

Stories of Practice (2 of 5) Being Seen

November 25, 2025

SUMMARY KEYWORDS stories of being and feeling seen, having support, mirrors, monasteries, Zen formality, making choices, Vipassana

Gil Fronsdal

Hello and welcome to this second talk this week, where I'm sharing some stories that were important for me in my journey through Buddhist practice.

Today I want to talk about how important it was that certain people saw me, that I felt really seen by them in particular ways. I had no idea at the time that the way that they were looking upon me and seeing me was having any real lasting impact. I didn't exactly take it for granted, but I maybe was clueless. I didn't understand what was happening with me or didn't have enough self-understanding to really see the impact of these things, but in retrospect, I've come to appreciate that these were turning moments in my life.

The first was when I started going to the San Francisco Zen Center. I'd been practicing, I was living in a college town an hour or two away and visiting periodically. I was kind of practicing Zen meditation every day. In my social life on campus — I didn't know it at the time exactly, but I was playing social games. I was behaving in ways and talking about things in order to get people's approval, to have people like me, so I was trying to present myself in a certain way.

So then I went to the Zen Center and I continued, doing the social selves, what I called social games, social kind of way of presenting myself to try to make an impression, and to my surprise, there was no response. There was no going along with it. There was no picking it up and reinforcing it. I just was kind of stunned, and I got to see myself more clearly: I saw what I was doing. I thought, "This is invaluable, to have this support, these mirrors, to see myself."

That's one of the reasons I went to live at Zen Center, was to be around people who would mirror what I was doing that I didn't want to do anymore. Then I was there, living at Zen Center for — I'd probably been living there for maybe, been in the community for maybe about nine months — and a close relative got very sick, and maybe was going to die, didn't end up dying, but it was quite distressing, concerning.

There was one of the Zen students there who was just another practitioner. He was not ordained as a Zen monk yet; some twenty years later became the abbot of Zen Center. I was standing in a pathway talking to him about my relative and what was going on. I'd never experienced someone who looked upon me with such genuine, caring compassion. There was no... he wasn't trying to exactly fix me or make me feel better. He really listened and he gazed at me, and there was so much compassion in how he was present for me, that I certainly felt at the time, you know, somehow I recognized it and felt it was somehow nice.

That was the beginning, I think, and I look back now, at the same kind of capacity, not the same, but my own capacity for compassion to be awakened. The Zen practice really kind of brought it forth to become extremely, extremely important. So how he looked upon me was so valuable. Then, as I was practicing at the Zen Center and struggling with my human struggles, I would go see some of the teachers there. There were ways in which they saw me. Again, they didn't give me advice. They didn't try to be my teacher and teach me something, but there was a remarkable way, which in retrospect, that they just kind of affirmed me. They kind of appreciated me.

They said, "Good. Your practice is good. Things are good." I don't know, I can't remember well how exactly they did that, but I remember that it was very clear, and I don't think I would have continued practicing or had confidence on my own to keep practicing without this encouragement, this simple way of being seen and recognized with appreciation, or that things were good with me, even though things were hard. It was so good to

be seen that way. It kept me, again, practicing. It made it very encouraging to keep doing this practice that in some ways required quite a bit from me.

Then, there was this moment, where I'd spent about three years living at the monastery deep in the mountains, where everything was choreographed, not everything, but there was a lot of how you stood, what you did with your hands when you're standing. When you're walking in the meditation hall, they had to walk in a certain way, a lot of bowing, a certain way of sitting, a certain way of eating. It was all kinds of ritual, choreographed theater in a sense, of mindfulness, of attention, of really being there.

So what it meant was that there was no choice exercised, except to go along with all these ways of being, and I brought a lot of attention, a lot of mindfulness to my experience, but when I left after three years, that choreographed way of living was no longer present. And to my surprise, I saw that there was a lot of choice. And even before I would sit in the chair, I just sat in the chair. But now, if I sat in a chair, I realize there was a lot of choice.

The monastery had to sit a certain way. And it wasn't that I had to sit that way again, but I saw there was choice. Do I slump? Do I relax back? Do I sit upright? Do I cross my legs? All these little choices, they were unconscious before. I saw my day was filled with choices that I didn't get busy with or stressed by: it was the opposite. It actually allowed me to see how through the day I could find my peace, find my presence, find how to be present in a good way that just felt clear so I wasn't giving into impulses that I didn't really want to live by anymore.

