

Gil's Story (3 of 5) In Pursuit of Integrity

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Keyword Summary

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Hello. Today I will continue with the third part of my story about my Buddhist practice.

I had just been introduced to Zen practice and was very attracted to it. I decided to return to Norway to come to terms with my relationship with my home country. I hadn't lived there for many years while growing up, but I had gone back frequently.

When I got back to Norway, I had many different adventures. In the fall of 1974, I worked on the docks in Bergen, loading and unloading small cargo boats.

There were very few Buddhists at the time in Norway, but I made a wonderful discovery. My girlfriend at the time knew of one famous Buddhist. I am not sure how famous he was, but my girlfriend knew about him because he lived near where she grew up. He lived as a Buddhist hermit high up in the mountains. He lived in the coldest part of Norway.

I climbed up the mountain to visit him for two weeks in the middle of January. He lived in a small cabin. This was probably the closest thing in my life to the cartoon idea of going into the Himalayas to find a wise person high up in a cave. I spent two weeks with him, which was fascinating. I spent the mornings skiing by myself in the high country and the afternoons having long conversations with him.

I stayed for about a year in Norway. An important thing that happened was that for the following six months, I lived on a small farm in southern Norway with a wonderful couple. They took me in and included me in their family and farming life. I loved the life there. I loved getting up in the morning to care for the cows and the farm. It was a lovely lifestyle for me – so much so that I decided I wanted to be a farmer in Norway.

In the course of that time, my friends left for a week's vacation. I stayed to take care of the farm and the cows. It was the first time in my life that I had been alone for that length of time. The only person I saw for that week was the mail carrier. He would come walking up the road, and I could see him from a distance. The farm was at the end of a dirt road. Otherwise, I didn't see anyone.

During that week, I wasn't meditating, I was just living alone. But daily life became a kind of heightened meditation, with heightened awareness. Without social contact, just being alone, I became acutely aware of my surroundings. Everything started to sparkle. Everything seemed to be brighter than usual. I was delighted at how beautiful everything was.

I also became more acutely aware of my thoughts than I ever had before. They had a kind of sparkle. I don't know if they were particularly good thoughts, but everything had a clarity. The sense of awareness in the present moment became very clear. It felt so satisfying to be alive and to be there. Later I felt it was as if I was on a meditation retreat but without meditating.

When my friends came back, that sense of clarity and peace went away. I felt the loss of that. I didn't decide to become a hermit, but I now had a quest. I worded the quest as, "How can I be alone with others? How can I have this intimacy, this peace, this clarity, this sense of being awake with other people?" That became my spiritual quest. It was the question that I started to explore and think about.

The other thing that happened on the farm was that I started to meditate each morning before going to breakfast. It quickly became clear that going to breakfast, feeling very peaceful and calm, not feeling the need to say anything and just being present in a relaxed, silent way, didn't work for the friendship with the couple.

It felt awkward to be there in this new way of being that I now knew. They expected the old Gil to be there and to interact in my usual way at breakfast. I decided that I either had to stop meditating or I had to lose my friends. I decided to stop meditating for the duration of my time living there.

I also decided that I wanted to become a small farmer in Norway. To do that in Norway you had to go to a vocational school to be trained as a farmer. Only then could you buy a farm. I realized that I only had two more years to get a degree from the University of California. If I went to the University of California at Davis, which was one of the premier agricultural schools in the world, I would fulfill the requirement for buying a farm in Norway. I would also have excellent training. It wouldn't just be a vocational school. If at some point in the future, I wanted to do something else with that degree, I could do that.

I also wanted to be close to the San Francisco Zen Center. Davis was about an hour and a half drive from San Francisco. I went back to finish school at UC Davis and got a degree in agronomy.

When I got back to Davis, I immediately began to meditate twice a day. I followed the same schedule that they followed at the San Francisco Zen Center. This was two forty-minute periods a day of Zen meditation. There was one in the morning and one before going to bed, but never on Sunday. At the San Francisco Zen Center, they never meditated on Sunday. It was their day off. I figured that was the way to do it.

