

# Buddhist Pilgrimage

**Gil Fronsdal**

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Okay. So today I would like to talk about Buddhist pilgrimage. And the catalyst for that was I just finished doing a Buddhist pilgrimage. So it's very fresh in my mind and very much a part of my heart. And so I'd like to just speak what's up for me. The simplest definition maybe of a pilgrimage that I kind of like is that a pilgrimage is where an outer journey and an inner journey intersect and support each other. And so, but conventionally, pilgrimages are often associated with going to a sacred site.

And so they're spiritual in nature. Not everyone will, some people think that our life itself is a pilgrimage. Some people will call pilgrimage something which is not necessarily spiritual, but that's often the association. And I've been on, I've walked four pilgrimage routes in my life. Two of them were not a pilgrimage for me. It was other people's pilgrimage routes.

So they were people of other religions would enter into it in a deep way because it was deeply connected to their faith. And I went along those, partly because they were spiritual. I felt that was an important part of why I was there. But I didn't share the same spirituality as them. And so the resonance of that part wasn't that strong for me. And I'd been on two which were Buddhist pilgrimages.

And they were actually part of my faith, part of my spirituality, and really felt to be important parts of it. And one of them just ended two days ago. So that was quite lovely. So pilgrimage is involved kind of an inner and an outer aspect. And the outer one is one that is connected to the place we go to. Outwardly, one of the kind of simple definitions of, added definition to a pilgrimage is walking to a sacred site, to a sacred temple, sacred place.

And then maybe walking back is also part of the pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is a time when we're separating ourselves from life as usual and work and home and all these kinds of things that we leave behind. So we enter into a kind of a different way of being in the world. And it has

a lot of overlaps with going on retreat, where they're also that we leave our home behind, we leave our work behind, life as usual, in order to be able to experience life, experience ourselves, independent from how those influence us, or condition us, or weigh us down, or something. And it takes a while, both on a pilgrimage and on a retreat, to let ordinary life settle away, to pass away and not be so pressing on us. And then something else can start happening.

And so the pilgrimage that I just finished did have a kind of a sacred site that was going to, but it was both, this pilgrimage began at a sacred site and kind of ended at one. And so we were walking between these two places and on land that some people consider to be sacred land. And I'm happy to call it that when I walked on it. So, the sacred land was Mount Tamalpais in Marin County. And one of the people on the pilgrimage with us was following in the foot, in other times, had done a lot of following in the footsteps of a kind of a sacred pilgrimage that was started by the Beatniks. That Gary Snyder and different people in the 1960s started a pilgrimage around Mount Tam, circumambulating Mount Tam.

And that's been going on for years and now I think it's kind of an abyss, but some of the, one of the people I've been involved in has done that now a number of times. And there's a book about it, and she follows the route of the book. So she was on the right, on the pilgrimage. There was ten of us doing it together. And so, and going from, we went from, from kind of over Mount Tam, Mount Tamalpais, from Spirit Rock Meditation Center to Green Gulch Zen Center. Both Buddha centers where I've taught, where I've practiced, important places for me personally, and, and I would consider them sacred sites.

And, and it was a wonderful, in both places we were offered hospitality. One of the characteristics often of pilgrims, pilgrimages, the pilgrims are guests of everybody. And they're kind of received by the people that get along and receive hospitality. Not always that way, but that's often one characteristic of it. And so the pilgrims usually go with certain kind of humbleness. As you would a guest into someone's house, you don't go in there and demand that they, you know, that instead of serving you, spinach salad that should have been some other, you know, the wrong kind of salad dressing you're using for me or I demand, you know, like a restaurant you might go in and demand like it's, you know, something but, you know, you're a guest in someone's home.

There's a humility or a humbleness and receptivity of being a guest. So to be that kind of guest walking through the lands and putting aside your status, for example, with your work and your place and just being a kind of a humble person. The word pilgrim comes from a kind of a Latin word that kind of suggests being more like a servant. And so a certain kind of

way of walking with simplicity. Usually pilgrims don't go with a lot. And so it was very nice because we received the hospitality from Green Gulch, from Spirit Rock.

