

Dharmette: Gil Stories (1 of 5) Pre-Buddhism

Gil Fronsdal

October 12, 2026

Keywords: Buddhist practice, Zen meditation, Transcendental Meditation, Mont Saint-Michel, monastic life, atheism, honesty, LSD, Shunryū Suzuki Rōshi, Zen My Beginner's Mind

So hello, my friends, and welcome to Monday—the beginning of a new series. Some of you might know that I've been teaching a lot the last couple of months. The month-long in September was teaching almost every day. And in this last week, I was teaching up in the Sierras for eco-chaplaincy retreats. So I feel like I've been teaching a lot.

So the idea of sitting here and teaching something Buddhist, like I usually do, doesn't quite seem to be in my heart. Not quite something that I like to live when I teach. And so I'm kind of full of doing teaching for the moment, or empty of doing teachings. So hopefully, if it's okay for you all, I'd like to do something that's easy for me, and that is to tell you some stories, some practice stories, some of that practice background.

And I'll do a little bit chronologically over the week. So today, I thought I would start with kind of how I, kind of a little bit, the background that I think about when I think about coming into Buddhist practice. And it won't be the full background, but what's kind of alive for me is not all the challenges that brought me, but rather all the goodness that brought me. The different ways in which I tapped into something healthy and good and supportive.

Sometimes, without knowing it even until later, I don't know if it set my course in the direction of Buddhist practice, but certainly by the time I encountered Buddhism, this was part of the support system inside of me that helped me with the struggles of the early years of practice and suffering, the difficulties I had. There was also this amazing support within, of maybe how I was prepared for it. So when I think back about that support system, I think about how I was born in Norway to Norwegian parents. And Norwegians, well, are known for being seafaring folks. So the Vikings are maybe some kind of representation of that.

So I spent a lot of time growing up, and early in life, on the water, in the fjords in Norway and different places in the world on water. And there was something about being on the water, especially early in the morning, before the wind started up, when the water was completely still and quiet. Being up on the deck of a boat and sitting there quietly and just feeling the stillness and the peace, then everything was good in the world. Somehow, I kind of ingested, took in, some of that peace and stillness, and I think it shaped me in some degrees or became a reference for me.

Another, very different kind of reference for peace happened when I was 18, and I was driving alone around Europe and meeting people, picking people up, and sleeping in hostels, sleeping in parks, sleeping in the woods, sleeping here and there. I didn't have much money, and I came to Mont Saint-Michel. It's a kind of big Catholic monastery cathedral on this little island off the coast of Normandy, in northwest France, where there's a big tide difference. So, when the high tide is in, except for a bridge kind of going into the island, it's an island. And when the tide goes out, it's kind of mud all the way out to the island.

And it looks a little bit like a Disney castle. You're driving along, and it suddenly appears up on this sort of high mound island, little island, and then this cathedral-like spire comes up out of the middle. And I went there and looked for a place to stay. In this town back then, they had a small little hole-in-the-wall Catholic hostel by Pax, some kind of organization called Pax—Pax for Peace. And there was a single priest in there who kind of took care of it.

I don't know how many people could stay there—six, eight, or something—and we'd have meals around this big wooden table with the priest. And at some point, he took me for a walk, and we had a wonderful talk. It was the first time I talked in my life with a priest. And then I walked by myself to have a tour of the whole monastery with a group of other people. They took us into the top of the hill around which this huge cathedral was built, or chapel, or monastery.

There was the original one-room stone chapel that had been built maybe a thousand years before or more. And as we walked into that chapel, something inside of me just got settled and peaceful. It was almost like I stepped into a presence of peace that I'd never experienced before. And I tried to linger in that room as long as I could, in that chapel, as the group was leaving, just again to take in this phenomenal capacity for peace and well-being. And that became a reference point for me.

And maybe part of the reason I started having thoughts about becoming a Catholic monk. And I wondered if they'd take me as an atheist. There was something about just that life and that feeling in that life that became very attractive for me. And then, over the next year, back

in college, I got initiated into *Transcendental Meditation*, and I really liked it. But mostly, it made me calm.

