love, put it in a nice frame. If you select scented candles, place them on a lovely dish or tray.

Choose a date to start the program. It will run from Friday to Friday.

The Schedule

The first few days, the weekend, will focus on making your life as quiet and simple as possible. You'll be spending as much time as possible by yourself with minimal interaction with others. So let family and friends know you'll be taking time for yourself. Cancel any social engagements. Make sure your kitchen is stocked so you won't have to think too much about food. Make a commitment to keep to a minimum all forms of entertainment: television, internet surfing, talking or texting with friends, reading fluff—as much as possible, don't engage in these things. If you're going to read, keep it light. The idea is to cut down on the amount of stimulus in your environment to allow your mind to quiet.

All you will need in addition to your meditation spot is a journal.

Friday Night

When you come home from work Friday night, make sure your meditation area is set up. Sometime in the evening, have a seat on your meditation cushion with your journal for a brief journaling exercise. Settle onto your cushion and take a moment to just

sit there and appreciate wherever you are. What can you see, hear, smell, and so on?

Noticing the space you're in is a simple way to come into the present moment.

Open your journal and finish these sentences:

Please help me to ____ so that I may ____.

Please guide me to _____ so that I may _____.

Please show me _____ so that I may _____.

Please teach me _____ so that I may _____.

Let these sentiments be your offering for tonight. Tear this page out of your journal, fold it up, and place it somewhere on your altar table.

Practice shamatha meditation for 10 minutes.

Dedicate the merit.

Saturday

Practice shamatha meditation in the morning for ten minutes. Get out your journal and write three longhand pages without censoring yourself. Remember, this doesn't have to make any sense. Just keep your hand moving across the page and if the only thing you can think of to write is "why am I doing this?" then write "why am I doing this" a gajillion times. Let the words flow out onto the page.

Spend the rest of the morning reading, resting, doing little things around the house. Keep it very, very simple. Don't call friends. Don't go online. Keep your mental energy to yourself. This may feel uncomfortable at first, but you will adjust. If you cry a bunch, it's okay.

Before lunch, do another ten-minute shamatha practice.

Sometime in the afternoon, pick up your journal again and settle yourself for a writing session that will last about an hour, or longer if you like. In this exercise, you'll write the story of your relationship from a third person perspective. Begin with this line: "They met like this: " You could come up with something like: "They met like this: she was a bartender in a nightclub and he played guitar in the house band." Or "They met like this: She was in San Francisco for a business meeting with a new client who turned out to be the love of her life." Or "They met like this: They had known each other since High School but life circumstances led them in different direction until one day, by coincidence, she ran into him at a party."

Continue from there. Write about how they felt about each other as they got to know each other. Did one of them develop romantic feelings first? Was one of them involved with someone else at the time? Was falling in love easy or fraught with difficulty? How was this relationship different from her past relationships? How was it the same?

I know that "she" is you, but the point of this exercise is to step back from "her" and observe her behavior and emotions as the relationship developed. If you love to write, you can make this story super-long and detailed. If you do not like to write, just keep it simple. You can write the story in bullet points. If you feel like getting wildly creative, you can write the story as an email exchange or screenplay. Take it seriously, but have some fun with it.

When you think you've covered the early stages of the relationship, put the exercise aside for now. We'll be picking it up again later.

Close this writing exercise by writing (on a separate piece of paper) one to three things that you feel grateful to your ex for, things that arose during the early stages of the relationship. You could list things like “I’m grateful to you for making me feel desirable,” or “thank you for that time I was stuck at the airport with a flight delay and you drove out just to keep me company,” or “You were the first person to ever appreciate my sense of humor—thank you.” When you’ve made your list, fold up the piece of paper and place it on your altar.

Before dinner, do another ten-minute shamatha session and spend the evening however you like. Just keep it simple. Watch a lighthearted movie or read a magazine. Don’t channel surf or text message your friends or go out clubbing. Remember, the point of this weekend is to pacify turmoil and the simpler and quieter, the better.

Before going to sleep, return to your cushion for a few more minutes and dedicate the merit of your day. Using whatever words feel right to you, rouse a sense of the work you did, of all the effort you put in or were unable to put in, even. Offer the fruit of your practice for the benefit of all beings, that everyone currently suffering the pain of a broken heart would be liberated, uplifted, and held in the cradle of loving kindness.

As you drift off to sleep, reflect on your day, on all the feelings, words, insights, and frustrations you encountered. Allow a simple prayer to develop and offer this prayer to the loving spirits of the night. Ask them to guide you toward healing as you sleep.

Sweet dreams!

Sunday

This second full day of inward focus and simplicity will proceed much as Saturday did. You'll continue practicing meditation, journaling, and writing out the story of your relationship. But on this evening, we'll add a traditional loving kindness meditation practice.

Practice shamatha meditation in the morning for ten minutes. Get out your journal and write three longhand pages without censoring yourself.

Spend the rest of the morning reading, resting, doing little things around the house. Again, keep it very, very simple.

Before lunch, do another ten-minute shamatha practice.