And we slept in the meditation hall. They have nice residence halls, but they didn't offer us that. And it was lovely then to sleep in the meditation hall. And then when we came to Green Gulch Zen Center, we also slept in a meditation hall there. And the difference was at Spirit Rock, no one was using a meditation hall the next morning. At Green Gulch, the wake up bell starts the meditation hall at quarter to five.

And we had to be out of there by then. So we had to get up early, which was part of the charm of it all. And then we slept two nights on Mount Tam, because we took our time with the walk. And it's exquisitely beautiful. And so it was, so that was, that was our pilgrimage. And the process to that, the land, played a very important role for us, certainly for me.

The land, the trees. We had a botanist along who told us a little bit about the plants as we went along. And I learned that the redwood trees, which are a big part of that area, are apparently one of the oldest continuously present species of living beings on the planet. And that the redwood trees as a genus goes back to the Jurassic times, so 200 million years ago. And the species we have come back to the Cretaceous time, which could be about 100 million years ago. And coincidentally, I learned that a very big redwood tree has 100 million leaves.

It's kind of astounding to me. And the scale of time, the scale of kind of complexity. And these redwood trees are so beautiful and so, so, so tall, some of them that we saw. And so the pilgrimage in the scale of time that we're part of, the scale of, and then also to see as we went along, and as the botanist pointed out, so it stood out kind of wonderfully, that how the plants are shaped by the environment they're in, the way they evolved. And you can clearly see that because all the understory plants, they all have a problem with getting enough light. So they're all flat, going directly up to the sky.

And you can see how they were all created in shapes that helped them find light, but because the larger trees were kind of didn't leave other choices for them to evolve. And so this way, and so humans as well, we've evolved as, as a species conditioned by the land, the environment, the natural world in which we've lived in and been in. And so I, as I was walking along the pilgrimage, I thought of one of the Americans, one of the anthems of the United States for some people, Woody Guthrie's song. But I had to change, I wanted to change the last, the refrain to, this land made you and me. This is the land that made you and me. If you've been here in the United States for more than seven years, probably to some degree or other you've been made by this.

And it's very nice sound. And so So the idea of going someplace and then walking. And there's something about walking, the movement of walking, the somatic experience of walking, that loosens us up. It creates a kind of different way of being on the land than driving a car. It's a different way of being alive, walking outdoors in a beautiful natural environment than being where the real estate is a computer screen. You know, that's a very small piece of real estate to spend the time with everything focused on, which some people work that way and spend hours each day doing, focusing on this little screen, the little piece of real estate that calls on so little of our physiology, so little of our body and our senses and experience of life.

And who we are in relationship to that screen is very different than how most people feel who they are in relationship to the natural world, the forest, the ocean, the rivers, the trees, the mountains that we all went through these last days. And for one thing I reflect on is that when I came back, I did go on my laptop. And I looked at my screen and wondered, how am I different here? And I could feel how I was bigger than whatever the screen is. I'm like a big thing. The screen is only, I don't know, a square foot or something at the most.

And I'm big and substantial, and I'm alone. There's something about the solitude of being in relationship to a screen. Even though my wife was in the house, There was something about, it was very different compared, in contrast to being outdoors where all the senses are open. And there's this huge receptivity that develops over time. The walking is a lubricant or is a massage. It kind of opens things up step after step after step.

And you always have to take into account what's around you. And many times the trail was not completely even. So there's a constant call. Your whole body is being shifted. How it moves through space is constantly being adjusted and changed on all these little micro muscle ways. It's little adjustments with the ankles, and where the foot comes down, the knees, and which muscles are activated, and what environment you're tuning into.

Are you tuning into things through the ears? Are you tuning in through the eyes? What are you attuning to? The ground, the trees, the sky, the birds, the ocean. And it's a constant shifting of all kinds of things. And the whole body is involved completely.