There was a small Zen sitting group in Davis. I sat with them twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday evenings.

It was clear that I started meditating that fall because I was suffering. Part of my suffering was that I was very lonely, and part of it was other issues that I was dealing with. The primary reason I started meditating regularly was I thought that meditation would help me deal with my suffering, my anxiety, my loneliness, and all kinds of things that I was feeling.

I started meditating every day. After some months a very strange thing happened to me. The surface suffering that I was trying to address faded away. This might have been from the meditation, or maybe because I got busy with school, and I had some friends. I noticed that while the suffering or the reason I meditated had faded or disappeared, I still meditated.

I found that it was very strange that I would continue twice-a-day meditation without the reasons I had before. I could not come up with any other reasons to meditate. I am a rational person and I wanted to have reasons for why I did things. I found it strange that I kept meditating for no reason, but this is what I did.

I kept meditating and wondering, why am I doing this? At some point, I realized that I was meditating for the same reason that a dancer dances, an artist paints, or a musician plays a musical instrument. For me, meditation was a form of self-expression, like an artistic expression. It was a very deep way of expressing something that I didn't even know was there. There was something deep inside that I could characterize as peace or calm. There was a sense of aliveness that had such goodness in it. I was more alive in meditation than at any other time in my life. It felt so right.

The keyword that I used to characterize how I felt was "integrity." I didn't feel that the word "integrity" was connected to ethics. It wasn't an ethical integrity that I felt. It was closer to a sense of wholeness. The integrity was a sense of being one or full as if all of me was there.

Experiencing that integrity then became the purpose of meditation. The purpose wasn't some big goal of enlightenment in the future – it was to sit down and be in that integrity and wholeness. It was to experience the expressivity of meditation itself.

I didn't know much about meditation. Luckily, I didn't have the idea that I was supposed to stop thinking, so I wasn't burdened with that idea. My thinking mind kind of continued, but there was a deeper wellspring of something happening.

At some point during those two years at Davis, I began to ask myself why I only felt this integrity when I was meditating. I thought, "It is the same mind in meditation as outside of meditation. Why can't I have the same integrity outside?" Now my quest became one of learning to extend this integrity, to live with this integrity in my daily life outside of meditation.

I continued meditating, but now the meditation had a second purpose. Meditation set the stage and gave me a familiarity with this way of being. I wanted to discover how to be this way in daily life as well.

When I graduated from Davis, I didn't go back to Norway to become a farmer. By this time, I had been going to the Zen Center throughout those two years in Davis. I went there to practice and do day-long retreats and other things. When I finished my degree, I decided I would move closer to the Zen Center to practice there.

Part of the reason I went there was that when I visited the Zen Center, a remarkable thing would happen. When I would talk to the more senior Zen practitioners, they were mirrors for me. I saw myself better. I saw that I was playing social games. I was trying to impress people. I was trying to show them what a great person I was. I had an image of myself that I wanted to replicate so they would see me through that idea of who I should be.

There were all kinds of social games that I got away with my friends. My friends did the same. It seemed we expected it of each other. We just went merrily along.

At the Zen Center, there was no response to those games from the senior practitioners. I didn't feel like they were cold. I just felt that, of course, they were not going to respond to something like that. This allowed me to see myself much better, and I thought, "This is really good. This idea of trying to bring that integrity into my daily life and to live with people who will mirror me in this way will be a big help."

When I moved, I first lived in an apartment near the San Francisco Zen Center. The motivation was not to meditate more but to find a better way to integrate what I was experiencing in meditation into my daily life. Because of that, I meditated even more. I would go to the Zen Center and meditate with them. That was the beginning of becoming a deeper Zen student.

I lived in the neighborhood near the Zen Center for about eight months. Then I went on a week-long retreat at their farm, the Green Gulch Zen Center. I hadn't visited there before, but now I had discovered a farm! I thought, "Wow, this would allow me to bring together the things I love – my farming and Zen practice." In April of 1979, I moved to Green Gulch to live there and practice. That was the beginning of my residential monastic life.

I will continue with that tomorrow.
Thank you.