So I went to the abbot. We had this very formal way in Zen to meet with the abbot. You do a lot of bowing, you just sit down cross-legged, opposite to each sitting in kind of cross-legged, full meditation posture. Maybe knees are about maybe, I don't know, fifteen inches apart. So very present, very, you know, very formal... And I explained this to the abbot, all this choice I had.

When I finished, he did something very unusual. He broke out of the pattern of Zen, of Japanese Zen, of bowing, of this formality, how to be, this choreographed way. I explained to him, and he reached his hand forward to shake my hand. It was like, this was his way of saying, "Great, this is really good." That's all he did. I took it as so kind of encouraging, "Oh, this is... I've been approved here. What I've discovered is, this is the way to go." And again, this was so supportive to have that.

And then the last story, I can tell a lot of stories about being seen. But this is one of the valuable things about living in a, like a practice community, a Buddhist center — to practice among other people and teachers who have been practicing for a long time — is that there's so much happens in the relationship there. It's in the relationship that so much can happen, that maybe would not happen in meditation, private meditation for oneself. And so this, the relational, is such an important field of practice.

So I'll tell you the last story. I was practicing, and hopefully you'll appreciate this. So I went to Thailand for the first time and stumbled upon an insight Vipassana retreat. I was a Zen monk in Thailand, and I just had to be there, for visa reasons, to go back to Japan, and I just went to check out the Vipassana center.

I said, "I'm here to kind of learn what you want to do, until my visa comes for Japan," so the abbot gave me a little hut on the edge of the monastery over the rice fields. He said, "You go out there, just practice all day long," and he gave me instructions, "...and every day come to see me." So I did, and it took me ten weeks to realize the visa wasn't coming, and for ten weeks I waited in the monastery. So the ten weeks was kind of an accidental Vipassana retreat. The longest I ever done a retreat before was for a week, so ten weeks was a long time.

Somewhere early in that retreat... I had the idea that I was supposed to follow this very strict schedule, maybe because I had been doing Zen practice, of just sitting and walking, practicing all day long, and that's what I should always be doing. So I was doing that mostly, but then one day I decided to take a break, and I was just walking casually around the monastery, and who should come, walking, was the abbot. And we were kind of walking perpendicular to each other, and so I was heading towards him, right at him, but he was going ninety degrees the other way, and he was maybe forty feet away.

And so, you know, it's like, "Uh-oh, I'm going to get busted. Uh-oh, you know, I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do." Like in Zen monasteries, you have to follow the schedule strictly. And I thought, "Oh, now I'm in trouble."

And he turned to look at me, turned his eyes, his head towards me, looked at me, and he clearly saw me, that I felt, I saw, but there was something about how he saw me. It was almost like he saw right through me because he saw me, but there was no judgment, no concern, no unhappiness, no... He didn't flinch, he didn't raise an eyebrow. It was like being seen fully without anything extra, any judgment, any concern.

It was remarkable for me to feel this. I don't actually know what was going on in his head. But maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe I misunderstood his gaze. But for this very experienced practitioner, Vipassana practitioner, teacher, maybe he had the capacity to just see, clearly, without any judgments, without any bias, any feeling of right and wrong, just see. I was just seen.

That helped free me from myself, to be seen that way, "Oh, this is possible. And maybe I can see myself that way too." That was one of the invaluable things that happened on that first Vipassana retreat.

So, to be seen, stories of being seen. Maybe these kinds of stories are not often talked about in Vipassana because we're often giving instructions of how you can practice. But being seen, being in relationship, and being seen in ways that bring compassion, bring support, bring appreciation, bring affirmation, bring showing the possibility of freedom, which is what the first abbot I had in Thailand showed me, by the way that he gazed upon me.

So may you be gazed upon with love, be seen with love, but don't wait for others to do it. Be sure to do it for yourself. You can do it. I'm sure you can do it, and I'm sure you're worth it. I'm sure you're whole. I'm sure that it'd be wonderful for you to gaze upon yourself kindly, fully.

Thank you.