

Dharmette: Stories (3 of 5) Starting Zen

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Hello and welcome to this week, where I tell stories from my life—practice stories. Hopefully, you'll find them interesting and nice to hear.

So, at some point in 1978, I graduated from college. I'd been meditating in college for the last two years, twice a week, in Davis. When I came there, I'd visited Zen Center in 1974 or 1975, I think it was, and then went back to Norway for a year. I decided to go get an ag degree at UC Davis.

But I had been to San Francisco Zen Center, as being an urban Zen center. I naively thought that every urban center had a Zen center, so I went looking for one in the small town of Davis. I went to the religious studies department and asked them if there was a Zen center in Davis, and they said no. But somehow I discovered—maybe they told me—that there was a small Zen sitting group that met. There was a couple, Lee and Vicky Stewart, who had a small sitting group in their little apartment.

They had two bedrooms, one very small one, and so I started sitting with them twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursday evenings. Sometimes it was only the three of us. Sometimes there were four or five people there. It was very small, and that was kind of very special, to be able to go twice a week while I was in college.

I meditated every day in college, which is also, looking back now, maybe unusual for a college student, but seemed completely natural for me. I'd get up in the morning and meditate for forty minutes, and before going to bed, forty minutes. Then twice a week, I'd go sit with the Stewarts.

I had a wonderful experience one evening sitting with them, that I had some kind of hallucination. I don't know where the hallucination started and where it ended. But I was sitting the

way you sit meditation in Zen. You sit with your eyes open, and you sit facing a wall. Since the bedroom was quite small, we had to have the knees right up against the wall, so the wall was really close.

I was also meditating there one day. This majestic, authoritative, solid, serious Roman column rose up in front of me, like you'd have in front of a bank or something, to show this is a serious institution. Written down in this column, in black, engraved in the column going downward, were the letters Z-E-N: Zen. So that was certainly a hallucination, and I don't know where it stopped there or continued. I don't know, but the experience I had was that I then went to embrace that column, like this.

I just put my arms around it to embrace it, to hold it, hug it. As I did that, the column vanished, and I fell forward and hit my head against the wall of the bedroom. So that was quite unusual for me, to have this kind of hallucination.

As I was going home that night, I was thinking about it. I realized—or I don't know if I realized, but I put it together to suggest—that I had created Zen as this external great authority. Zen was this monumental, wonderful, perfect, or something, religion that was out there. When it all fell away, then I realized that there was no Zen out there. It was all about the practice here and myself.

So it kind of became a very significant turning point for me, to really start showing up here for me. I was living in a garage at that point. I had started sitting Zen meditation again when I went back to college because I was suffering, and I thought that the Zen practice would somehow end my suffering. Somehow, a certain kind of layer, or the surface layer, of that suffering did settle. I got calm and quiet.

Then I continued meditating, and so the reason for meditating stopped. I thought this was very strange because I'm kind of a rational person, wanting to have reasons for things. But I kept meditating anyway. I just kind of wondered. I kept wondering, "Why am I doing this?"

Then one day I realized—or I don't know if I realized—but I understood something very significant: I was sitting as a form of self-expression, the way that an artist would express themselves on a canvas, or a dancer in dance, or a musician in making music. It was a kind of deep inner expression. I wouldn't call it creativity. I just called it a kind of inner expression that came, was flowing out of me, that was me, that felt right.

So here I discovered this place that's here inside, where something really valuable is. Something can flow out of me like a spring somehow. That just felt so right and so complete in a certain way, even though my mind kept thinking. You know, I didn't have any idea, when

I was doing Zen meditation, that I was supposed to stop thinking. I was just supposed to be fully present with the moment, practicing unconditional acceptance of the moment as it is.

Somehow, that led me, sitting and meditating every day in the garage, to just feel the rightness of being present for this inner expressivity. Then, in 1978, I went to live near Zen Center in San Francisco. I rented an apartment there. It was a dangerous area, a high-crime zone, and I had three or four roommates, housemates, all of whom were robbed at gunpoint or knifepoint in the area. I was spared that particular challenge, though I think once I was able to duck out of the way of that.

