

# Gil's Story Pt 2 (1 of 5)

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## Gil Fronsdal

Hello and welcome as we begin another five days of talks. I had thought I would finish my story about my relationship with Buddhism last week. I thought that was plenty of time. But there's still some more to talk about.

We ended on Friday with my decision to go to Burma to follow up on my first experiences with *Vipassanā* in Thailand. It took a while to get the visa. I didn't know this, but Burma was closed to any foreign or at least Western travel until about June. I was able to get there in September. I was there for eight months at a meditation monastery.

It was the headquarters of what's called the *Mahasi* meditation movement. It was probably the biggest

Theravada Buddhist meditation movement of the last century. A monk named Mahasi Sayadaw formulated a way of practicing *Vipassanā* that was very effective for many people, and it spread very quickly. When I was there, there were maybe 300 centers of this practice in Myanmar. It spread first to Sri Lanka and then to Thailand, then it came to the United States. The people who initially got it established here were Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, and Jacqueline Schwartz. They had come out of that scene in Asia and started teaching it here.

So I went to the headquarters, the source of it all. There was a very large monastery, kind of like a community college campus with some 5,000 people meditating there at any given time spread around the complex. We were there to do intensive meditation. We were supposed to get something like four hours of sleep a night. We practiced throughout the day, with two meals a day, breakfast and lunch. Most days there was a meeting with the abbot for about ten minutes. And most days he gave a Dharma talk around four o'clock in the afternoon.

Otherwise, for the eight months, I practiced there mostly in my small room. It was big enough to have two beds in it. I had one that I slept in and meditated on. I often did the walking meditation in the room, sometimes outside in the hallway. I would say it was one of the most

wonderful times of my life. I had a lot of joy and happiness and delight in doing the practice.

I had come there out of my Zen practice. I was still a Zen priest. I had the idea that I was going to continue with my Zen practice, which I defined to myself as an unconditional acceptance of the present moment. But I was going to learn to do it better. I was going to follow the instructions of the meditation teacher, Sayadaw Upandita, in order to do that unconditional acceptance.

I had learned from doing the *Vipassanā* practice that the unconditional acceptance of the present moment that I learned to do in Zen was very meaningful and helpful for me. I had learned to be pretty settled, calm, peaceful, and resilient in my life. But my unconditional acceptance was only in the macro moments, in the larger scale of things. I learned through *Vipassanā* that in the small micro-moments, in between, or underneath this in a deeper layer, there was a lot of non-acceptance going on. There was a lot of wanting, resisting, not wanting, judging, and criticalness. This was much deeper.

The surface kind of issues in my life had kind of been settled in a very important way. But there were still deeper roots, deeper activations there that I wasn't often aware of. In the more careful moment-to-moment

attention and the deeper concentration of *Vipassanā* practice, I could see these were still operating. I intended to follow the instructions very carefully in order to do this unconditional acceptance.

This was extremely important for me because the teacher, U Pandita, was a little bit like a general. He wanted us to strive. He wanted us to try harder, and stay up all night. He was always pushing us to strive. Some Westerners under his tutelage crashed. It was really difficult for some people. Somehow their Western psychology didn't match very well the striving effort that he often pushed for. But I didn't buy into it. I had the resiliency and acceptance from Zen together with the careful attention that he wanted us to have. So it worked fairly well for me.

In the beginning, the first two months I was there, I did put in more effort than I usually would in Zen. Maybe because U Pandita was so demanding, I decided, “Okay, I'm going to really try to practice here.” We had to keep an account every day we saw him of how much sitting meditation and walking meditation we'd done in the last 24 hours. We had to sum it all up. We had to be honest, right? So he'd hear how much we were practicing alone in our rooms. If it wasn't enough, his eyebrow would go up. When those fierce general's eyebrows went up, that was enough for us to decide, “Okay, we don't want to do that again.”

So I would sit and walk as much of the day as I could. I would never do laundry on the days I was going to see him. Once a week, we had a day off from seeing him. That was the day that I would do my laundry and other kinds of cleaning because I didn't want to report less time for meditation.

