

# Gil's Story (4 of 5) Becoming Compassioned

November 30, 2023

## Keyword Summary

San Francisco Zen Center, Green Gulch Zen Center, seven-day Sesshin, Heart Sutra, Tassajara Zen Center, soil sciences, life choices, suffering, acceptance, conceit, boundaries, abbot, Zen monk, storefront center, ordained, public figure, *Vipassanā*, insight meditation

## Gil Fronsdal

Hello. I will begin the fourth talk about my life story with Buddhism, or with Buddhist practice.

When I was about 24, I came to live near the San Francisco Zen Center. After a few months, I moved to Green Gulch Zen Center, a farm and Zen center.

It might be interesting to hear my experience of the first seven-day silent retreat I signed up for. I was still studying at the University of California, Davis. It was between my junior and senior years. I signed up for a seven-day Sesshin at the Zen Center.

A week or two before the retreat was supposed to start, I called up the Zen Center and explained to them that something important had come up and I wouldn't be able to attend the retreat. They said, "Okay." That was it. What I didn't tell them was that the important thing that had come up was fear.

I chickened out of going to my first silent retreat. Some of you may have been nervous coming to your first retreat. Some of you haven't been on a retreat and feel nervous about doing one. If that is the case, you are in good company. I was not only nervous about going, I also didn't go.

I did sit a seven-day retreat at Green Gulch in the spring of '89. That is when I decided to live at the Green Gulch Farm. I was still thinking about going to graduate school. In the fall of 1989, I was accepted to a soil science program at UC Berkeley. After studying agronomy, I was aware of the tremendous challenge of soil erosion around the world. I wanted to be someone who addressed those issues.

It was getting close to the time to go to UC Berkeley. In the middle of August, it dawned on me that school was starting in a couple of weeks. I needed to figure out what to do. I needed to find a place to live and make a plan.

That day, I went to the noon chanting of the Heart Sutra that they do at Green Gulch. It was an optional chant, and because it was at noon, most people didn't go. I was just there with a few people. We were chanting a chant that I had chanted many times by then. I wasn't thinking about anything but the chant. Suddenly there was this inner explosion, and I knew that instead of attending graduate school I should go to Tassajara, the Zen Center monastery.

I let UC Berkeley know I wasn't coming. I said something important had come up. Could I postpone beginning graduate school for one year?

In January of 1990, I went to a cold place in the Big Sur Mountains called Tassajara. It is down in a deep canyon. It is a fourteen-mile drive on a dirt road deep in the national wilderness to a small private property. It is a hundred or maybe one hundred and forty acres.

I started my monastic life there. I loved it for the most part. I was very happy with that lifestyle. Sometimes I thought this was the perfect lifestyle. I just loved the whole thing about it except for the times off. Every five days we had a day off. Often, I would go hiking in the mountains there. That is when I started thinking about my life.

What did I want to do with my life? Should I go back to graduate school and address the soil erosion problems of the world? I wanted to be of help to the world, but I had a deep mistrust of the desire to help. I had the suspicion that wanting to be of help could be self-serving and selfish. I had doubts about myself and what I should do. During my days off, I spent a lot of time thinking about that. This made me feel miserable. There was no solution.

Then the next day I would get back into the monastic routine, and that was great. I was meditating a lot. I continued this for quite a while. At some point, I was walking in the mountains, and I said, "This is ridiculous. I am living in a world of imagination – imaginary futures and things I could do. I am imagining possibilities that I can't imagine properly and know nothing about. This is not taking me anywhere. I feel stuck."

So, I spontaneously decided to start my life over and just take the next step. Whatever the next step was, I was going to build my life from there. I would just start there. It might seem that this was naive or simplistic, but it was a decision I made.

In retrospect, I feel so lucky that I decided to do that at a Buddhist monastery. The next step was that a bell rang, and it was time to go meditate. They rang a bell, and it was time to do my monastic work or go to a Dharma

talk. I had all this wholesome Dharma practice that was the next step. This allowed me to just settle in.

I decided not to go back to graduate school but just stay there and keep practicing at the monastery. At some point, I began wondering again about what I should do with my life or what was next. I wasn't thinking about it too much.

I started to recognize that I had been changed by the years of doing Zen practice. It was a very slow change. One of the primary changes that happened was that I didn't get enlightened, but I became compassionate. I was sitting for all those years with a lot of inner suffering. In Zen practice, I wasn't given any tools or any mindfulness practices to do with suffering. The only practice we had was to sit upright and accept the moment as it was.