In a way that I'm sure your body is completely involved in your laptop. But it's not, it's probably not as fluid and open and flowing. And it's probably getting more and more tense sometimes. And, you know, kind of, if you, if you spend a lot, a lot of time on doing the same thing with your body, things begin to stiffen up. So this wonderful kind of way in which a pilgrimage is built into it is this walking, walking, walking, and hours of walking. And we walked in silence before lunch.

So to walk with a group of people together, there's something of bonding that happens when we spend time together in silence. You get to know each other differently. There's a kind of feeling of, of way of tuning into people when you don't have to be figuring out what to say or, or how to respond to what they're saying. There's a kind of sense of camaraderie and commonality and something very, I think for me, it's been very touching about that kind of experience. Not so many people are willing to spend hours, you know, six hours or something in the morning. Maybe not that way. Probably four hours that we spent in silence as we walked.

We did talk occasionally, like learning how old the redwood trees are. And we had little rituals we did, very little simple rituals we did as we went along that involved some speech. And so, because of the outer silence, it affects the inner silence. And it was like being on a retreat or meditating where the inner landscape became highlighted. And I became much more aware of my thoughts, much more aware of my feelings, my sensations. And there became an inner silence, an inner stillness started to develop.

Being in this, having this silence as we walked, being in touch with an environment that, I don't know if you would say it was a silent environment, but it was so spacious and so supportive that it kind of contributed to kind of an inner receptivity and inner silence that was a very important part of this pilgrimage. An outer silence that supports an inner silence. An inner silence that supports an outer silence. And as I went along, the little slogan I had for myself that became very rich to reflect on, kind of a koan or a practice phrase, was, love teaches us to say yes to everything. Wisdom teaches us what to say yes to in every situation. So, we're not saying yes to everything just automatically.

There are things we shouldn't say yes to. But even so, even in those situations, there's still something we can say yes to. And so what is it we can say yes to, even in challenging situations? Even in situations where you don't agree with someone. And one of the things was, was, yes, I'll listen to you. You know, this isn't exactly the conversation I want to have. But yes, I don't know if I agree. But yeah, but yes, I'll listen.

As we walked along. Yes, I'll listen. Why not? I listen to the birds. I listen to the ocean. I listen to the creeks. Yes. And so there's a very different orientation to have this yes. Knowing that I disagree. Knowing that in certain ways, you know, I would say no or something. But yes. You know, to live with a yes. I felt that was kind of like, how do I say yes here? Where is a yes that I can live with? As opposed to, for some of us, sometimes the automatic policy is no. You know, no, no, no. But yes, to live a life of yes. I felt to me it was a wonderful piece of a pilgrimage to do this pilgrimage route.

And then we had a Buddhist teacher at Spirit Rock give a little short Dharma talk to us to begin the journey. And that was Ann Cushman, who has spent years studying pilgrimages and Buddhist pilgrimages in India. And so she was familiar with us. And then we were at Green Gulch. One of the senior teachers there met us and gave us a short talk. And both places we meditate a little bit with the teachers. And then we met and they gave a short talk. And so it's kind of like book ended, the whole thing with this wonderful, you know, receiving teachings as we went along.

And the Zen teacher gave this beautiful teaching that is from a kind of a koan in the Japanese Buddhist tradition. It's kind of a fable, I think. You decide. The Buddha himself was out for a walk with his students. Maybe he was in a pilgrimage. And, and he stopped at some location, he pointed to the ground. And he said, this is the place to build a sanctuary, a sacred site. Apparently the phrase can also mean, the way it's translated in English is sanctuary. But apparently the Japanese words can also mean a place for enlightenment, place for liberation. This is the place.

