

## Zen Boyfriends: Woes of a Wannabe Goddess

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Finding love in California as a wannabe goddess in a sea of boys playing with spiritual toys is no small task. Most women find that you get to a point on the path when regular, body-building, security-driven, “don’t-get-too-deep-on-me” guys just don’t cut it for you anymore, and yet the spiritualized version of such guys is equally problematic, not to mention the horror of New Age wimps. Coupled by the likelihood that your own neurotic-based psychological angst has likely been the force that brought you to the path in the first place, and that emotional abandonment in childhood has actually left you *attracted* to that which is unavailable to you, you are likely to find yourself in a sterling silver set of New Age handcuffs.

At such a stage in my own spiritual development (a stage that unfortunately seems to go on for decades for some of us!), I began to attract a new breed of men (or the same old breed disguised under a new set of clothes) that over time I came to call “Zen boyfriends.” I use the term “Zen” loosely here, because a man doesn’t have to be a Zen Buddhist to fall into this category. He could be a Tibetan Buddhist, a Sufi, or even a practitioner of some obscure brand of yoga. The more rigid the tradition, the better for this type. What defines a Zen boyfriend is the manner in which he skillfully uses spiritual ideals and practices as an excuse for his terror of, and refusal to be in, any type of real relationship with a woman. He is both too identified with his balls to become a celibate monk, and at the same time too little identified with the wider implications of them to take responsibility for them. The result: a righteous, distant and very intelligent substitute for a real man.

Andrew was a great example of a Zen boyfriend. He was tall, bright, charming and strikingly attractive. He was creative, well versed in spiritual scriptures, a great chef, and exceptionally funny—but he couldn’t give in to a woman if his life depended on it.

This is how a typical morning went for Andrew and me:

At 4:30 a.m. his alarm sounds (not a simple ring or buzz, but the schizophrenic chirping-bird type of alarm). “Andrew, your alarm is going off.”

“Press the snooze.”

I oblige. Then at 4:38 it goes off again. “Andrew, get up!”

“I’m too tired.”

By the fourth snooze I was wide awake, while he dozed away like a baby in arms. When he’d finally open his eyes sometime around 5:30, I was undeniably and un-spiritually pissed off. Without even a word or a glance in my direction, he would roll out of bed and head for the bathroom. I would listen with mounting rage as he gargled his Chinese herbs, did an hour of tai chi on the creaky hardwood floor, and then adjusted himself on his *zafu* to meditate. Often I would get up and meditate as well, but since I didn’t practice the same form of meditation as he did, he said we couldn’t practice together. Finally, just before 8—approximately three and one-half hours after the alarm had first sounded—he would come in and tell me he was making breakfast. Yippee. During breakfast his rule was silence so he could read the paper over organic oats and mint tea, both without sugar.

The argument was always the same:

“Why do you set your alarm if you’re not going to get up?”

“It’s important to hold the intention to get up early. The energy for meditation is strongest between three and five in the morning.”

“If it’s so strong then why don’t you just do it?”

And then:

“Andrew, it would make a big difference to me if you would at least say ‘good morning’ when you get up.”

“I want my meditation to be consistent with the delta waves that are activated during sleep, and speech interferes with this.”

“Even two words—‘good’ and ‘morning’?”

“Yes, even two words.”

“How about a hug then?”

“Same thing.”

“Then why doesn’t cold water on your face or flushing the toilet screw up the delta waves?”

“I need space. Conversation closed.”

Men need space. All women know this. But some men need two parts space for one part intimacy, or even ten parts space for one part intimacy. But with Andrew, and other Zen boyfriends, it was more like 98 parts space to 2 parts intimacy. What they really want to be in relationship with is a stone goddess, not a woman.

It was lose-lose proposition with Andrew. Exactly why I wanted our relationship to work so badly in the first place is a worthwhile question, but I am a woman, and the more a man withdraws into himself, the more a woman chases him there to draw him out. Andrew told me that our relationship wasn’t working because I wasn’t spiritual enough. What a blow! He complained that I wasn’t an experienced meditator and that my three short years of meditation practice didn’t enable me to understand my mind the way he understood his mind, thus rendering me incapable of a “spiritual relationship.” When he lamented that I only meditated a half hour a day whereas he meditated for an hour, I painstakingly began to meditate for an hour. When he complained that since I studied Vipassana Buddhism instead of Zen Buddhism that I couldn’t really understand his true aim, I started reading Zen and altered my meditation. Finally, he said that even though I was starting to walk the path of Zen, that his teacher taught in a very particular way that was distinct from other schools of Zen. But when I told him I wanted to meet his teacher, he said that I had already taken over too much of his life, and that he was entitled to keep the very thing he treasured most—his teacher—for himself (even though she taught publicly throughout California.)

Our relationship ended over a winter weekend at a rented condo in Lake Tahoe with his mother. I should have had the foresight to realize that for some men, having their girlfriend and a mother in the same house is the very thing that takes them over the edge.

