

2020-10-25 Stories of My Zen Teacher, Mel Weitsman

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So that meditation was a little bit inspired by my Zen teacher, Mel Weitsman. And he's 91 years old. And after 53 years as the teacher, the abbot of the Berkeley Zen Center, yesterday, he stepped down from his role. And because of this, it is usually a public ceremony, it was a public ceremony, it was put on on zoom and YouTube. So I attended that way. And it was quite touching for me to be at my old teacher's stepping down, kind of retirement from his role that he has for so many years. And so that's really what's in my heart, my mind.

And so what I thought I would do this morning is talk a little bit about him. And for some of you, perhaps, that's interesting because you know he was my Zen teacher, formative teacher, for me. And very importantly, remains very important for me and remains a reference point for me in the Dharma. And maybe it's not always so visible, even by people who know him. But, you know, part of what I teach when I teach comes out of his teaching, and maybe more than his teaching, how he lived in the world. And so when I teach the Dharma, and my Dharma talks, my Dharma expression of the Dharma. It's kind of a little bit of a hybrid of my experience in Zen practice and with this teacher, Mel Weitsman, and also my Theravada practice, my Vipassana practice and the teachers I met in that tradition as well.

So hopefully this is interesting for you to hear a little bit about him. And maybe some of you will find it, as I said, interesting because of how it might reflect on me if you've been listening to me for some time.

So, Mel Weitsman, was a was born in 1929. And as a young adult, he was a artist kind of, my impression is a little bit of a starving artist living in the Bay Area. And he was a taxi driver. And that's how he supported himself. And then in 1964, he met Shunryū Suzuki, Suzuki Roshi and started

practicing with the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, the Japanese priest. And three years later, in 1967, Suzuki Roshi asked him to start or support a beginning of a small Zen center, starting with just a sitting group in Berkeley, California, across the bay. I think also that Mel maybe lived in Berkeley by that night. And so, they say they founded the Berkeley center together, and it was a small zendo in an attic in a two story Berkeley home and high up in the attic they converted to a zendo and first started sitting zen. Erelatively early I would sit there sometimes and for day long retreats and remember, you know, there the a frame roof we were underneath the rafters of the roof and a little bit dark and but kind of cozy up there in the attic. And Suzuki Roshi ordained him as a Zen priest in that attic and there's a photograph of that ceremony. It's kind of cozy, it's not like in a big temple, but in this attic with, you know, these angled sloped rafters above about them as they were doing the ceremony.

And so it kind of speaks to kind of different kind of Zen, not the formal, maybe monastic Zen of temples life in Japan, but something that in 1967 in Berkeley, was going to express a very different kind of ethos than. And there was a beautiful story that I read yesterday. So they were sitting there in the attic, meditating and a small group of people, and sometimes there are only one or two people would come and meditate with him. And but sometimes they were more and they would meditate early in the morning, and one day a police officer knocked on the door. And so Mel went to the door to answer and the police officer said that he was just checking on the house because it was early in the morning and all these lights were on it was everything okay. And they'll said yes. And he said, Well, I mean some time ago before you had this house, I was involved in coming into this house and searching the walls for drugs. And Mel said, Oh, well, we're here upstairs in the attic is a group of us meditating. And the police officer said, but can't you get there much faster by getting stoned? So imagine a police officer saying that. And Mel's response was, we're not going anywhere. Instead of getting somewhere fast through drugs, Mel says we're not going anywhere. And that kind of represents his zen, that it's not about attainment. It's not about getting somewhere, but rather about inhabiting the place you're at, enhabiting the location, the situation yourself, as you are now. And this idea of just isn't happening and being in it, without conceit, without seeing a problem was part of Mel's teaching. Just you there and fully there.

