Tuesday Dharma talk

Gil Fronsdal

August 05, 2026

Keywords: Buddha, Zen, zazen, Dhamma, non-clinging, compassion, mindfulness, meditation, wholeness, suffering

---

One of the ways that I've appreciated understanding the path of practice is that it involves transformation, not transcendence. For me, that is a little bit of protection from some of the more transcendent ideas of what's supposed to happen in practice. Also, transcendent possibilities—what can happen in practice—that transcendence of this human life is not the point here. Rather, the transformation of it is the point, the transformation that begins with ourselves. So that how we are shifts.

What we are is one of these great mysteries, and I think one of the great gifts of this practice is first discovering, in a sense, who we are. Learning all about ourselves, knowing ourselves pretty well, maybe inside and out. But it's more important than that. At some point, leaving ourselves alone to be ourselves in ways that are not defined—that we'd rather actually not say.

The Buddha, when he was asked who he was or was going to let people know, sometimes answered in a way that probably would have irritated some people or confused some people. So imagine you go up to someone and say, "Look, what are you? You seem to be a spiritual teacher or something here. What are you? Or who are you?" And sometimes the Buddha said, "I am so. I am thus. I am such."

So the Buddha said, "I'm such." No definition. No explanation. No justification. No apology. No defensiveness. No assertiveness of any positions or place. He didn't add after his name all kinds of initials.

And, you know, sometimes we do people a tremendous service by explaining a little bit more than that, so that you know some little bit about what their experience is, what their knowledge is, what their training is, and how they can help. If you come to big spring retreats and someone asks you, "What are you? Or who are you?" and you just want to be helpful, you

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

say, “Well, I’m a trained medic. If there’s an issue, let me know. I’d like to help.” Functionally, pragmatically, that’s very helpful. Thank you for telling us.

If they just said, “I’m so,” it might have been very profound, but it wouldn’t have been helpful. But still, the Buddha said that. And there’s a way that it’s very profound for you to say that about yourself, where you don’t have to be anybody for anybody. Where you don’t have to have anything to limit you. You’re allowed to just be fully, completely yourself in your own being. There’s no one to tell you you can’t.

To have this freedom, so it’s a transformation. Though these words are always tricky. And how we get transformed in this practice is we get transformed by becoming whole. And what is the whole?

I’m fond of this analogy that there’s a rare tree deep in the forest. No one’s seen it; no one’s ever identified it. Then a botanist comes to the forest and sees this is a different tree, and looks at the leaves and looks at the bark. It looks like it has identifiable characteristics that are visible, and kind of puts it in some kind of family or genus and kind of gets a sense of what it is. And maybe because it’s never been named before, okay, this gives it the species name: the tree that is so. Maybe, or names it after themselves.

Somebody else comes to the forest, sees the tree, and looks at the beautiful flowers. They’re so nice. The bark is so soft. Wow! Grope up against it. The leaves are just shimmering in the light. This is so.

So the woodworker comes and sees it and studies the tree to identify what kind of wood it is and how easy it would be to cut it down. Could it be worked, and what kind of projects can be worked from it? And he’s really studying all the characteristics, you know—what kind of branches, can the branches work or the trunk work? He is trying to identify and perceive really well all the different parts of it and how they can be used for the craft.

Okay. Someone else comes to the forest, and it’s an unapologetic romantic, and they see the tree. And they say, “Look at that beautiful tree and the shade and the green grass underneath it. I mean, this is where to come with my sweetheart. And I can just imagine we’ll have a nice basket of food and we can have a nice blanket on the ground, and we’ll sit there and talk and be close and look at the flowers. And maybe I could put a flower in their hair, and this will be like the romantic holiday of the ages. Yeah, it’ll be great. Can’t wait.”

And because it was a long time before they come, the fantasy grows even more. What’s going to happen there? Maybe they even get divorced. Fantasies can take us all kinds of ways.

And then a painter comes to paint and sees, “Oh, this is a nice tree to paint.” And the painter

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

just loves to see a little detail up there of a tree and to put that detail on the paper. And he loves to paint. But what the person really loves is these very precise little moments of cognition, of clarity, of connection, of knowing, and translating that knowing onto the canvas. And something comes alive and present, and time disappears, and these all these little moments of cognition.