And so the Indra, who was, I don't know if he still is, one of the most powerful gods in the Indian pantheon, heard this and was coming kind of following along I guess on the walk and it was, you know, somehow came down from his celestial domain and plucked a blade of grass out from somewhere and planted that blade of grass into the spot the Buddha had pointed to and said the sanctuary is built. And the Buddha smiled. That's the story. And the Zen teacher talked about how Indra, being the most powerful god in the Indian pantheon, could have just, you know, snapped his finger and created a huge palace, a cathedral, you know, a real building as the sanctuary. But he just took some of the most humble, simple, ordinary thing that is right there, I suppose, a piece of blade of grass, and put it in the spot and said, I made the sanctuary.

And so one interpretation of this for pilgrims is that every step is the sacred site. It's not about going to a sacred site. It's not about leaving a sacred site. It's about finding the sacred site in every step. Every step is something very precious and valuable to be present just for that. And so part of the task of a pilgrim, maybe a Buddhist pilgrim, maybe a Zen Buddhist pilgrim, is to find what does it mean? How do we discover that tremendous value, the power, the spirituality, the sacredness of one step, of the place we're standing, the place where our foot comes down, this particular moment here and now.

And it certainly requires a certain kind of humility, humbleness. It requires certain receptivity. It requires a certain quietness in the mind where we're not caught up in our thoughts and concerns so much that we miss the moment. We miss the footstep. We're not here for it. And,

and it certainly requires some kind of feeling of the value or the specialness of really being here in the place we're at. And part of that specialness for Buddhists is to appreciate the possibility of liberation, freedom from attachments, from clinging, from self-preoccupation, self-building up the self, defending the self, preoccupied with the future, preoccupied with the past, finding some liberation from all that, which is not an easy thing to do. I think one of the characteristics of many people's lives is preoccupation with some aspect of these things. But to find it with every step, and there's something about walking all day long through the natural world that contributes to that, contributes to that, contributes to that. Somehow the scale of our life and what's important changes in that world.

So we walked, part of what we walked along was the Marin Headland Cliffs. And there's this amazing, we had good weather, so amazing view of the ocean, you know, going far, far out. We had, you know, the other thing that I loved about the pilgrimages was how friendly people were to us. As we went along, there were people we encountered. And even if they didn't know we were doing a pilgrimage, people were just friendly out there. And some of them were county employees who were doing their different work that they had to do. And they were just so happy to be there and meet us and talk with us or answer our questions about what they were doing.

And then also what was nice was that we were a pilgrim group. And as we walked, and through the days, we started bonding together. And becoming more and more, it felt like, now we're not just a group of people doing the same thing. We're a group of people sharing a certain sensitivity, a certain mutuality, a certain sacredness, a certain kind of like, we've come together. Some of us, we've never met before, never met each other before. And the kind of peak time for that really felt like it gelled. There were two nights we slept out on Mount Tam in sleeping bags and tents. And the second night, there was a picnic table. We'd had our dinner. We'd finished everything. The evening was coming to a close. And we all just sat around the picnic table. And there was a feeling, as it was getting darker, that we were, it was a full moon. And we were all kind of, like we were now had gelled into kind of a single, kind of a single body, as you might say for a group of people, kind of like we were all now on the same page, sharing the same thing, same kind of sensibility and feeling very connected to each other.

And so, and probably partly because we had walked so much together, we were sharing the sacredness of this land and this purpose that we're doing. And because of the of, you know, that strong connection we had to this, to the practice that we all had. Everyone was a practitioner. So we'd spend time meditating together. Sometimes during the day, we'd come to

these spots that just seemed like the right place to meditate. And we'd sit there and meditate. There's a place called, I don't know if some of you might know it, Cataract Falls. It's one of the great hikes in the Bay Area. So we walked up Cataract Falls. And halfway up, there's this great waterfall. And we sat there on the hillside meditating. So these things can happen right here in the Bay Area.

