

Gil's Story Pt 2 (2 of 5) – At the Cusp of Teaching

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Gil Fronsdal

Hello and welcome to this series that I'm giving about my Dharma life. I left off yesterday with having gone to the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts for a three-month retreat. Up to that point, I'd been going back and forth between doing Zen practice at the San Francisco Zen Center and doing insight practice in Asia, in Thailand and Burma. The first time I practiced with Western teachers was at the three-month retreat at IMS.

Afterward, I went back to the Zen Center. I had been ordained as a Zen priest there. After someone is ordained as a Zen priest, in the course of growth in that role, at some point, they are given the position of head monk for a three-month practice period at the monastery. That is considered to be the transition into training to become a Zen teacher. You do your first Dharma talks there. I was invited to have that role. It seemed like a wonderful continuation and kind of a completion of my Zen training. Some people see it as a completion. All your basic training has now been done. You are also kind of a model student, a model practitioner, so you go to all the meditations and do all the rituals. The job of the head student is to clean all the public bathrooms and do the trash and the compost. I loved it. It was very nice.

So I went to do the three-month retreat at Tassajara monastery in the wilderness. It was a wonderful way to continue what had happened for the previous three months. Imagine being in a long silent retreat for three months and then, rather than going back into the busyness of the world, being able to go into the monastic life in the quiet of winter when the public didn't come to Tassajara.

During that time I began feeling that my future was not to stay at the Zen Center. I can't articulate exactly why,

but it just didn't feel right. I had spent ten years doing intensive practice, and that period of time felt like it had been completed. There had been a complete cycle of development. I felt it was appropriate to not continue in the more intensive Buddhist practice environment but to go out into the world a little bit.

But I had no interest in a career or a conventional job. I thought, "Well I'm going to have to support myself in some way. I had this (probably) naive idea that if I got a master's in Buddhist studies then maybe I could teach Buddhist studies at a community college and make enough income to get by in my simple monastic lifestyle. So I applied to the University of Hawaii in Honolulu to do a master's in religious studies with a focus on Buddhism.

The reason I went there was twofold. Someone had given me a book about the Middle Way of Nagarjuna by a professor in the philosophy department in Sri Lanka, a man named David Kalupahana. Nagarjuna was one of the very important early Mahayana philosophers of India. David Kalupahana had a very different orientation toward how to study Nagarjuna. Most people studied this second-century philosopher through the lens of later Indian interpretations. David Kalupahana said we shouldn't do that. We should understand him through the lens of the earlier Buddhist texts that Nagarjuna

would have read and been influenced by, which were the early Pali discourses of the Buddha.

I thought that was a brilliant move. I really liked David Kalupahana's take on all this, so I wanted to go there to study with him. Also, there was a wonderful Zen teacher named Robert Aitken Roshi who had a Zen center in a house right next to the university. So I went to Hawaii to do koan study with the Zen master for two years and to do the master's program there.

The master's program in Buddhist studies turned out to be lots of fun for me. In the ten years that I'd lived a more monastic life, I actually hadn't done very much study or reading of Buddhism. Now I felt like a kid in a candy store and I had a great time with studies, so that was nice.

After two years it was over and I thought, "What do I do now?" Again, I had no conventional career in mind. I didn't feel like I should go back to living at a Buddhist center. So I wondered what to do. I didn't really have any idea. I wasn't a teacher yet. I thought, "Well, it was fun to do this master's program. Why don't I apply for a doctoral program in the San Francisco Bay area." I wanted to be close to my Buddhist teachers and my Buddhist community. I wanted to be close to the San Francisco Center.

Also by then, I wanted to be closer to the burgeoning world of Spirit Rock. There were some *Vipassanā* teachers there, Jack Kornfield, and others that I hardly knew. I wanted to be closer to that scene. I didn't expect to get

accepted to a doctorate program. But I was accepted, to my surprise. Not only was I accepted, but to my surprise, there was a very large scholarship for living. I think it was a lot of money back then in 1990. It was eight thousand dollars a year for me to live on. That was enough for me to live on and go to school.

I quickly discovered that a doctorate program at a major research university is very different than a master's program. The master's program was a great introduction and survey of much of Buddhism. The doctorate program was about boring down into the details and doing a lot of critical analyses of texts. It wasn't as much fun as I had had before.

But one of the motivations for me was as follows. My undergraduate degree was in agronomy at this great agricultural school, the University of California at Davis. I was part of a team of students who were what we called “alternative agriculture.” We were the activists on campus who tried to get more organic farming studies and do different things that were alternatives to conventional commercial fertilizer- and

pesticide-centered agriculture. We had wonderful adventures at university promoting that.

