

Gil's Story pt 2 (4 of 5) Growing with IMC

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

IMC incorporation, religious nonprofit, fundraising, survey, Friends Meeting House, Presbyterian Church, Unitarian Church, Zen Center, Jikoji, projection, zabuton, platform, authority, minister couple, First Christian Assembly, buying the center, mindfulness in schools, conference, parenting, tired, preschool, feedback loops, conceit, fear, attachment, teacher's role

Gil Fronsdal

I'll continue with the story of my Dharma life. This week is more about my life as a teacher.

I ended yesterday by talking about how we became incorporated as a religious nonprofit in 1997. The purpose was to be able to purchase our own property and have our own center.

We had the first (and maybe the only) fundraising committee meeting. We gathered a group of people who were interested in trying to fundraise for this purpose. We met in someone's living room.

Terry Lesser, our yoga teacher here at IMC for many years, said, "Money follows the practice." As soon as she said that, we stopped talking about how to raise money and instead talked about how we could offer more practice opportunities. We did a survey of the community to see what kind of opportunities they wanted. Desired options included a Sunday morning program and a yoga program. So we started a Sunday morning program in Portola Valley.

Soon we were using many different facilities during the week for all the different programs we had been developing. We had two programs a week at the Friends Meeting House. We had the Sunday morning program at the Community Center in Portola Valley. We had day-long retreats on Saturdays in a Presbyterian Church and a Unitarian Church. We started doing weekend retreats at a wonderful little Zen Center up in the mountains here called Jikoji.

A person connected with the sangha offered me a room in her house with a door to the outside, which I could use as an office to meet people. Before that, if I was going to meet someone one-on-one for a practice discussion, we met in city parks when the weather was good, and in coffee shops when the weather wasn't good. It was interesting to be having very deep or difficult conversations in a coffee shop. Sometimes people were crying as they told me about their lives. We had no place of our own until I had an office in this person's home.

As we used all these different places it became clear that we had enough programs throughout the week that we could consolidate them and move them into our own center. This reality justified having our own place. But in the meantime, we just developed our practice.

First, we had Monday evening, then Thursday evening, and Sunday evening programs. One of the clear decisions I made was that I didn't want to be teaching too many people at one time. So when we had about a hundred people coming on Monday nights, we started a second program on Thursday nights to take the pressure off Monday. Then we started the Sunday morning program.

It would have been a lot easier for me to give just one Dharma talk a week to a big group of people. Maybe it would have been more efficient in some ways. But I felt that in the dynamics of being a teacher in front of a very large group of people, there could be a lot of projection, even if it was unconscious. So many people are focused on one individual in the way we give Dharma talks in the Insight world. I think it creates kind of a skewed

relationship with projections or associations. I wasn't interested in that. I wanted to keep things simple and more basic. I didn't want to become a big teacher somehow.

One aspect of this was that when we met at the Friends Meeting House and other places, I just sat on the floor on a zabuton – a meditation mat. But over time people began to say, “We can't see you in the big room. You have to be elevated a little bit.” I resisted that a lot – even being elevated eight or ten inches on a little platform. I didn't want that because I felt it could be associated with becoming a little bit too special or something.

Then at IMC, we brought that platform here with us. Then they wanted it higher and I resisted that. I would only use it sometimes. But that's what I'm sitting on now. It's probably 15 inches or so. Now it just seems like what we do. But at first, I had a concern about projections of authority or power related to the elevation. All kinds of things can go into being in the role of a teacher.

We started to look for a place. I think we were pretty naive about how we were going to finance it. But we were surprised that before we even started asking for money, when people learned that we wanted to buy a place, they walked up to us with checks and said, “Here.” They weren't big checks necessarily. But people just started offering us money. Then we started raising money with a fundraising letter once a year.