So I met Mel about 1976. I was 22 years old. And I was going to college at Davis, California, which is about maybe an hour, kind of northwest of Berkeley, maybe a little bit less and I was a college student there. And there was a sitting group and sitting group that met on Tuesdays and Thursday evenings in someone's little bedroom, extra bedroom. And I would go and meditate with them every day, those Tuesdays and Thursdays. And every once in a while they'd invite Mel up to do a half day retreat, which would end with lunch. And and that's how I met Mel. Mel would drive up from Berkeley, in his somewhat old, maybe 10 year old maybe 12 year old Volkswagen bug VW bug. And apparently he repaired it himself. Fix himself. And then he would do this half day stating and he would do a practice discussion, we would meet one on one with him and an extra bit another extra bedroom in this little apartment. And I remember the first time I had this formal meeting with him, I was so nervous that I couldn't speak. And the first thing that Mel told me in this kind of as a teacher was breathe deeply,

somehow, because I was so intimidated or nervous about this meeting. But what struck me about this person right away, that the first those first encounters in Davis, was something that many people have repeatedly said about him is that how ordinary he is. That there was something extraordinary in his ordinariness. And I think that what made it extraordinary was he wasn't trying to be anything or be anything special. He wasn't trying to assert himself or trying to. He wasn't trying to be a teacher, there was no sense of status that he was the teacher and other people were not. There wasn't any sense that he had some special privilege, place or role. In fact, he was always ready to wash dishes, he was always ready to clean up and take care of whatever needs to be done. Aside from whatever teaching role that he had. And this simplicity and ordinariness, if you saw him in supermarket, you wouldn't. You wouldn't think too much about him. It seemed like a nice man. But there was nothing that you know, that made him stand out to something someone special. And so he was the taxi driver, whatever that is. My wife usually thought of him as a who's, my wife is Jewish, would think of him as a nice Jewish deli owner. He would do on down the street to get deli sandwiches from him.

And then I had, I went to live at San Francisco Zen center, and eventually go to the monastery of Tassajara and had some contact with him. Not a lot. But I remember once walking, running into him at Tassajara this monastery I'd been living there for a couple of years, and we kind of cross paths and I just without any premeditation. As we pass each other I told him that I had become a response machine. And this idea of being response machine in retrospect was probably a pretty, you know, not a very inspiring statement to make. But just in the moment, that's kind of what came out of my mouth. But what I was trying to say was that what I'd become very happily in this sense of a sense of freedom would become was that I now lived in this world, responding to things as they came along. And that sense of response is using the word machine was that it was somehow natural, automatic, little bit spontaneous, that there was this kind of way of just being responsive, that felt they could welled up from someplace deep inside, that was very different than how I had known how to live before that, where before that it was about the ego about me and myself and mine, about the fear, which was a big part of my life early in early adulthood. But it was just, there was some deeper sense of welling up of connection. And if the something needed to be cleaned, if the path needed to be swept, then the movement of sweep came up from our inside of me. And this was such a special feeling for me. And I was discovering living in the monastery meditating a lot, that I just shared it there with him, and he smiled.

The next big encounter I had with Mel that made an impression on me was in 1983. That's when the abbot of San Francisco Zen Center at that time, was not Mel it was someone else. And that person had a scandal. He had been sleeping with some students. He had been maybe misappropriating, misusing his authority, his power over the students. And so it all came to a head. And I was, you know, I can imagine it was came, it was a, you know, it was a big place San Francisco Zen center, and many people had devoted their lives there. So it came as a big shock to the community. And it was very devastating for many people. And when I heard about this, when this scandal broke, the first thing I did was I went over to Berkeley to talk to Mel. Mel had been part of San Francisco Zen Center almost

from the beginning. And I thought he would have some wisdom and just I would talk to him and check in with him about it. And I wasn't particularly alarmed or disturbed by all that it wasn't like personally shattered by the abbot scandal, but I was concerned enough, I wanted to go talk to Mel. And what I remember that conversation was very important for me. What do you say? One of the things he said was he was on the board that time of the San Francisco Zen center. And before Suzuki Roshi died, that he made the successor, the next person, the abbot, the terms of office for board members was for life. And so he was a life member of the board. And he could see that something was wrong with how the abbot was conducting himself, he didn't know about the sexual scandals, but the way he was using authority and the way he was holding himself, and there was something not quite right. And Mel, couldn't really say anything. If he did, it didn't really go anywhere, because most people were supporting the new abbot. And for 12 years, he just thought, okay, I'll just stay here, this will have to come to a head at some point. And I'll just patiently wait until it comes to head and then I'll support and help what has to happen next.