One of the things that surprised me when I studied the science behind farming is that as a fundamentalist organic farmer, I came into it with a lot of preconceived ideas about farming, and especially fertilizers, that were erroneous. I was kind of shocked that I was capable of very dogmatic opinions about farming that weren't quite right.

When I started my doctoral program in Buddhist studies, it was in the Religious Studies Department. I remembered that experience at Davis and I thought, "Now I'm doing religion here. In religion, I think there's even more dogmatism and it's easier to succumb to the belief that *this* is the truth, this is really what it is." I wanted to be really careful not to fall into that trap. I wanted to be able to have a foundation for understanding my assumptions. I wanted to understand where the beliefs came from and understand how to interpret meditation experiences so there wasn't an overlay of dogmatism on top of them.

I've certainly seen a lot of fundamentalists in Buddhism and I didn't want to be one of those. It turned out that these religious studies in a doctoral program at a major research university served me really well in some ways. It helped me develop a better critical mind in the best

sense – a mind that could analyze, think about, and question things in a deeper way. When I was there I felt that that kind of questioning was another form of liberation. It was kind of an intellectual liberation.

A number of interesting things happened along the way around that time. Just before leaving Hawaii to come back to California, I think it was still 1989, I received a phone call out of the blue from Jack Kornfield, who I only knew a little bit and I'd never practiced with him. But he knew about my practice. He invited me to be in his next teacher training.

I had a remarkable experience. I remember standing looking out of the window while he was talking to me on the phone, and I viscerally had the sensation in my body of the puzzle pieces of my life literally coming together. It was like, click, click, click. I thought, “Wow, it all fits now.” I can't necessarily explain that but that was the physical sensation of it.

Later in a rational way, I thought, “Well I don't know if I'm going to become a *Vipassanā* teacher but it'd be foolish not to go study with Jack Kornfield. So I started that training at the same time that I started my doctorate program.

When I came back to California I had a little trouble finding a place to live. So I ended up living back at the

San Francisco Zen Center in San Francisco, living in the temple. It was nice to be there. My Zen teacher, Mel Weitsman, was the abbot. At some point, he took me for a walk and we had an interesting conversation. There were two major abbots at the Zen Center at that time. He asked me about my relationship with the other one. I said that I trusted the other abbot's Dharma, his teaching. But I didn't quite trust him. Then Mel Weitsman asked me about himself. I said, "Well, I trust you. But I'm not quite sure about your Dharma."

Then he did a remarkable thing. We were walking on the sidewalk. He turned around and faced me. When I said, "I'm not sure about your Dharma," he put his hands together almost like a clap and said, "And that's where we'll meet." He wasn't upset. He wasn't concerned. He was kind of delighted that I didn't quite see eye to eye with him about the Dharma. This was not that we were going to meet and he was going to convince me of something. That's where he wanted to meet me. It felt like a really respectful thing. Also in Zen, when you put your hands together like that it is an act of respect.

Later on during that walk, he suggested that I start training with him specifically to prepare for Dharma transmission, which means becoming a full Zen teacher. I said, "Well, I think it's too early to talk about that. But

why don't I come over and start studying with you?" So I started studying basically for that purpose, but I had kind of put off the decision.

So here I was: studying for a PhD in Buddhist studies, involved in training to be a *Vipassanā* teacher with Jack Kornfield, and training to be a Zen teacher with Mel Weitsman all at the same time. 1992, when all this was going on, was also when I got married. I'd met my wife some five years earlier when I was living at Green Gulch after I came back from Burma. I met her there on the farm. She was farming there. We got together and we went to Tassajara together. She also went with me to Hawaii.

When we came back from Hawaii, she went to UC Davis to get a master's in botany, and I went to graduate school in the Bay Area. In 1992, we were married.

The last thing I'll say is that as part of the homework for teacher training with Jack Kornfield, we were supposed to teach a weekly sitting group. As it turned out, there was one in Palo Alto that met Monday nights with about 12 to 15 people. The person who facilitated it, a wonderful man named Howard Neutelman? had gotten sick, so he couldn't lead the group anymore. He wasn't teaching it, but he was facilitating it. Jack suggested that he invite me, so he did. In August 1990, I began to

teach this little group which grew into what we are now
– IMC.

There was a wonderful combination of things happening then. Looking back at it now, it seems like I was doing a lot. But it felt very spacious and matter-of-fact. Looking back now, thirty years ago it was a whole different era. There seemed to be a lot of time for everything compared to now, where we live in a very different world. Now my time is filled in a way that it wasn't back then. So that brings the story to a certain kind of conclusion: when I started to teach. I'll continue with my life as a teacher. Thank you.