

Dhamette: Gil's Stories (2 of 5) Edging Toward Buddhism

Gil Fronsdal

October 13, 2026

Keywords: Dharma, Zen practice, San Francisco Zen Center, Buddhism, Buddha, swami, World War II, Einar Bjørn, Norway

So hello from the Insight Meditation Center. This week, I'm going to continue talking about my stories from my practice life and, yes, do it a little bit in a chronological way.

So yesterday, I brought myself up to when I learned about San Francisco Zen Center, and so I went there first. I think I was hitchhiking into Northern California to meet up with a college friend. I stayed at her house and went over to San Francisco Zen Center a couple of times, maybe over a weekend, and got a sense of what was there, what was possible. I remember receiving Zen meditation instructions early in the morning, staying for the *Dharma* talk, and hearing the abbot there for the first time. And I thought this was quite interesting and decided I wanted to go back.

But I then went hitchhiking with my friend into Northern California, up to Oregon, visiting communes that existed there. This must have been 1975. We stayed at different communes. We stayed in one in Oregon, maybe a place close to Cave Junction called the Meadows. It was a very, very simple life that we lived there on the land.

My friend and I had this beautiful little kind of hobbit hut, with a loft with a bed, right on the edge of a beautiful grove of cedar trees. It was kind of magical to be there, like a fairy tale. Eventually, I wrote to Seven Springs Zen Center to ask if I could come back and be a guest student, be there for two weeks. I went back and continued there, meditating with them, living that life.

And to this day, I remember what it was like to sit in the meditation hall there. It was kind of in the basement, very quiet, very peaceful, with the noise of the city kind of around, just outside the walls. There was kind of this amazing juxtaposition of the noise outside and the silence inside. It certainly was challenging for me to sit there, but mostly that was physical at that time.

But there was something about that experience of peace, something about the experience of wholeness, of being connected to myself in a fuller way, that reminded me of sailing that I had done just a little while before that, across the Atlantic. I was really taken by the life there. So after two weeks, I decided I wanted to come back to Zen Center to be more actively involved.

But I had this idea that I wasn't ready at that point. I was twenty years old and about to turn twenty-one. I decided that I had dropped out of college. So I decided I had to take care of a few things before going to do Zen practice. One of those things was to go back to the country where I was born, Norway, to see what my relationship to that country was, kind of figure something out there.

I went back, and it almost took me in a different direction because I went to live and work with two wonderful friends on their small farm in southern Norway. I loved that lifestyle. One of the important experiences there was that, because I was there taking care of the cows, they could take a vacation for the first time in a while. So I spent a week alone on the farm with five cows, milking them, caring for them, taking them out to pasture, and caring for the farm.

It was the first time in my life that I had been alone for seven days, and I just saw one person, the mail carrier, in the distance one of those days. The farm was at the end of a road up that kind of valley, so no one came by. Every day, day by day, my mind got clear. I didn't stop thinking, but my thinking—each thought, no matter whether good or bad in some ways—sparkled.

I remember the kitchen. The things in the kitchen sparkled. I felt such an intimacy with myself, being alone that way and just settling in and not dealing with the social dynamics, I guess. And then, when my friends returned, I kind of lost that. And I said, “Wow, this is quite something.”

I decided that my task was to learn how to be alone with others. And what I meant by that—that intimacy, that sparkle, that way of being—I wanted. I didn't want to be a hermit, so I had to learn how to do this with people. That became kind of the question, a guide for my practice, my direction for my life for the next few years: how to be alone together with others.

And here, alone was not lonely at all. It was this kind of intimacy and presence and peace that I felt before. Kind of interesting, kind of fun, I guess.

Before I went to the farm, I was kind of looking to see what was available in Buddhism in Norway in 1974–75. I guess it would have been 1975–76. I had a girlfriend there from northern Norway, and she said that near where she went to college, or went to high school or some-

thing, there was a fairly well-known Buddhist hermit living high in the mountains. He also lived in the coldest place in Norway, far from the coast, halfway up.

So I wrote him a letter and asked if I could come visit him, and I did, as he said yes. I hitchhiked up. I sent my skis on a train, hitchhiked up to the train station in the little town where he was at. I remember being so cold. I didn't really have the right clothes for this.