And this idea of having a long term view like that, of realizing that there's nothing I can do, but I will stay here and hang in there until something changes and then I'm here to support it and help it and that it did so when that abbot eventually resigned. And Mel was there and the edges kind of supporting people, supporting zen center until 1988, 87, 88 he started teaching more and more at San Francisco Zen Center in 88 he become became the co-Abbot of Zen center. And by that time I was living at Green Gulch Zen center, I was talking to the manager of the meditation hall. So I had a lot of contact with him as the abbot there. And it was lovely to have this contact with him and be in communication with him. And one of the big lessons I received from him then, which maybe doesn't sound so big, but the implications were, you know, huge if you understand it. In Zen you eat in the meditation hall in a very formal way. You in a choreographed way you sit in meditation posture, there's a wooden kind of plank in front of you where you have three bowls. Or if you're a priest, you have more bowls, you have like five bowls. And servers come and serve you food, food in the meditation hall put food in the three bowls. And you bow a lot. And then before you eat, you chant. When you finish your chant. And so you eat in silence, but the room full of people in this formal way with three bowls. So I got into the idea to eat without any desire. Just to eat, to eat, to eat efficiently. So I just decided that the most efficient desireless way to eat was to pick up the first bowl with them had the most food, like the rice in it, and just eat it all. Finish, put it down, take the second bowl, eat it all finish, put it down at the third bowl finish and put it down. And just I was just kind of just going through like that. And but Abbott Mel sat next to me. And the meditation hall saw what I was doing. At some point, he said to me Gil, when you eat, just eat naturally, that's all he said. And I realized that the way I was eating was kind of unnatural, just eat all one all second on, you know, dish and the third dish. And so then I just kind of sat down to eat. And I saw that kind of independent of desires, there seems to be an intuitive feeling for take a few bites of this, a few bites of this, a few bites of this and kind of go back and forth. And maybe mix it up in the belly or in the mouth or something. And this kind of more intuitive way of eating, just kind of doing what's more natural, and what the system inside maybe the tongue, the belly, who knows what's operating that, that pulls us towards different food that way actually had a lot more ease than the kind

of ease ahead of just being efficient and beating all at one another. And this idea of just doing things in a more natural way and not making any big thing and not being driven by desire but not avoiding some deeper intuitive desire or intuition about how to do things and what to do. And it was nice being when he was you know. When I was living at Green Gulch, and he was abbot kind of this first year or so that he was Abbot of Zen center, that he It was quite something he would come in, I would often work in the garden and there was a farm there, I'd work in the farm. And he would often come and work with us in the farm, I remember memories of him coming into the greenhouse, and we were preparing seedlings for lettuce seedlings to plant in the in fields. And he would always kind of work with people. The idea that he would work, he would work with people, and not always be off being the abbot or be off being the teacher separate and status. But he'd be in the fields working with us or in the kitchen, washing dishes with us. And the idea of with working with people was part of what he taught quite how he was. And the idea that he said that during that time, he was Abbot of San Francisco Zen center, and the abbot of the Berkeley Zen center, and Zen center had three temples, and he would do the circuit to take care of all these people, all these temples, you know, and it was quite a big job.

But what he said was that, you know, back then the Zen center had an explosion with the abbot scandal to kind of figure out how many people left trying to figure out what to do next financially and all kinds of things. And he was there he was being the supportive Abbot. And he said that during that time, he never related to Zen center, as if there was ever, ever a problem, there was no problems. There was just something to address when it needed to be addressed. And so he'd wake up in the morning and he would not see a problem. And he would get up and then someone would come to him with something to be addressed. And he would address it and and take care of what needed to be taken care of whether it was washing dishes or talking about fundraising or talking about institutional issues of the Zen center as a whole. All these people who live there, there were probably I don't know 150 people who lived at Zen Center at that time. And this way of conducting himself where he didn't live as if there was a problem, but he lived as if there was really something to fully be present for and meet to really meet the situation and be present and and find your way and do what needed to be done. But without seeing as a problem and without any sense of hurry, without any sense of, of crisis without any sense of hesitation as well, just just here he was. And as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world to do and take care of. A few years later, we, where he and I were walking down the streets of San Francisco just going for a walk talking about things. And he asked me this question, which kind of came out of the blue. And but he asked me, How do you feel about me? Or how do you see me? What's your relationship to me? And I said, told him, that I trusted him implicitly, I had complete trust in him as a person. However, I didn't always feel aligned with his Dharma, with how he taught. And, so it's a little bit strange, especially a Zen teacher, who is my teacher, you know, to say that say, you know, you, I think your trust you but not necessarily what you what you have to teach, your Buddhism that your teach. And, and his response was so powerful. So you're walking down the road, you know, side by side, and I said, this statement. And when I said, I don't always, you know, trust or feel aligned with your Dharma, your teaching, he immediately pivot in front of me, stood in front of me, and brought his hands together, like this, and said, and that's where we'll meet, rather than