Each of these five people sees the tree in a different way. How does a tree see itself? Each of them sees different parts of the tree. The tree is not divided. The tree doesn't see a difference between one branch and another, leaves and branch, roots and trunk. It all works together in one large whole, undivided.

But the humans focus on particular things they're interested in and see the tree through the eyes of their particular interest. And some of them get attached to that. They only see it that way, and they insist that's all it is. These are ways in the Buddhist tradition that people get stuck in looking at themselves.

Some people are completely obsessed, involved with their appearance, their physical characteristics. And we have a country where a phenomenal amount of money is spent on adjusting physical appearance. Whether it's makeup or clothes or hair or plastic surgery or all kinds of things people do, people suffer because of their preoccupation with physical characteristics. It's a huge place of suffering, a huge place of attachment to be fixated on appearance, like the botanist who is only looking at appearances.

There are people who are obsessed with pleasure and pain, comfort and discomfort, and that's where their fixation is and preoccupation is. Everything is seen through that filter. Will this be pleasant? Will this be unpleasant? Will it be comfortable? Where's the pleasure here? Nothing else really matters.

There are people who get attached to their ideas, their concepts of things, like the woodworker, the craftsperson who is going in to look at all the little details to understand them. But there are opinions about things, opinions about what things mean, and people have lots and lots of ideas that we overlay on top of things, or filters through which we see things. So we do that to ourselves.

Probably some of you could fill in the sentence: "I lack X. I'm not good enough. Why? I am terrible. In this way, I'm terrible." Something like that. It's always something that people are maybe subpar or something.

So the ideas we have, where we get attached to certain concepts like professions, certain personalities, certain capacities we have—that it's not good enough or it's really good—I want

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

people to see me this way. I don't want people to see me this way. I'll hide it. So this whole idea of ideas and what's right and wrong—and what's there—are people who live in their stories, like the unapologetic romantic.

But sometimes it's not romance. Sometimes it's fighting the good cause, the war, or danger. But living in the fantasies, the stories. And sometimes it is that people get attached to cognition, attached to the fact that we're conscious. Somehow awareness is the thing.

All of these things are ways in which we're attached; we limit ourselves. The alternative is just to be so. This is what I mean by getting out of your own way. To not fixate in any of these things, not limit yourself in any of these ways, but give yourself unapologetic freedom.

At least when you're sitting meditating, at least when you're doing walking meditation in the woods, unfettered freedom to be yourself without definition, without attachment, without a need to prove yourself. Without being driven by compulsions, it's a phenomenally, phenomenally wonderful thing to just be so, be such. It's hard to do it because society often doesn't allow us to do that. You go to the block party and I say you tell the people there, "I'm so." Now they have a really good idea who—what—who you are, and now they don't even want to talk to you.

But can we do that for ourselves? Can we be the tree that is whole? It's not any piece of its parts that people want to have or orient toward. Can we just be the whole thing?

And I've found that the best place to do this is in meditation, because nothing's required of you. And if you're sitting still and not moving, you're not going to justify, "It's just my nature to punch you out. That's just the suchness of how it's what's coming through me." It's a little bit dangerous, this kind of letting yourself just be free that way. But to sit still in the middle of it and see it all, make room for all of it, including the compulsions, the desires, the fears, and begin to shed all that's extra.

To shed all, to see past or shed all these ideas and drives and attachments that we live with, that we think we need. And at times we did need them. Sometimes attachments are what keeps us alive. But here is a chance to do something very different and allow this vitality.

So when I was studying Zen in Japan at a monastery, I didn't understand much Japanese. I could do conversational Japanese, but the *Dhamma* talks I couldn't understand very well, or hardly at all. But one day, I think it was during meditation, the Zen master was giving a kind of a *Dhamma* talk. The Zen master said, "*Zazen wa bakatsu*."

That's me saying that in a much stronger, explosive voice. I don't want to shock you, because it's, "*Zazen wa bakatsu*." And so *zazen* is an explosion. Meditation is an explosion. I

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

don't want to affirm that statement, but what I like about it is that we tend to emphasize that meditation is quietude, is stillness, spaciousness, sometimes emptiness, deep calm.

