

Gil's Story Pt 2 (3 of 5) Visioning Sangha

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Gil Fronsda

Hello. Today I will continue with the story of my life when I became a teacher. I am enjoying talking about this. Sometimes when I've told my story, I've become bored telling it. This gives me a chance to reconsider it and look at it in new ways from the perspective of today, at this age.

In 1990 I came to graduate school at Stanford University. I moved back into the San Francisco Zen Center. I started teacher training with Jack Kornfield. Within a year or so I started training to be a Zen teacher and get Dharma transmission. By 1992 I was married. Looking back at it, it was a wonderful time.

My scholarship at Stanford was a three-year scholarship which included living expenses. I was able to spread it out over four years, so I went to school two quarters a year rather than three. That allowed me to go to teacher training, to go on retreats, and to start teaching retreats. I very quickly understood that the primary way we were graded in the graduate courses I took was on the final paper. Because I was doing Dharma things and retreat things as well, at least one summer I wrote my final paper before the class began. I understood the topics I signed up for, and I knew how this went. I knew I would be busy.

One of the things that I was busy with every fall during the 1990s, beyond the time I spent in graduate school, was teaching a ten-day experienced student retreat just north of San Francisco. The retreat was right near the end of the quarter, just before everything was due. I had to really plan ahead in order to get the coursework done. But it seemed to always work out. In fact, when it was time for me to defend my dissertation, it happened to be in the middle of that ten-day retreat.

Looking back now, I kind of marvel that it worked out this way. But I was kind of matter-of-fact about things back then, and I just did it. In the middle of teaching at that retreat, one morning I got up, put on a nice jacket that someone had given me, and drove down to Stanford. I did the defense, then drove back to the retreat and just continued teaching there. This integration, going back and forth, worked very well. I feel very fortunate about the way it worked for me at graduate school.

I was also teaching. In August of 1990, I began teaching for the sitting group in Palo Alto that I had joined. That group began to grow, and I very quickly had the sense that there was a vision. I had a vision or knowledge of what is possible for people when they enter into the world of Buddhist practice. I knew that there was much more to practice than just coming to a Monday evening sitting group. I knew that volunteering – caring for the place you practice in – is really valuable for one's own practice.

There wasn't much to be done there. There was just a key to get into the room in the church, taking home the flyers for Spirit Rock programs, and then putting them out the next Monday when we came back. So early on I asked for volunteers for that. I said to the person to whom I gave the key, "You're now the president of our sitting group." I wanted to promote people to have some sense of ownership, involvement, and responsibility for what was going on.

I taught happily for about six months without any thought or concerns about compensation for teaching. Having grown up for ten years in the Buddhist world practicing at the Zen Center and in Asia, being paid and getting compensated was completely out of the picture. The idea was just to engage in the practice. If you were invited to teach, then you would teach, and I had been invited to teach for this group. I had no thought about any

compensation at all. They had a little basket to collect money to pay rent for the church, and after six months, there was an extra hundred dollars. We said, "What do we do with this?" Someone said, "Let's give it to Gil." After maybe another six months, there was another hundred dollars. That was the beginning of being supported to live and teach the Dharma.

As that group began to grow, I started to have what I later realized was a vision. I began to realize that part of the responsibility of caring for a meditation group was to have a vision of what was possible for them. People were doing practice, and it was wonderful. Having a vision that they could do more would be helpful.

I said, "This group is probably ready to do a half-day retreat." Someone had access to a small conference room on the fourth floor of the Aerodynamics Department at Stanford. We went there on a Saturday or Sunday when the building was closed. There was a deck and there were hallways. That's where we did our first half-day sitting. Then we did more of them.

Then I had a vision that these people were ready for a whole day retreat. At some point, I said, "Some people who come here don't know about meditation, so I think it's time for us to offer an intro class." I'd offered an intro class before, so I wrote in the next IMC Newsletter about the beginning of this intro class. I started to feel that my job, my responsibility, or my caretaking, was to have this vision of what was possible.