Sometime in the afternoon, pick up your journal for the second part of your writing exercise. Move your characters forward into the middle segment of your relationship. You can begin with this sentence: "And so they settled in to their relationship. They spent their time together doing things like _____. As they got to know each other, they came to see each other's good and bad qualities. What he loved about her was _____. What she loved about him was _____. On the other hand, what he didn't like about her was _____. What she didn't like about him was _____." And go from there. Describe several memorably wonderful times and several memorably not-so-wonderful times. If you fought, write about a particular fight. Describe the moments of particularly deep connection. Remember, it's your story, so write it from your point of view.

When you think you've covered the middle stages of the relationship, put the exercise aside for now.

Close this writing exercise by writing (on a separate piece of paper) one to three things that you feel grateful to your ex for, things that arose during the middle stages of the relationship. You could list things like “You taught me how to fight fair,” or “When I lost my job, you were such a great friend,” or “I know you made your best effort to be honest with me.” When you’ve made your list, fold up the piece of paper and place it on your altar, on top of the previous list.

Before dinner, do another ten-minute shamatha session and spend the evening however you like. Remember: keep it simple.

Before going to sleep, return to your cushion and practice maitri or loving kindness meditation. Please refer back to Chapter ___ for specific instructions. As you begin the practice, touch in with the qualities of your broken heart. As you move through the phases of this practice—offering loving kindness to a friend, a stranger, and an enemy—try to remain connected to this sense of brokenness. When it’s time to offer *maitri* for all beings, offer it for all who struggle with heartbreak of any kind, be it related to romance or not. Finish by dedicating the merit of your day.

As you drift off to sleep, once again, reflect on your day, on all the feelings, words, insights, and frustrations you encountered. Allow a simple prayer to develop and offer this prayer to the loving spirits of the night. Ask them to guide you toward healing as you sleep.

Monday

Most of you will be returning to your regular work life on Monday morning. Set your alarm a bit earlier to give yourself time to practice shamatha meditation for ten to

twenty minutes before heading out the door and writing three longhand pages of free writing.

I ask that during this entire week, you try to keep your schedule as simple as possible. I know people can't avoid e-mail, errands, and other responsibilities. That's okay. You can still get the full benefit of this program—just try not to take on any additional professional, scholastic, or social engagements during this time. Try to get home as quickly as you can after work so you can continue to work closely with your broken heart.

When you get home after the day is done, practice shamatha for ten minutes. Then pick up your journal and finish your story. Write about the final third of your relationship. Begin with this prompt: “She knew the relationship had hit a rough patch when...” and then write about the first time she had an inkling that this wasn't going to work out. Describe some uncomfortable moments, big fights, or memorable emotional disconnects. Finish by describing the breakup. End by completing this sentence: “When she realized it was over, she knew what she would miss about him, and what she wouldn't--...” I know this is painful. Cry it out, girlfriend. Don't be ashamed. When you're finished with the story, once again, I'm going to ask you to write out one to three things that you are grateful, yes, grateful to him for. You could be grateful that he told the truth. You could be grateful that he showed his true colors. You could be grateful to him for having once loved you. Don't be snide, but be honest. Try to find at least one thing you're grateful to him for about the breakup. Tear this list out of your journal and place it on your altar with the other two slips of paper. Leave them there until the program ends. Finish the day with ten minutes of shamatha and then dedicate the merit.

Tuesday – Thursday

These days will follow the same schedule: ten minutes of shamatha in the morning (or more if you like), followed by 3 pages of free writing. When you come home in the evening, do another 10-minute shamatha session followed by maitri practice. If you'd like, you could also contemplate and journal about one or all of these topics:

- Going forward, how can I develop the ability to notice my habitual emotional reactions without necessarily *acting* on them? What helps me to tread the ground of powerful feelings without being overwhelmed by them or running away from them?
- How can I stop seeing others's devices for good or ill in my personal dramas? How can I learn how to focus more on giving love than getting it?
- How can I come to terms with the idea that, somehow, all relationships end? What would help me to take a chance on love again, knowing there are no guarantees?
- If or when I enter into a new relationship, how could I bring the understanding I've gained from having a broken heart into it in a way that would make me a more loving person?

Close your day with ten minutes of shamatha, dedicate the merit, and have a good night's sleep.

Friday

This final day of the program begins, once again, with ten minutes of shamatha and 3 pages of free writing. When you return home in the evening, make sure, as

much as possible, that you won't be disturbed. Sit down in front of your shrine. Practice shamatha for a few minutes, followed by *maitri*. For this final session of *maitri*, place your ex in each position—offer him loving kindness as your friend, as a stranger, and as an enemy. Finish by offering loving kindness to all beings. Then gather the little pieces of paper with your words of gratitude. Safely and carefully put them in a fire-proof bowl that is large enough to hold one at a time without catching your house on fire. Put the first list you made in there and burn it. Then the second list, and finally the third one. As these papers burn, acknowledge that, no matter what happens in the future, right now, this relationship is over. And you are a stronger, more beautiful person for having welcomed it into your life, experienced it, and then watched it dissolve.

To close, let it all go, all of it. Practice shamatha for 10 minutes in a state of openness and freedom. Dedicate the merit. Congratulations. You are now a spiritual warrior.