being upset. But you know, that maybe it was disrespectful to say, I didn't really trust his Dharma, or how he what he was teaching. He was almost like delighted by this. And for him, this was a meeting place, you meet whatever is there, you don't make it a problem, but you meet it. And then later, he asked me if I wanted to start training with him to receive Dharma transmission, to become a Zen teacher. And I felt, you know, I felt a little bit, I don't know, maybe shy, or I forget exactly how I was feeling about it. And I said, well, let's not talk about that. But let me start coming over to see you regularly, and I'll study with you. And then for the next three or four years, I'd go over to Berkeley most weeks, and meet with him in his office. And we would study Buddhist texts together, we would discuss the Dharma together and there's a lot of personal time together, sometimes he'd make me lunch. And, we would, and I would ask him a lot of questions about himself, but how he lived his life and because I felt that was how he lived and who he was, was really important for me try to understand better. And that was his teaching was not so much the texts that were studying, but who he was and how he was. And I was probably a little bit forward and that probing asking fun. Who is this guy? Who is this? Who are you and asking all kinds of questions, and, and he always very, like he would meet anything like he would. Next thing to do is to wash your dishes. Next thing to do is to add circles questions.

And then, it seems like after a few years, it was kind of evolving without the thing being said, in the direction that I would become, do this Dharma transmission that I would do this become a formal Zen teacher. And but then this speed bump happened. And that is that I had another Zen teacher as well at Zen center kind of before that, who I felt somewhat close to. And that teacher came to me and said, Well, what about me? What about doing Dharma transmission with me? So I don't know. And so I went back to Mel and told them about this other teacher. And this was a rather unusual situation to be in. And Mel just kind of completely relaxed. And he said, Well, we'll just, we'll take our time, and we'll keep meeting and you tell me what to do or what's happening and so they did was I started seeing the other Zen teacher as well and kind of figure out my relationship there. But what happened was, I never went to see him. And after a while, I realized that without any decision being made, a decision had been made that I was clearly I since I wasn't going to see him. It wasn't really in the cards for me to continue studying with that teacher. So then I went. So then Mel and I continued, and then in 1995, I received Dharma transmission from him. But the little kind of unusual thing about that was that I already the early 1990s, at 1994. So gone through teacher training as a personal teacher, with Jack Kornfield. So I was kind of like doing this double major of becoming a Zen teacher and to be a vipassana teacher at the same time. And Mel knew that and he was completely fine with it. And then when I went through the Dharma transmission ceremony and finished it, and I was authorized as a Zen teacher, he explicitly came over to me and said, You know, I'm very happy to have done this Dharma transmission for you. And you should know that I have no expectations on you, you're free. And that was a big thing for him to say. He knew I was a Vipassana teacher by that time, I was already had IMC in Palo Alto, teaching there. And Zen is kind of a big thing, because Dharma transmission is not just an authorization, there's kind of an idea that the Dharma, the teachings, the the freedom of the Dharma is being transmitted from the teacher to you, and you become the carrier of it, you become a carrier of the lineage, the Zen lineage, that particular Zen lineage, that of Suzuki Roshi, who was Mel's teacher.