We began to fight over his special Zen knife—as if that is what we were really arguing about. He had this stainless steel knife he had bought from some Japanese Samurai chef that he used to cut vegetables and fruits when we cooked. The knife had to be held a specific way, used at a certain angle, and could only touch the cutting board with a minimal degree of contact. He was proud of his knife and had given me special permission to use it as I was his girlfriend. That Sunday morning he came downstairs while I was preparing a fruit salad with a dull paring knife.

“You can use *my* knife if you’re careful.”

I nodded and continued chopping walnuts.

“Well aren’t you going to use it?”

“No.”

“Well why not?” he retorted, Zen compassion void from his voice.

I finally looked up from what I was doing. “There are so many damn rules attached to your Zen knife that I’d rather use a plastic picnic knife than bear the consequences of touching it the wrong way.”

He told me once and for all that I simply wasn’t enough Yin to match his Yang, I told him his spirituality was seriously deranged, and the relationship ended, though I missed him terribly for months.

Jake was another one of these scared guys who hid behind his spirituality. He was a Zen Buddhist when I met him, but had become a Vedantic non-dualist before we split up, which is as bad if not worse in terms of Zen-boyfriendness. We met at a narcissistic, eco-retentive, save-the-earth weekend workshop, but that’s another story.

Two days after the workshop, as I sped off the Golden Gate bridge and headed up 101 north toward my country home after a full day of seeing therapy clients, I noticed a tall man pounding on a drum while standing on top of a beaten up VW van alongside the highway. He looked familiar, but I couldn’t be sure. I got off at the Mill Valley exit, drove back down the highway, turned around again, and pulled up behind his van. Sure enough, it was Jake. He told me that the workshop had inspired him to do a new form of political eco-protest. Once a week, he said, he planned to stand on his van alongside the highway and call out the list of endangered species while pounding on his drum. When I asked him what he hoped to accomplish by this, he said that he didn’t know, but that he was intuitively guided to do it. Strange as it sounds, I was impressed.

He asked me out on a date. The first night we ate vegetarian lasagna, Caesar salad and Haagen Daz by candlelight in his living room, and then rolled around his balcony for hours while Mickey Hart played on the stereo and Sausalito danced at our feet. The next morning, he told me he needed space. And in this way, our Zen relationship developed, in the small gaps between the large spaces.

Jake eventually left for India (a spiritually disguised, intimacy escape plan I myself was to later model after), and returned a year and a half later looking very monk-like in his white cotton Indian garb and ivory shawl. His long hair had been cut to shoulder length and had grayed, his skin appeared to have permanently tanned, and small wrinkles marked the corners of his eyes. He said he had thought about me a lot and would I like to go out for dinner? As I was between boyfriends (again), and as he was quite handsome in his new guru-look, I agreed.

Jake thought he had become enlightened, though he wouldn’t have dared to say as much. He had become a student of one of those Indian teachers who skillfully create mystical experiences in their groupies by momentarily cutting through their psychological blocks, and then declare them enlightened from the experience. In such a situation, the master gets a swollen head and an immense reputation for being able to enlighten people, and thousands of Western hippies who are afraid of really living life get to think that they have risen above it, and then proceed unsolicited to try to bestow the same boon upon others.

Jake was a living example of such a situation. The first night was all right, as far as Zen boyfriends go. I enjoyed hearing of his adventures over a cappuccino, only occasionally irritated by his references to having “seen through the nature of reality” or having “become

one with everything.” Of course by early evening he needed space, but that was to be expected.

The next day, however, as we walked in Muir woods, he tried to do his spiritual number on me. In order to understand his spiritual approach in a sentence, non-dualism is based on the tacit recognition of the oneness—or non-separation—of all things. It means that “I” doesn’t exist separately from you or any other animate or inanimate being or thing: all is one. However, there is a big difference between being able to spew these words (as I just did), and living as one who abides eternally in the truth of this reality.

“Jake, if we are going to hang out together I need to feel like you’re really here with me and not always so detached,” I opened the floor.

“But who is the ‘you’ who wants to hang out with the ‘me’?”

“*I* am the me and *you* are the you!”

“There is no difference, so we can never really be apart or together—it’s all the same.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“But who do you think is the ‘me’ that is full of shit?”

“I think it is YOU!”

“Who’s getting angry?”

“*I’m* getting angry.”

“Look into my eyes, what do you see?”

“You.”

“Look more deeply. Now what do you see?”

“I see a lonely man who thinks he’s enlightened.”

Extremely frustrated and teary-eyed, I walked away and sat on a log by the stream trying to figure out why it was so important to me to try to get through to him.

“Why did you come all the way over here to cry?” he sat down beside me, fully believing in his own innocence.

I looked at him with that end-of-the-relationship look in my eye. “Because there is no one there to hold me if I cry, and I’d just as soon cry alone than cry with nobody.”

And in this way came and went a couple more Zen boyfriends. Yet in the end, I blame not them but myself. For as distant, arrogant, righteous and terrified as they were, it was I who sought them out, I who tried to open them in the ways *I* wanted them to be open, and ultimately I who recreated my childhood pattern of not feeling loved by eliciting the same response in my relationships. I could have just dated a nice Jewish boy after all.