And what made it a pilgrimage and a sacred pilgrimage was the intention, the purpose, and the kind of context in which it was created. And it was created last year. This is the second year we've done it. And before that, this pilgrimage didn't exist. All Buddhist countries have pilgrimage routes, as far as I know, in Asia. Most religions, like maybe all major religions, have pilgrimage routes. And I don't think there's been too much of this, or any much of this, I don't know of any of this in the United States yet. So it was high time that we have one here in California. And so now we have one. And the idea is to make it longer. And so this year, last year, we did Spirit Rock to Green Gulch Zen Center. And this year we actually walked a little bit further to Rodeo Beach and ended there. And then the idea is to make, slowly make it, the idea is to try to spend as many nights in meditation halls or Buddhist temples as we make our way down the coast. And maybe eventually make to our retreat center in Santa Cruz. Or further, make it all the way to Tassajara. Tassajara is deep in the Los Padres National Wilderness, Tassajara Zen Center. And so I don't know how long that would take, but it's a lot shorter than El Camino that people know in Spain. So maybe we'll get away with it. So that was what I did for my vacation, kind of, for my pilgrimage. So hopefully that was nice for you to hear. And if you have any questions you want to ask about it, I'd be happy to try to respond.

Good morning, Gil. Mine's less of a question but more of a comment on your talk today. I couldn't help but draw the analogy that if the sacred site equaled enlightenment and each step was the site, revered a site, it would be each meditation would be this step. And even more, each moment of our lives would be a step. And how, so you said how difficult that would be. Yes, I completely agree with you. I think that's the whole, you know, that's definitely the conclusion of this practice is to realize that every meditation you're sitting in the place of awakening, it's a sanctuary, every step, every thing you do. And so that's the goal. Some of us need some help. And pilgrimage is one of the ways to get that help because it's not just going on retreat, but you're living kind of a life in the world, walking and encountering things. And so there it's really palpable that this is what you're doing. And then hopefully we learn from that, we imprint that, it becomes imprinted in us so that when we go back home that we bring that with us to appreciate that every sip of water is a pilgrimage. And you're



welcome to ask anything else too. It doesn't have to be a pilgrimage.

Gil, it's been a long time, but I've done the Cataract Trail a couple of times and it's a very wonderful place. I was glad to hear that you've done it. Sure. Let's see if this, yeah, this is better. And the waterfall there counts as a body of water, you could say. And you saw a view of the ocean, I think, you said, as well. I saw in the news yesterday, I just saw the headline about what makes bodies of water so peaceful for us to be next to. I didn't read the article, just saw the headline. And I resonated with that because I myself find bodies of water to be very peaceful. I just love to be there. But I don't know why. Any thoughts on that? Why are bodies of water peaceful?

Maybe I want to answer that question directly the way it's asked. And this last year, there's been a few times where I've been in situations where people had to kind of introduce themselves with a little bit about their background, where they come from, and their story of their life. And I've told my life story, or, you know, a short version of it, so many times that I'm not that interested in it anymore. So I had time to reflect before I was going to do this introduction to myself. And other people were doing theirs first. So it was kind of interesting to hear other people's introductions and then have that reflect back to understand myself in a different way based on what they said. And by the time it was my turn, I didn't want to tell any stories, any conventional ways. It just wasn't really relevant for me. But what was most relevant, what I felt most was, at that, these last, I guess, six months where this has been an issue, is how have I been shaped by places in nature? And one of those ways that I feel when I was doing this reflection is bodies of water. I spend a lot of my life on water. And it's been a really big theme throughout my life. I was born on the coastal town in Norway. And there's a lot of time on water in a few words. Some of these fjords can be so peaceful, so calm when there's no wind. And so the calm bodies of water, I feel like have shaped me. There's something that lives in me in a way that the spaciousness, the openness, the expansiveness of peace or calm, that seems to kind of impact something in my chest where the chest becomes similar. Something in my chest gets peaceful and quiet and peaceful. Why that is, I don't know. But you're asking why. But certainly it's had a big impact. So certainly water. That was an odd question. That's a great answer. Thank you.