And you have now a responsibility in that lineage to carry it on and pass it on to the next generation. And so that's kind of in the, in the part of the understanding, but he offered me the Dharma transmission without that being requirement, just here, I just want you and there's no expectation, and I know that you're a Vipassana teacher as well. And I'm very happy to see how your life and your teaching evolves from there. So that was quite touching, for me. Also, that this kind of sense of generosity and acceptance of me as I was, and that's what a lot of people have felt about Mel that often human, very accepting of people, and just there and he's there to meet you. And he didn't seem to make much distinction between, you know, the, the in crowd and the out crowd, them and us. He was just with whatever was happening at the time being with the people who was he was with, with the situation he was with. And it's most like this, whatever the situation he's in, that was the teaching that I was a teacher. And one of the very important teachings of Mel, and I think of Soto zen, and has come to me, is the importance of practice. That practice is really the teacher practice is the center. And we all share the practice, rather than the teacher being at the center. And everyone shares a teacher, everyone, including the teacher is sharing the practice, and we're all doing the practice together. And we're all engaged in it.

And the practice is not something that's limited to meditation practice, or the study of the Dharma, the practices, how we wash the dishes, or how we sweep the house, or how we meet people who may be very different from ourselves and how we meet people who anybody that we come across, that the Dharma is found, the practice is in that meeting. That's where we'll meet. And whether it's a person or a thing, the kind of the question, the Zen question is, what's being requested of me, in any situation, what's being requested at me. So if you have something like I have this striker here and you don't treat the striker and Zen is just an inanimate thing that's just there to use for some purpose, and then you put it down and don't care anymore. That is, since this is what you're meeting right now and what you're holding, you would respect it and you would look into what's the request of the situation here when I put it down? And then you would put it down in a place where just seems to be at harmony with the situation? And what's the request where where this striker gets put down. And in harmony here with this, and whatever we're doing, what's the request or the situation? What's the request of this person I'm with this person wants my attention, this person has a need. And so it's kind of stepping out of our self centeredness and their self specialness, for the sake of being in harmony with the situation, but not to sacrifice ourselves and not to diminish ourselves, but in a sense, as an expression of our freedom of really being ourselves. And so one of the one of the things that Mel told me at some point, he said, You know in terms of I started being a teacher. He said, it's the student that makes the teacher. And that was very freeing, because I'm just skill going about my life and taking care of things in a certain way. And my allowed to be myself, but when a student comes, some practitioner comes to ask me a question or relate to me that in the role of a teacher, then I'm a teacher, they've made me a teacher. But otherwise, you know, in response to the situation, they request situation, I'm a teacher, but that's, you know, not really who I am. And when that's over, then the next thing I do is maybe I'm sweeping the hallway, or that I'm a sweeper, or the next thing I'm doing is involved with administrative work for IMC, and then I'm an administrator. So whatever we're doing, kind of defines what we are, but

in a way that we inhabit, with all of who we are. So it is who we are. It's not like we're different or sacrificing who we are. We meet it fully with all we are in that request of the situation. So this wonderful teacher, Mel Weitsman, it was very touching to see him yesterday stepping down, he has something like pancreatic cancer and so he's already quite thin and walking into the zendo, he had to carry, walk with a staff to hold himself up and it was quite moving to see you know, he you know, he sits up on a platter teaching platform. And he was too weak to pull himself up onto the platform to people that that kind of help him up and sit up in there. And then he get once he's on board, once he was sitting there, kind of ready to sit through really, you know, been put up on this cushion. Then he did what he's done many times before. He pulled this, he pulled his feet into full lotus. And then he sat there for the next hour, an hour and a half. Sometimes a little bit in tears, talking about his life and apologizing for any any harm or hurt that he's caused in his years as an Abbot and talking about his experience there and so to see my old teacher being frail. And we don't know how much longer he has to live, but even here stepping down from the his Dharma seat as abbot. He was just there and inhabiting that situation, meeting that situation. And then he stepped down and went home.

I hope that was nice for you to hear and I appreciate the opportunity to be able to offer a little bit of what's very big in my heart right today after yesterday and a little bit of my my own kind of Dharma connection and my own teacher that I had in Zen and he remains very important for me. And, and maybe through me Maybe he has some importance for you as well. So thank you and and look forward to next time.