At some point, someone suggested we move to the Quaker Meeting House, which had a bigger room. That turned out to be wonderful. I love the Quakers. I love the ethos and the atmosphere. I felt that there was something I took in deeply from sharing the Quakers' space with them. There we decided we were now ready to take a deep dive into the Buddhist precepts, so we did a class on the precepts. Then we decided we were ready for loving-kindness, and we did a class on loving-kindness.

By now we were kind of full on Monday nights, so we said, "Let's start Thursday nights." The Quaker Place was available for us and so we started Thursday nights. I had a different vision of what Thursday nights were about. Monday nights were more about Buddhist practice. Thursday evenings were more about how to cope in this difficult life. The people who came on Thursday nights were much more on the edge, just managing to cope, and wanted some kind of basic support. I loved having both possibilities.

We kept wondering what to do next. At some point, I had a vision about about not staying with the group. I was very inspired by the people who were coming and how serious they were about practice and I felt a responsibility to caretake and support these people. But I had the idea of growing this group big enough to invite another teacher to take over so I could leave. I wanted to live in the country. I had an idea of living near Point Reyes up the coast north of San Francisco, halfway between the Green Gulch Zen Center where I practiced, and Spirit Rock where I'd also practiced. I had a strong connection to both. My vision was that I would live up there and be involved in both worlds.

But at some point, I think by 1996, I was so inspired and impressed by this growing community that I decided to commit to staying here in the Peninsula and supporting this group. It was kind of a big deal for my wife. She didn't want to live in an urban area. But that's what we did.

I didn't require or want anything from the community with that commitment, but I wanted them to know that that was the case. So I asked for a meeting among maybe a dozen or 15 people who were more central than everyone else. We met at someone's home, and I explained to them what was happening. It felt like I needed to tell people about this commitment and that there was no expectation of anything.

That meeting stimulated a conversation that evoked a vision that we should have our own home, our own place to practice. I had a full vision of that. I had a really clear sense that so much more was possible if we could have our own place where we didn't have to move zafus and where people felt they could come – this is our place. It could be available 24/7. It could be people's spiritual home in a way that a church room could not. I felt that as the community and the depth and maturity of practice grew, we would be able to do more different kinds of programs and better support people.

So we decided to get incorporated as a religious non-profit. That took a little while. Back then, coming out of the alternative culture that I'd grown up in in the United States, the idea of consensus and equality and everyone in it

together was paramount. The idea that we would have a consensus-based model for governance for this new center was at the forefront of our minds. A group of people came up with bylaws.

But when they presented it to me and we had a meeting to ratify them, I was kind of shocked at what was presented. It was very open. There was no membership exactly. I guess anybody who came to a meeting had a vote except one person – me, the teacher. In this consensus model, we were all supposed to have a vote and decide together. Not granting me that one vote, just one, didn't seem right to me. And I thought what was set up was too complicated. I thought, "This is not going to work." I said to the committee, "I'm not ready for us to ratify this. I'd like for us to put it on hold while I have some time to think about this." Some people were angry with me, but that was the decision. Then about nine months later, I felt ready. I reassembled some of the people from that committee to come up with new bylaws, which are the ones we have today. Then we were ready to start thinking about a center so we could keep developing this community.

Around that time, it became clear to me that I was also maturing. Something about the interrelationship – the back-and-forth connection to a community that was asking questions, growing, and maturing, and my teaching them – affected me. Being in the role of teacher was a very important opportunity to understand myself much better. Being a teacher is not free of attachments, shortcomings, and oddities. I had lots of opportunities to see parts of myself that I hadn't seen in years of meditation practice. They were elicited in that community dynamic. It was wonderful to watch the mutual maturing of the community and myself. Incorporation was a very important choice that the community and I made at that point. Incorporation opened the door for much more to happen here at IMC.

Thank you very much, and I'll continue with this tomorrow.