In a way, all those things are true. But what I think is missed in that is that meditation is a time to get out of the way, to allow the deeper expressivity of beingness, of who you are, to course through you. Letting, for example, if you could let go of all your attachments, you'd still be alive. You'd still have feelings and thoughts, perceptions, sensations. But they would flow through you in a way that is a form of vitality, aliveness.

They would glow. They would radiate. They would just be. Being is not nothing.

When I first started meditating, I did it because I suffered, and I thought meditation would help me not suffer. So I had a good reason to do it, and I did it. I practiced very regularly, twice a day. And quite many years later, I realized that was an odd thing for a college student to do—twice a day for 40 minutes—an unusual thing, maybe. But I did it.

But after a while, I don't know how long, the suffering that got me to sit wasn't there anymore. And what was really strange was I continued to meditate twice a day as a college student, and I thought that was really strange. Why am I doing this? I no longer have a reason, and I just kept doing it. And I had this question: "Gil, this is really weird. You should have reasons to do things. Why are you—why do you keep sitting?"

And when I came to one point, I finally understood something that made some sense to me. That when I sat and meditated, I was expressing myself the way an artist would express themselves, or a dancer or a musician. There was, in sitting still, freedom to some inner movement of something that was relatively peaceful and calm. But there was an aliveness. There was a fullness. There was all of me that was there.

And in that fullness, all that was there, and the calm or the peace, you had a wonderful feeling of aliveness. Like this life was being expressed in a full, whole, complete way. And I didn't have to have any other reason to do it. Just like someone says, "Why do you sing?" "To express myself." Great. Give them the permission then.

Why do you paint? It's an expression. Dance, an expression. So it doesn't look like an art just to sit, but it felt like an expression. And then to discover and keep settling, keep—I kept, you know, going, meditating and meditating.

And there was not like a linear path to being better and better. It's a lot of suffering still that I had to go through. But that deep inner expressivity morphed at some point into compassion. Compassion that wasn't interested in—that was a surprise to me. And that became an orienting.

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

That itself became so important that I decided that was the central orienting principle for my life: to live a life of compassion. Not because it was an idea; it just felt that was the nature of it. As I kept practicing, other things started arising and being there as part of this deep expressivity of the wholeness, of the completeness, of the naturalness of just being alive.

That cannot happen if we stay attached. Cannot happen if we're attached to identity, attached to definition, attached to pleasure, attached to our ideas and stories, attached even to being conscious, attached even to being alive. So there's two things then that became important for me in this practice.

One was staying true to this deeper expressivity, this deeper flow that felt very wholesome. It just felt very—felt like medicine. This is good. And it became a reference point where I could see when I was losing it, when I departed from it, and that was so valuable to see.

Then I became my own teacher in the sense, "Oh, look at that." And there was no should, no overriding idea that I'm supposed to be in a particular way. But you put your hand on the hot stove, you remove it. It was kind of the same thing. If I departed from that kind of warm, peaceful, settled place, this seemed like the most obvious thing, the most natural thing, is to not continue going off away from it, not continue to put the hand on the stove, not continue with what's unwholesome, and come back here, be here.

The other thing that happened was, at some point, the difference between being attached and not attached became a very powerful reference point. The sense of what it's like to not cling, to not crave, became kind of almost like a living reference point there with yourself. And it just felt so good, so right, natural, to stay true to that.

And so I found myself then for many years having to deal with the lawyers of the mind, who kind of were saying, "Gil, you're supposed to be attached. You're supposed to want. You're supposed to get angrier. You're supposed to be alarmed. You're supposed to all kinds of things." And there were people around me who expected of me, expected me to have desires of a certain kind, expected me to have certain angers and alarms and distress. And so I had my inner lawyers telling me the same thing.

And so I had to look at that and look at that and listen to those lawyers, and they get their day in court too. And so it was actually a very important part of my practice. At some point, it was to look at all the inner voices, all the inner shoulds and ideas of what is right and what is wrong, and question them. And then slowly become free enough, free enough so that these primal reference points inside became the reference point for how to walk through life.

The reference point of this place that feels so wholesome, and knowing the difference when

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

it's not that way. The reference point of this kind of sense of living, sense of non-clinging. That just is so nice, so wonderful. It sounds like a nothing, right? You can't package and sell it very well.