So something some of you might want to reflect on is, how would you tell your life story from the point of view of the places you lived, as opposed to, you know, what you did? And right next to you. Hi, this is Ashwin. We just recently completed Everest Base Camp tracking and I wish we had thought of some of the ideas that you mentioned, such as walking in silence for half the day and stopping at different spots and doing the meditation and have purposeful

conversations. So I think it's a wonderful thing, looks like, and maybe IMC will organize some such either hikes or pilgrims that non-teachers maybe, or others can participate in it and explore this further. Great, thank you. Yeah, there is some people who have organized hikes, and Kristin Benson has offered a couple this last year. She was trained to be an eco-chaplain, and so she's offered hikes that have brought together some of these things. I don't know if she's planning to, she does it on the solstice or equinox time, so I don't know if she's planning to do it in the summer solstice, but keep an eye on the newsletter to see. But it's like, I mean, they did do more of it than, and then, you know, maybe with the with, if this pilgrimage route gets developed all the way down to, you know, south of here, at some point it has to go through the peninsula. And so either you have to wait until it gets that far, and then you can join, or maybe we'll do it, develop it in sections. And we can just try finding sections on the peninsula to make, and then we can later connect it to create a peninsula pilgrimage.

I have a quick question. I just came back from a sacred place, Salt Lake City, and IMC came to mind in Buddhist practices because I really was challenged in different ways in terms of what I witnessed, and I tried to have a curiosity and an openness. I continue to have my challenges. So I'm just curious, any thoughts in terms of my struggles with that experience of mine? So I don't quite understand, but I think what you're saying is that you came out of maybe a religious situation that had problems. No, I don't practice. I just went on vacation to Salt Lake City, and I struggle with aspects of that faith. I don't practice it, but just the history and the unfolding, the hierarchy and treatment of women. So you're commenting on kind of an openness, having more of a curiosity versus a judgmental, is kind of how I interpret it. Yeah, so I appreciate very much what's behind your question. Sounds like you're asking a very important question. Not sure my answer will respond and we can talk more later. But the, I have, I have Mormon friends, a number. So I know some of the, you know, who grew up that way and so I know some of the challenges that they have with their own religion and, or some of them have left their religion. And, but those challenges are not that, maybe the nuances, the details are a little different, but almost every religion, probably every religion has some of the same problems. And you don't have to, you don't have to, you don't have to kind of look very long or very far to see problems with Buddhism as a religion as well. Buddhism is not free of this as well.

But I've, I've, in terms of this idea of, you know, saying yes to everything. So yes, there's problems in religions. And there's a lot of goodness in people as well. So I was, I've noticed that there's a, a lot of generosity, a lot of friendship, a lot of ethics among Mormons that I've met that have inspired me. And I know some of the difficulties as well. But I really like to

orient myself around that which resonates with me and that which inspires me. Because that's a way of supporting more of that than the world. To only orient ourselves towards the problems is kind of limits ourselves because then we're resonating with what the problem is and the distress that causes us. And I don't know if we grow from that as much as we do resonating with what's good. But what's very important is not to be Pollyannish, you know, and just ignore the problems. I think there's a tremendous importance to see it clearly, but not to be limited by it or in any kind of way, but to actually find where is the spiritual growth happening. And one of the ways to be inspired, maybe that's not the right word, but one motivation that I have when I see things that are terrible in the world is that it inspires me to do better. And it reminds me that the world I want to live in is the world that needs to begin with me. So rather than waiting for someone else to fix the world, at least we try to fix our own world, the world that is born out of us. And so if other people are being unethical, I would like to live in a world that's ethical. And so then I have to look at myself. How's it come from me? In the world without war, I want to live at peace. War, where there's conflict, I want to live with concord. So how do I live and promote concord coming out of me, rather than participating in the conflicts in the world? So does this little bit answer your question? Oh no, it very much answers. Very inspiring. Okay, great. Great. So thank you. So it's now the official time to stop. I'm happy to stay up here if you have some more comments or questions, but I hope to see some of you at the picnic and thank you for being here.