

# Gil's Story (1 of 5) First Interest in Buddhism

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## Gil Fronsdal

Hello on this Monday. I'm sitting here in Redwood City at the Insight Meditation Center, and I am delighted to have this time together.

In thinking about what to speak about this week, none of the themes really had a spark for me. None of them were something that I could embody or feel a deep heart connection to.

So I will fall back on a default that might be interesting to you, and that is to talk a little bit about myself. Maybe some of you would like to know more about me.

Usually, I talk about the Dharma, but maybe some of you don't know much about me. I'll talk about the background of my life and describe what brought me to practice, to IMC, and even here today, teaching with all of you. I feel a little apologetic that I'm not giving you some specific Dharma topic to chew on. Maybe that will come out as I talk about my life.

My first contact with the Dharma was when I was probably eleven years old. My father was working in Italy at the time. He had the summer free from work, and so the decision was made for my mother, father, and me to go to Los Angeles where we had a home.

We set out traveling east. Along the way, we stopped in India. My father was reading a book called *The Wonder That Was India*. He commented to me that one of the characteristics of Indian religions was to be very inclusive. All the different forms of religion in India could somehow be held together and seen as one big harmonious religious family. I was really inspired by that.

I grew up in a non-religious household. My parents were disinterested atheists. It wasn't a big deal for them. I

was born in Norway, where there is a pantheon of Nordic gods from a thousand years ago – for example, Thor and Odin. The gods never came up in our family discussions. It was never a topic of interest for my parents. Being atheists, it just didn't occur to my parents to talk about something like religion or gods. But when I heard how ecumenical and inclusive attitudes were in India, I was inspired by the harmony that seemed to imply.

Then we went to Thailand. I remember seeing a big statue of the reclining Buddha in Bangkok. It's gold. It's probably at least forty feet long. He's lying down. It looks like a sleeping Buddha, but it's really the Buddha in the posture in which he died. He's lying on his right side with one hand underneath his cheek and he's resting on his hand. I was inspired by that statue, but not religiously. I thought, “Oh, that's the ideal way to sleep – sleeping on your right side.” So for quite a while, that's how I slept, inspired by the statue.

When I was fourteen, my mother bought a copy of Hermann Hesse's book, *Siddhartha*. I read it and was inspired by it. I felt the simplicity, the peace, and the non-contentiousness of the way the Buddha lived in that novel.

These things didn't make a big impression on me. I think the next impression was when I was eighteen. I was traveling around Europe by myself. I came to a great cathedral, a monastery called Mont Saint-Michel on the coast of Normandy. Architecturally, it looks like a Disneyland castle rising from the hilltop. It's on a little island, with its spires rising up into the sky.

I spent the night there on the little island at a Pax Christi hostel that had an ancient feeling that was like a little cave. It was a stone building with wooden tables and chairs. We were served bread in the morning like we were at the Last Supper or something. There was a priest there who was very friendly as he talked to us. I felt like I had stepped into a timeless place, almost like I was in the monastery already.

The next morning, I went on a tour of the monastery. The monastery had been built around a very simple one-room stone chapel at the very top of the hill. It was added to slowly over the centuries. The tour took us through the original chapel. As soon as we stepped into its cool, quiet, peaceful space, something in my body shifted and everything got really peaceful and quiet. I had never experienced this deep peace and quiet before. Even though the tour kept going, I tried to linger as long as I could in the chapel to feel the experience. It made a huge impression on me.

When I was a teenager or shortly afterward, I had spent time wondering if I could join a Catholic monastery and become a monk, even though I was an atheist. There was something about the atmosphere of that life – getting up early, walking around a peaceful place – that I imagined was like the experience I had in the chapel. I wanted to dedicate and devote my life – not to God, not to religion – but to that experience of peace and the deep sense of calm. It felt so healthy and holistic. I couldn't imagine anything better than that.

But I didn't do that. I went to college. It was during the Vietnam War. And I was eligible for the draft. In the dorms the first year, there were intense debates about war, particularly the Vietnam War. I was always the extreme pacifist in the discussions. I don't know where my pacifism came from, but it was really clear that I would not fight. That was impossible for me. I couldn't give a good philosophical, political, or religious reason for why I would not fight or pick up a gun. My disposition simply made it impossible for me to do something like that.

I defended my pacifist stance with my friends. And I found myself disturbed by what I discovered about myself. I had a strong position that involved passive civil disobedience if necessary – standing up, protesting, and interfering to prevent the harm being caused in

society and the world. But what I discovered was that I was afraid to die.

I thought that if I took my beliefs seriously, I had to have the same courage as a military soldier who goes into battle. I had to be able to put myself in harm's way in order to be involved in protesting or working for nonviolent change. And I was afraid to die. The dissonance between what my beliefs were and what I was capable of doing really disturbed me a lot. I started to search for some approach or way of living that would help me deal with my fear of death so I could live with my ideals.

That was when I first thought about Buddhism – that Buddhism had an answer. At the same time, I was going to college at the University of California at Santa Barbara, which is right on the coast. From the university, you can look out and see oil platforms. Just before I arrived, there was a massive oil spill on the Santa Barbara beaches. I began to be interested in environmental studies. I actually became an environmental studies major for a while.

At first, I was going to study the science of it all. But I felt science was not going to solve this problem because it's a political issue. So I started studying political science. And that was interesting. However, I

thought that was not going to be enough – politics alone would not change this. In the language of 1973, what was needed was a change of consciousness.

That's when I started looking around to find who, where, what orientation, what teachings, and what way of life could help us change our consciousness so we could make the change that would really help this world of ours. So I started looking. The teachings that spoke to me the most were Taoism and Buddhism. They seemed to speak of a radically different way of living in harmony with the world, rather than the disharmony that over-consumes, over-destroys, and over-abuses the world in order to support our lifestyles.

So that was my beginning. I started looking for a solution to my fear of death and to our social and ecological issues. I began to be oriented towards Buddhism and Eastern religion. Then I dropped out of college. I'll pick up that story tomorrow.

I hope this story is interesting for you. If it is, I'm very happy to continue telling it. Thank you.