I practiced along, and I was happy to practice. But then an amazing, wonderful thing happened. He left for Australia for two months to teach a retreat there. As soon as he left, I was poised nicely, I think ( I wasn't conscious of this) so that something in me relaxed. I had the momentum of practice and then I relaxed, let go, and settled into a much deeper place of well-being, of peace that was really wonderful.

That became the entry point for me to go deeper into *Vipassanā*. I had experiences of release and freedom that I'd never had before in my life. They were life-changing for me. They taught me how deep release can be. From practice before I had a sense of peace, a sense of the value of letting go, and a sense of clarity. But in those eight months of practicing there, it felt like I experienced the deepest possibilities of that peace, letting go, and clarity. I didn't realize it at the time, but over time I came to realize that this was life-changing.

At some point, I decided to continue doing the practice by going to practice with Western teachers with whom I could make sure that I had good communication, rather than communicating through a translator. Also, I found that not eating anything after noon didn't quite work for me. Practice went better if I could have just a little bit of a snack in the late afternoon or early evening to sustain me. I was very thin. I think I weighed 140 pounds. So I had no reserves to get through the evening.

So I came back to America. I was planning to go to IMS, the Insight Meditation Society. At some point, I felt too weary to go. I had signed up to go, but I felt a deep weariness inside that I could not identify, so I said, "No, I'm not ready to go."

By then I was back at the San Francisco Zen Center. I was asked to take a leadership position there in the meditation hall, the meditation hall manager for the year. Since I wasn't going to IMS, I was a Zen priest, and I had no other life plans, I felt very lucky to be able to spend another year back at the Zen Center practicing there.

That was a nice integration practice for me to go from the intensity of being so full-on in Burma to being in a community and a monastery.

During that time there was a man who had been at Burma with me. He had been a monk. He came to see

me at Green Gulch. In the conversation with him, I reviewed and talked about what had happened to me in Burma. I realized that in the way I practiced, I had overemphasized concentration, and I had not realized that. U Pandita tried to tell me that, but because of the way he told me, I couldn't understand what to do with it.

An amazing thing happened when talking to my friend, I realized this. Immediately that weariness evaporated. Immediately I said, "Okay, now I'm ready to continue at IMS." So in the fall of 1987, I went to do a three-month retreat at IMS studying with Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein in order to continue the practice. That was also quite wonderful for me to do. It had different challenges than I had before, but it was really wonderful.

During that time, I had a similar kind of deep release as I'd had in Burma. It clarified for me an understanding of the possibility of what the work was about. I felt like now I understood that the essence of practice is this deep release of all holding, all clinging.

At IMS, I also learned something I hadn't learned before in *Vipassanā*. I learned about goodwill, *mettā*. They didn't do this in Asia, but the teachers in America included guided *mettā* meditation as part of their three-month retreat. As a Zen student, it seemed too artificial, too sweet, or not authentic to use those

phrases about *mettā*. So I tuned out the teachers when they did the guided meditation, until in the deeper releases that I was having in practice, *mettā* arose. I said, “Oh, *that's* what they're talking about.” Then I had something as a foundation for the practice of *mettā* and living from that *mettā*-full place.

While I did Zen practice, I was compassion-ed. Doing *Vipassanā*, I was *mettā*-ed. I was good-willed. I don't know if these two different movements were inherent in the practice that I was doing or whether they were just part of the phases of my life. In Zen, I was contending with a lot of my suffering, a lot of the conventional suffering of my life.

Doing *Vipassanā*, there was not much suffering. There was a lot of physical pain at times when I was at IMS, but not a lot of suffering. There was a lot of joy, a lot of happiness. This was like being softened and softened in a very different way than I had been in Zen or during that Zen time. In that, there awoke in me *mettā*, kindness, and friendliness which became the orientation around my practice when I left IMS. It had a lot to do with the release, the deep freedom, and the *mettā*, this warmth that came out of it.

That seems like a good place to leave off. I came back to California, to the Zen Center, and wondered what to



do next. I spent almost 10 years in monastic life  
wondering what to do next.  
That will be where I pick up tomorrow.  
Thank you.