Non-clinging. Can you start an IPO and get wealthy? Sell a non-clinging, you know, package. Just add water. And non-clinging—it might work. Not with water.

So I'll package non-clinging. Just add love. That's the magic. So I'll do underwell with my IPO, which is an insight practice opportunity. Which is what we're doing here.

We're very, like, up to date. We're just really with our culture here, participating in IPO. So when you go home and they ask you, "What were you doing?" "Oh, I was participating in an IPO." You get a lot of credit status, so just ahead of stuff.

So, with time in this practice—and this is maybe not this retreat—but with time, it's important to know that you start getting a reference point. That becomes a support for the practice, a reference point for support and how to live your life. It doesn't answer all the questions of what to do in your life, but it answers something more important. It answers how you are, how you are as you go through your life.

And how you are is you're not going to cling. How you are is you're going to stay close to that who you are as a whole human being. Not a divided or partial human being, a whole human being who's not willing to allow themselves to be limited, divided by themselves or by others. When we stay true to that wholeness, and we have a reference point of not clinging, non-clinging.

So the final thing I'll say today is, in some ways, this makes things very simple. Maybe not easy to stay true to this, but it's closely related in my life, at least, with a question that I ask myself often, kind of my practice question. And the question is: "Am I suffering?" And if I'm not, I carry on. And if I am, then I—

I said this once, and then someone gave it to me as a gift. I said my bumper sticker is, "I stop for suffering." So I take suffering seriously. I want to look at it, know it, be present for it, and that's an adventure. But in a sense, it's that simple: am I suffering or not?

And I'm happy not to suffer. What else has to happen? All kinds of things. But I'm not going to sacrifice my freedom. I'm not going to sacrifice my wholeness. I'm not going to sacrifice my non-clinging by clinging. I'm not going to sacrifice my non-suffering by suffering.

And it's a phenomenal reference point to navigate life with this kind of commitment, this kind of understanding, and see all the forces inside and outside that want to lead you in one

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

way or the other. And to grow steadily confident in non-clinging, in non-suffering. When everybody around you is saying you should cling, you should suffer. When everything that you have carries that message inside, kind of like, "I have to compromise myself. I have to do something. I have to protect myself. I have to, I have to cling. I have to suffer."

So in the early Buddhist tradition, then, the way that they talk about this reference point is different than how I talk about it. But they talk about having this reference point for how we navigate the world. And the way I translate this, the way I render these words, the *Pāli* words into English, is as independence, peace, and freedom.

So to have a visceral, personal experience of a certain kind of independence from being dependent on things for your happiness. To have that as a reference point: "I don't need it. My happiness doesn't have to be dependent." To have a reference point of peace that doesn't need anything. To become peaceful, the peace is here.

Can I practice peacefully? Can I practice without dependence on anything? And freedom, freedom from suffering, freedom from attachment. And so the reference point is now: can I practice that way?

So if your practice, like mindfulness or meditation, is based—the language they use in the old texts—it's based on these things. If your practice is based on these things, the quality of the practice changes dramatically. And how do you find that? You have to find it in yourself.

How do you find it in yourself? You have to start getting out of the way of yourself. You have to start allowing the express—the expression of life, what wants to surface and come—to make room for it to be there. And that might be messy at first until you kind of get things worked out and figure out what's really the best, most you.

So this is not quietude, but maybe, just maybe, it's like spring, and the seeds are germinating, the leaves are coming out, the animals are poking their heads out of hibernation. Spring has come, and life is coming, turning. Maybe sitting with the deep expressivity of who you are is more like you becoming spring. Wow!

Some of you have been through winter long enough. You're ready for spring, right here, sitting quietly with your eyes closed, feeling the immersion, emergent nature of the *Dhamma* in you. So I hope these words give you something as a reference or an inspiration of what's possible for you to find or to discover about yourself.

And sitting here quietly, what happens if you don't chase your thoughts anymore? What happens if you allow yourself to really quietly open up to feel what's here, to know what's here,

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

where the conversational mind has become quiet and the heart is open? It's an IPO. All that's needed is you add your love, and it all follows.

Oh. Thank you.

Transcript is machine generated and may contain errors.
Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International