At some point, we heard about a minister couple in Redwood City. They were the ministers in this building here. It had been built by a small Christian denomination called First Christian Assembly. They were somewhat mystical Christians. They sat in silence a lot. The elderly couple was ready to sell it, but they wanted to sell it to someone who also sat in silence. We had a person who knew us and knew them and introduced us. I called them up. They were certainly interested but the message we got back was, “Don't call us. We'll call you.”

We drove by the place and saw it. It was at the farthest limit of the geographical area we thought we could move to. So we didn't call them for some time. I think I called them one more time – this was in January or April. By the following January, we still hadn't been shown the church.

So I called them – partly to be honest, and partly as a way to see if we could get some contact going. I said we were looking for a place to be able to hold an event we wanted to do, and asked if we could use their church. The minister I talked to on the phone said, “No,” I think, but we had an hour-long conversation that was really nice.

The next day I talked to their spouse. We had another hour-long conversation. By that time we were like best friends. We talked a few more times on the phone. I felt so much love, so much warmth going on. And they just assumed that they were going to sell it to us. They hadn't even shown it to us. They even said that they would carry the loan, which we didn't have the money for (we planned to buy it ourselves). It was very strange to have all this going on without actually having seen the church. Finally, in September 2001 they showed it to us. It was a wonderful connection with them. They were so happy with our community, and we with them. We bought it and moved in January 2002.

In looking for the place, we had a bigger vision than just having a center. The dream I had was this: since I was going to be rooted here in this area now, it would be nice to be able to provide Buddhist practice opportunities and support for people throughout their lifetimes from cradle to grave. One of the visions we originally had was to find a property that was big enough to have a community meditation center, a place for people to do long-term self-retreats, and a hospice. Those three functions would synergize a depth of spirituality and connection.

We had thoughts about children's programs. When we finally moved here we were kind of pioneers for the mindfulness in schools movement. A few of us here met periodically and organized the first conference in the country on mindfulness in the school systems. People came from all over because it was the first conference. There was a bigger vision of what was possible that started with looking at a center like this.

Before we bought the place, my wife and I had our first child. That was a real turning point for me because we had a high-spirited child and parenting for me was quite demanding. Monastic life was easier for me than parenting. My wife and I were often very tired from the constant care of this child. We had no support. We didn't have grandparents nearby; we didn't have a nanny or things like that.

At one point we brought our child to a kind of preschool. He was expelled from preschool within a few weeks. He flunked out of preschool. So that was a glorious beginning to his educational career. I think he was expelled because he woke up other kids during nap time, and that was a no-no for that place.

What happened for me as a teacher was that I no longer had time to prepare for my talks. I was tired, so when I showed up to teach, I thought that the quality of my talks was dropping dramatically. But the odd thing that happened was that people seemed to appreciate my talks more and more. I think what was happening was that I was becoming less intellectual about the Dharma and talking more about how things were for me personally. People resonated more with the talks.

That was the beginning of becoming attuned to the way that being a teacher is its own practice. For example: I'd be sitting in my meditation posture – like I am here now – to give these talks. As I talked, I paid careful attention to whether I was leaning forward or pulling back, and the tone of my voice. There were many little feedback loops inside of me of where I got caught.

I was concerned about what people were thinking about me. If one person in the hall walked out, I might feel like I was failing. Sometimes it was subtle, but I could feel these shifts of attachment. I had fear sometimes. If one person was looking down and shaking their head, I noticed that my eyes went to that person all the time as if that person was the arbitrator of how successful I was as a teacher.

So I got to see a lot of the conceit, attachment, and fears I had. In the posture, I could see how the subtlest shifts and movements expressed how I got caught. As I was teaching, I used this observation as a practice. That was really important for me. I learned so much about myself through the practice of paying attention in the role of a teacher. That was a good thing because when we got the Center here I started teaching even more. It has grown steadily over time.

I think we'll do one more day on "Gil's Dharma story." Then we'll see what's next after that. I appreciate all of you and this chance to tell these stories. I hope it's instructive or helpful for you.

Thank you.