

## Love Lessons: A Bigger Heart

by Susan Piver



He watches TV in bed. You hate that. Try taking a Buddhist approach to four relationship pitfalls

**POWER TRIP?**  
*You don't always have to get your way to have the relationship you want.*

We all have picture-perfect notions of what a relationship should be. Some are crucial: Disagreement on subjects like monogamy, alcohol, and kids can and should be real deal-breakers. Other issues, however, may not be as nonnegotiable as you think. *Sundays are for snuggling. I can only marry a vegan. Holiday celebrations should always be at my parents'.* There's absolutely nothing wrong with these views. But, as anyone

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in a serious or committed relationship knows, they can escalate into power struggles, the kind that can turn you into a couple who makes wisecracks about each other in secret.

So what do you do when your mate doesn't conform to your ideals? The conventional answers are to *a)* set clear boundaries in some cases, and *b)* be willing to compromise in others. This is excellent advice. The problem is that most of us interpret this as *a)* "I'm not going to love you unless you change" and *b)* "Sometimes I'll do what you want, but I think it's dumb."

Here's another suggestion to contemplate: Experiment with giving up your preference. I know, this is a tricky thing to do. I'm not suggesting you martyr yourself or become a passive-aggressive wimp. Instead, try surrendering your preference as an act of power and big-heartedness. You can give from a sense of emotional abundance, not poverty.

In Buddhist thought, there are four qualities that can turn "you owe me big time" into "I choose to give you my love." Called the Four Immeasurables, these principles show us how to neutralize anger and judgment without "giving in" or feeling like a doormat or a phony. Even though they might sound super-spiritual, they're really just ordinary things that anyone can do. Cultivate these Buddhist basics and you'll greatly improve your relationship in the long run.

**Your vision** Mornings spent together.

**The reality** He ignores your attempts at chit-chat and instead grunts and grabs coffee on his way out the door.

**Try Loving-Kindness** If your dream relationship includes waking up together and spending the first hour of the day cuddling and talking, his early departure can feel like a brush-off. Trying to make him a morning person

may indeed prove a lost cause, so consider the many other chances in the day to connect. The Buddhist concept of loving-kindness isn't about being nice all the time; it's about figuring out how to love beyond your predetermined view of love. Instead of thinking, "If he really loved me, he would stay with me in the morning," focus instead on your wish to love and be loved—which can happen any time of day. Let him know that you are disappointed, but also use this conflict as an extraordinary way to stretch the boundaries of your own heart—and to push past your preconceptions.

**Your vision** He's the life of the party.

**The reality** He'd rather stay in.

**Try Compassion** So your partner may not hold court at cocktail parties or regale your dinner guests with hilarious tales. This is where compassion comes into play. Simply acknowledge

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that, just like you, he also wants to be appreciated for who he is. Instead of “Why doesn’t he want to go out more and be social?” you can think, “I don’t want either of us ever to be forced into situations where we’re uncomfortable or out of our element.” Including both of you in the wish to be comfortable prevents you from setting up a him-against-you situation. The goal isn’t just to endure the fact that your man isn’t a social dynamo. It’s to love and accept him as he is. This way, you nurture a sense of openheartedness, rather than impatience.

**Your vision** We take all of our vacations together.

**The reality** He can’t wait to go fly-fishing with his brothers.

**Try Sympathetic Joy** Whereas compassion allows you to feel your partner’s pain, sympathetic joy allows you to share his happiness, too. This Bud-

dhist concept doesn’t imply that you should pretend to be thrilled for him when you’re not. It means that even though you’re not excited about his choice, you can still feel happy when something genuinely makes him happy. Sure, you will have to address the bigger issues if he goes on to take every vacation without you. But it is possible to appreciate what this trip means for him and still share your feeling of disappointment for yourself—without mixing them together.

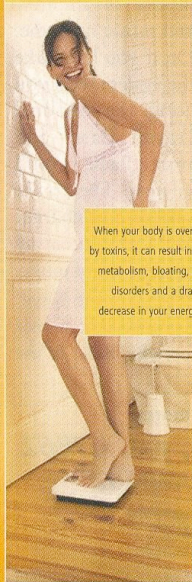
**Your vision** No wearing shoes in the house—just slippers.

**The reality** You come home to find mud tracked all over the white carpet.

**Try Equanimity** As you probably know, nagging your partner about his habits never really works. In fact, it tends to do the opposite of what you want, building resentment rather than changing behavior. Equanimity, defined as

the ability to remain calm and relaxed in the face of strong feelings, is the fourth and most important immeasurable—with good reason. Without this sense of composure, for example, loving-kindness could easily become martyrdom, and sympathetic joy would simply be patronizing. By approaching the situation from an honest (as opposed to a manipulative) stance, you are better able to communicate your needs and have them heard. Even attempting to expand your perspective enough to fully understand the nature of the conflict, no matter how painful it is to you, will help restore equanimity. Like the other Four Immeasurables, equanimity begets equanimity. If you want more love and understanding, learn how to authentically offer these things to your partner—over and over again. Open the gates of your own love, and you can have faith that the other person will do so as well. ✦

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