But even with that, when I look back, think back, at that 1978 in San Francisco, and 1979, compared to now, I didn't think about it then at all. But I've been back to the same streets now, almost fifty years later, and they're so busy. There's so much activity and so much traffic. There was so much less traffic back then. In comparison, it was a quiet, peaceful place, compared to what it is now.

I think that somehow that also affected me, by doing my Zen practice. Something took me into a different time, a peacefulness, a quieter, calmer time. I think I was very much affected by the environment. I realize now, just like many of us are affected by the more complicated, busy, hectic world that we live in now. I'm glad I had that conditioning before living in the present moment.

At some point, I did my first Zen seven-day retreat. Excuse me, I have some kind of a little bit of an allergy. That was at Green Gulch Farm in Marin County, and I did my retreat there. I saw there was a farm, and I thought, "I want to live here." So I went to live there.

Looking back at that time as well, I think one of the very important experiences of living at this farm was the very simple lifestyle we had. I'd get up in the morning to meditate, have breakfast, go work in the fields, have lunch, go work in the fields, have a break in the afternoon to shower and just rest a little bit, have dinner, and then meditate some more. That was the rhythm of the day. Then, on the weekend, there was some time off, and I'd go walking in the hills.

There was no television. You know, I stopped watching television in 1972, and I really haven't watched it since. So there was a whole way in which my adult life, I've kind of been not so connected to popular culture because of not watching TV. There was no TV there at Green Gulch, and there were hardly any newspapers. There were, if you could read, but there weren't a lot of activities.

There were no cell phones. There was no internet. There were no computers. So life was, compared to now, very subtle and simple. That was actually phenomenally meaningful and important for me.

To settle into this very simple routine of meditating and working, meditating and working, and this wonderful physical work outside, something inside of me relaxed, settled, dropped away, and I carried it with me into the meditation. So when I sat down to meditate, it was very simple. I was just right there, very, very peaceful. I remember one day sitting there, just kind of unselfconsciously, kind of taking in this new peaceful, quiet, settled, kind of embodied way of just sitting and meditating with my breathing.

There was no self-consciousness, no trying to accomplish anything or attain anything. That was a wonderful means by which to settle more and more. The paradox is that when we stop trying to settle and get concentrated, sometimes that's when it's easier to do so.

I remember at some point my breathing, from all ways of experiencing it, stopped completely. Again, I was unselfconscious about it. I hardly was aware of it happening. But then suddenly, I became aware I wasn't breathing, and I gasped for breath and said to myself silently, "I'm going to die." Then I got all agitated.

Some meditators have this somewhat common experience of the breath getting quiet enough to have this idea, to get afraid that they're not going to live. So I learned over time that you can live quite fine in very peaceful meditation without having any kind of evidence of breathing. Whether there's some subtle breathing going on, or exchange of oxygen in other ways, I don't know, but it seems to be just fine.

So I lived there at Green Gulch, and I was slated actually to go to graduate school. I went there in April. I was slated to go to graduate school at UC Berkeley in the fall, to study soil science, a continuation of my agricultural interest. I wasn't paying attention to that much, but about a couple of weeks before school was going to start, I hadn't gotten an apartment in Berkeley or any place to live.

I went to do the afternoon ritual, the chant of the *Heart Sutra*, that they do at lunch at Zen Center. There was almost no one there, but I went because now I was kind of, wow, I was kind of shocked. "Oh no, I need to do something, figure out what I'm doing here about going to graduate school or not."

In the middle of that chant, chanting the *Heart Sutra*, there was kind of a sudden shift in my body. Something welled up. I don't know if it was like an explosion, but just boom! There was a knowing that I was not going to go to college. I was going to go to the Zen monastery,

Tassajara.

I wrote to UC Berkeley and explained to them that something important had come up, and could I delay my start of graduate school for a year? They said, "Sure." So I finished the fall at Green Gulch Zen Center. Then, in January, I went to the Zen Center monastery deep in the Los Padres National Wilderness, a wonderful monastery. I went and lived there for almost the next three years, practicing.

So I'll continue some of these stories tomorrow. I think it's going slower than I anticipated. So I guess I'm not going to get to any conclusion this week. So thank you.