This turned out to work well for me. I would just sit there and have this acceptance practice of my suffering. Slowly, slowly that practice tenderized me. It softened me. I had a great need for compassion. I started seeing and feeling that there was compassion all around me. I was projecting my need onto the world. I think it was very effective to receive externally the warmth, love, and compassion that my suffering so sorely needed.

Slowly something began to soften and dissolve. As it did, a sense of compassion awakened within me. That sense of compassion became very important for me. At the same time, there was a softening of conceit – a softening of any strong sense of a boundary between me and others. In a healthy way, I felt that I was continuous with the people around me and the people of the world. In some ways, their suffering was my suffering.

As I continued this process, I was not oppressed by the suffering of others. I was not dismayed by it. Rather, it was met more and more with this warmth, this compassion. As my strong sense of self dissolved more and more, I started to feel that there was something inside of me that was responding to the world. It was not exactly the classic conventional idea of me, myself, and mine.

I was becoming responsive. I can't even say it was me, or that I was becoming. There started to be a compassionate response to the circumstances I was in. Living in that response just felt so right, so appropriate. This wasn't like a sudden realization that this was what was happening. It was a slow process of something dissolving and warming up.

One day, the abbot, who was seldom at the monastery, came for a few days. We rarely had a chance to meet

with him, but I had a chance to have a one-on-one meeting with him. I went and sat by the Tassajara River. I just sat overlooking the creek, reflecting. What should I talk to him about? What should I do? What should I do with my life?

I was reflecting in a very relaxed way. There may have been a kind of creativity, receptivity, or openness in this. It was a bit like it had been when chanting the Heart Sutra at Green Gulch. Suddenly something shifted inside of me, and I knew exactly what I should do. There was no question about it. I should be ordained as a Zen monk.

Because I am a rational person, I thought I had to have a reason for this. Then I spent some time thinking, why do I want to do that? The reasons I came up with were honest enough, but they didn't represent the fact that there really was no reason. I just knew that this is what I should do.

The reason I came up with was that I wanted to respond to the suffering of the world. I wanted to respond to it from the deepest place of freedom from suffering that I knew about. If I had done soil erosion work, it would have been very important work, but I would have always felt a little dissatisfied.

It is one thing to help farmers and communities with the land, but the depth of their suffering is still going to be there. It was important to do soil erosion work, but I would have always felt some dissatisfaction that I wasn't addressing suffering at its roots. Being ordained as a Zen priest was how I was going to do that.

I didn't think I would be effective or have high ambitions about what I could do. My image of myself as a Zen monk or priest was to have a storefront meditation center. It would be an open room in a storefront, a small place in the city. I would have the key, and I would keep the place clean. I would open and close it for people to come and meditate. We would meditate together.

I had not thought about being a teacher. I would be the caretaker of a place for people to come to meditate. The route to becoming a Buddhist teacher in those days was very slow. There were many other priests there at that time and the training was very slow for each of them. I thought that I would have to be there for twenty-five years before I might even begin to take on a teaching role. I was fine with that. I wasn't thinking about becoming a teacher.

So, I asked the abbot to be ordained and he said yes. Within nine months I was ordained. I was surprised how much that ordination ceremony changed me. I hadn't



had much feeling or appreciation for rituals, but something very deep changed in me in different ways.

I became a public figure. I had a shaved head. I had robes. I stood out now and strangers would come and talk to me. Before when I was a hippie, scrawny and dirty, people would be more likely to avoid me than to approach me.

My foibles and shortcomings became much more obvious now that I was a public figure representing the Dharma. At the same time as my shortcomings became clearer to me, it felt more okay to have them. Now I had become a child of the Buddha. That is a metaphor for what happened to me.

Being able to see my shortcomings better and feeling more accepting about having them because I was somehow sitting in the lap of the Buddha was a wonderful, significant combination. This was a wonderful balance.

Those years of Zen practice compassionated me. A warmth, tenderness, and gentleness surrounded me as I sat in my Zen meditation. This then motivated my life. It set the course for the rest of my life. My dedication then was to alleviate or help alleviate the suffering of the world.

That was the response of this life. It wasn't personal, but it became the center of the life that was coming out of this body. That is what it was all about. That is what it has been ever since. That is the center. My practice is important. Wanting to meet suffering and help bring about the end of suffering is one expression of my practice.

At some point in Zen practice, I encountered *Vipassanā*, insight meditation. I will leave you with this cliffhanger. That will be the story for tomorrow.

Thank you.