I had rain boots to be hitchhiking in, and they provided no insulation against the icy ground when I was hitchhiking. Luckily, I got enough rides to get there before dark. I picked up my skis, carried them, and started walking up the mountain, just like, I guess, the prototypical idea of going into the Himalayas and seeing a sage high in the mountains. I went and climbed, kind of went up above treeline, where he had two little cabins.

He was seventy-nine years old. Aner Bear was his name, and I spent two weeks with him. I had a wonderful time. I don't know how much I meditated there, but I would go skiing in the morning, cross-country skiing high up in this—

The weather was spectacular for those two weeks: blue skies and sun and this amazing kind of snow. No one else had been skiing on the high mountains. I was all alone. I would ski in the morning, and then I would come back and make lunch for both of us.

I would spend much of the afternoon talking with him. Mostly, he wanted to talk about his old life. You know, he had known Kaiser Wilhelm, the last Kaiser of Germany. He had seen Krishnamurti when he came to Oslo in 1917. He had seen Rudolf Steiner also the same year there.

He went to New York at some point and saw the first neon lights there. It was kind of fun to talk stories with him. He told me stories of his spiritual teacher. There was a *swami* who had moved from India, maybe around the same time, in 1917–18, and brought all his spiritual books with him to Norway. For some reason, he decided to go there.

After some years, he decided to move into the deep mountains, and that's why this Ander Bear became his disciple. They went to the deep mountains. Then, at some point in the 1920s, this Hindu *swami* decided he was a reincarnation of the *Buddha*, and that made Einar Bjørn a Buddhist. Though I don't know how much he knew about Buddhism.

But he told me one amazing story. The Germans had invaded Norway, and World War II was raging. This Indian *swami* decided he had to do something to stop the war. So he went into deep meditation, into kind of a trance of sorts. He stopped eating for a long time.

And at some point, it was clear that maybe he was going to be done. He was going to die

from not eating. And Aner said, “We thought he was not going to die without coming back one more time to give us last instructions.” So he managed to get a few things that he knew that the *swami* liked to drink and eat.

One of them was vodka, apparently, and the other whiskey, and the other was lettuce, which was unusual. He was going to try to get those things. So he went down the valley to where there was a telephone network. People would crank up and call the operator. He started calling the operator, cranking the phone.

As he was doing that, all these other people got on the phone, and they were all yelling and screaming and celebrating. Oh, there was another part of the story. Just before the Nazis came through that valley, the *swami* had Aner break up all his spiritual books and hide them in the basement behind these bricks.

As Einar was going to take the last book and put it behind the wall and brick it up, he took it and opened it. It was a Buddhist book, and he opened it at random. It said, “When a *Buddha* is born, a *Buddha* is enlightened, a *Buddha* dies. There are earthquakes.” He closed the book, put it in the wall, and bricked it up.

So he was down there. That *swami* was dying in his meditation state, and he went to call to get some more supplies. As he was cranking, everyone was on the same line. They were all celebrating and screaming, and there were explosions and earthquakes all around. What was happening was that the Nazis had just surrendered, and they were blowing up the mines that were around, and people were celebrating.

But for Aner, he said then he knew that his teacher had passed, had had his consciousness leave his body. He'd done what he needed to do: end the war. So I asked him, “Do you mean he died?” And he said, “No, his body continued for a while longer, but his consciousness was already gone.”

So that's a very unusual story about World War II, and very few people know that particular story, I suppose. There I was in the high mountains in January in Norway, visiting this hermit and hearing lots of stories, and that was one of them.

And then from there, I went to live with my friends on their farm. From there, I decided I wanted to be a farmer and buy a farm in Norway. But in order to buy a farm in Norway, you had to have an agricultural degree. I didn't know if I was going to be a farmer my whole life there in Norway.

So I thought, rather than going to a vocational school in Norway, I'd go back to the University of California in Davis for two more years and get an agricultural degree in Norway. Then I

could be close to Zen Center, and I could go back to Norway. Then, when I was finished, buy a farm. But then, at the end of that time in college, I got my degree in agriculture.

Then I went to San Francisco Zen Center in 1978 and was there kind of on and off for the next fifteen years or so. I got sidetracked by Buddhism, and I've never gone back to farm in Norway. So that was a little bit more of my life and stories. Thank you, and I'll continue tomorrow.