It wasn't like a profound thing to do, but I loved the calm, and that was good for about two months. And then there was summer vacation, and I just kind of forgot about it. But the summer vacation was back on a boat, and I sailed across the Atlantic on a small sailboat. I was a crew, and I got on the boat on the island of Malta, in the middle of the Mediterranean, and sailed to Barbados in the Caribbean. And it was a wonderful trip.

We made almost a record time because somehow we were delayed, and we were sailing during the hurricane season. We didn't encounter any hurricanes ourselves, but it meant the wind was actually quite good. And there was something about being on the boat hour after hour, say six hours a day on the helm, two-hour shifts, staying up in the middle of the night, two to four—the only person on deck. Stars, amazing stars in the middle of the Atlantic. Amazing sense of harmony, amazing sense of peace.

But the thing that happened on that sailing trip that made a big difference when, about a year later, I started doing Zen practice is I had decided at the beginning of the trip that it was fine to have a fantasy life. I didn't have to censor it, whatever was going on in my mind. But when I was standing there at the helm for two hours, that was a time to let my mind wander. But every half a second, almost, you had to be tending to the boat, adjusting the rudder slightly, tracking the sails, looking at the compass, understanding the waves that were coming.

We had to kind of navigate. The waves were big waves, so you had to be aware of what was happening all the time. And this combination of allowing myself the freedom to fantasize and to think, but every half second or so, every second, being grounded in the present, I think it was really freeing for me. And by the end of this trip across the Atlantic, I was kind of living at a kind of ecstasy, kind of a joy. And it just taught me so much about how to be present.

So when I came to start doing Zen meditation, I kind of had the same idea: to give freedom to my mind, not to try to control my thoughts, but at the same time, just keep, every half second, keeping here, keeping here with the breath. And then I wouldn't wander off in thoughts. But I also didn't try to control my thoughts. I didn't try to stop my thoughts. And that combination was very meaningful for me and gave me a sense of how to do Zen, because there was so little.

We were told to be with the breath, but more than that, there was not much else being taught. But the one thing more that happened before I came to Zen Center and started my Buddhist practice also changed me quite a bit. As I mentioned earlier, I grew up an atheist. And even

though I was kind of attracted to monastic life, I didn't like religion. I didn't trust it, and certainly didn't want to consider myself religious.

So I don't know if you could be a monk and not be religious, let alone an atheist. But I wasn't interested in spirituality. The word "spiritual" wasn't a word I was going to utter. And so then I was traveling across the United States. Well, I had dropped out of college by then and was traveling around the United States.

And I somehow ended up on the largest commune in the United States back then, a place called the Farm. There were about seven, eight hundred people there, mostly hippies living there. And before I got there, they had taken a lot of LSD. That was kind of the religious sacrament. But they were living in Tennessee, on a farm they bought.

The leaders of the organization, the commune, had been arrested for marijuana use, and they realized they couldn't be using drugs anymore in Tennessee. So they decided to use this—the next best thing, the next best—I don't want to call it a drug—but the next best sacrament to LSD, and that was honesty. And so, when I got there, I was blown away to be around people who had such expertise in being honest. How quickly they talked about tension! How much they worked on trying to find a way through and resolve the conflicts, the tensions that existed there, in a way that they were all trying to be honest with what was going on.

And I was so inspired by this. But they considered themselves spiritual. And I said, "Well, if this is what spiritual is, I'm into this. I want to. That's this. This is really good." And at the Farm, the Bible of the Farm—all, just about everyone, was reading it—was the book *Zen My Beginner's Mind* by the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, Shunryū Suzuki Rōshi.

And that book spoke to me. I was so surprised to read it and feel and just get a sense that I understood what was being said. Not only to understand it, but the book was mirroring back to me things that I already knew but didn't know I knew. That was the feeling. Wow! I know this, but I didn't know.

And I was so inspired by this, and the book had a lot to do with somehow sitting Zen meditation as a part of the book. So when I left the Farm in Tennessee, one of the first places I then went to check out was the San Francisco Zen Center because of that book and how much it had moved me to be there. And that's when I kind of began my Buddhist practice, first haltingly, and then some years later, consistently until the present. So hopefully that's nice for you to hear, and certainly we'll continue this journey over this week.

And hopefully it's nice for you to hear this background around me, and it also gives me a little bit of a break from the usual kind of teaching. Thank you.