

Dharmette: Gil Stories (4 of 5) Zen Monastery Life

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October 15, 2026

Keywords: Zen, Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, Green Gulch Farm, monastic life, ordination, compassion, suffering, meditation, response, Buddhism

So hello and welcome to this series where I talk about stories from my life. And yesterday when I spoke, I made two references to how there was a deeper knowing inside. One was not so sudden, but this was the discovery, or the evolving discovery, that meditation was a place for an inner expressivity. It was something deep inside, some sense of wholeness or integrity that felt so right to sit in. That's what meditation was: to return to this sense of wholeness, this integrity, this sense of vital goodness, just by being peaceful and quiet and settling in.

And when I first lived at San Francisco Zen Center, at the Green Gulch Farm that they have, I decided, kind of in a moment's notice, not to go to graduate school. There was this inner kind of knowing that just suddenly appeared in my body, that I should go to the monastery instead. And that was in August. Then, in January of 1980, I went to Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in the Ventana Wilderness, in the Los Padres National Forest, I guess. It's just inland, in the wilderness from Big Sur. Beautiful place: a fourteen-mile dirt road to get all the way in there, up and down and around into deep valleys, and far from the world in many ways.

And I remember this idea from when I was driving in there. I was getting a ride from San Francisco, and we stopped in Carmel Valley, like the last little town before—maybe Carmel, maybe not Carmel Valley. At the shopping center there, there was a bookstore. They were shopping for something, and so I had a few minutes free. So I went into the bookstore, and I went right to the spiritual bookshelves.

But I had very little time, so I just randomly pulled down a book, some kind of New Age, kind of Eastern religion kind of book. I just opened it at random, and I read the sentence that said, kind of as I remember, something like, "The problem with human beings is that they resist reality." So I closed the book, put it back on the shelf, got in the car, and drove to the monastery. That sentence kind of reverberated in me, and I decided that it was kind of a negative statement. I wanted to say it in a positive way.

So I reframed it for myself: that the solution in life is to participate. And that worked really well for *Zen* practice. *Zen* practice is a lot about giving yourself over to the activity you're doing, not resisting it, fully there. And that wasn't necessarily easy for me to do. I had resistance. So part of the *Zen* practice there was to really give myself over and overcome the resistance, or dissolve it, or see it, not have it stand in the way.

And that served me really well in meditation too. This idea of participating fully with what you're doing, and if it was meditation, really participate—not with a strain or over-efforting, but with the fullness. Yes, this is what I'm doing now. And so that exploration of how to participate became a very important part of *Zen* practice for me.

I remember when I first got there in the monastery. After a few weeks, I overslept one day, and so I came to the morning meditation late. And for me, in my mind, the monastery was, you know, a great, powerful authority figure, and it was with strict discipline. I was convinced I was going to be expelled from the monastery for oversleeping. I spent the whole day waiting for someone to come up to me and say, "You have to go."

And when I went to bed that night, I was so surprised I was still there. No one had even mentioned anything, like no one had noticed. And somehow something shifted inside of me. Not that there was a lot of permission to do things, but maybe I didn't have to carry the weight of other people judging me or other people disciplining me. And somehow I felt like now I had room to breathe in the monastery.

And then, as I stayed there, I loved being in the monastic life. The daily life was wonderful: me participating, just following along in the schedule. Not having to make a lot of choices, but just the bell rang, go to work. The bell rang, go to a meal, and just being fully there. And so much of it was contemplative in style, or meditative, and so I just loved kind of settling in.

And I was there for a long time. There was continued settling, just being in a practice environment, absorbed in the practice environment, settling into it, allowing it to kind of permeate me. It was really a fantastic thing, except on the days off. Every fifth day was a day off. It was a five-day week, which was a little bit confusing with our seven-day week.

And when we had the days off, I had a lot of time alone. I went for wonderful hikes in the mountains there, but it was also the most difficult time for me, because that's when I was left to myself to think, "What am I doing with my life? And what should I be doing? And should I go back to graduate school? And should I stay in practice then?" And part of the reason to go to graduate school was to address one of what I thought at the time was one of the great

environmental issues of the time, which was soil erosion. I wanted to help the world.

But I also had a mistrust of people who wanted to help. Somehow, it was insincere or egotistical, or I had kind of unformed ideas of mistrust. And so I spent a lot of time kind of pondering, thinking about this question: “What do I do?” Not being able to choose and decide, and it was kind of a lot of inner turmoil in those days, for those hikes. And then I’d come back for the next day of the monastery, and I’d be back in the flow and this rhythm every five days of having to deal with my personal challenge.

And after about a year of doing that, I decided not to go to graduate school, but really put that aside and stay in the monastery. And then one day I was on those walks: What should I do, you know? And I realized, “Wait a minute, Gill, you’ve been circulating around this question for a whole year, just kind of going around and around. It’s not taking you anywhere. It doesn’t seem like there is any solution for you in this way of thinking.”

So something inside of me occurred: let me start over. Let me start my life all over, and not know what I am supposed to do, and just take the next step. And it just, you know, was a wonderful place to make that decision because the environment was so special. So first, the next step was the next step on that mountain path that led back to the monastery. And then in the monastery, the next step was the bell ringing and going to meditate.

And so it was like, “I’m just responding to the circumstance that this is the next step. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I don’t have to know the big picture or the purpose of my life. I can just follow along in the simplicity of this, because the thinking mind that spends all this time thinking is not, you know, reliable.” And I was just so fortunate that that’s where I made the decision, in the monastery, because it put me back into the practice and the flow of it in even a fuller way. And it had a big impact on me.

And I remember going up to a teacher there, one of the *Zen* teachers, at some point. We passed each other on the path in the monastery, walking by each other, and I said, “I feel like I’m becoming a response machine.” It was very unfortunate to call it a machine, but what I was saying was that I feel like what I’m becoming is simply something that responds to the situation. I just want to respond. I’m just there and open and available, and that’s what I’m becoming—just a delightful response apparatus.

And so this idea that something inside, natural, wants to meet and be present. Around the same time, I saw in a magazine witnesses of tremendous human atrocities of a war, and people getting killed and bombed. Seeing that in the middle of the monastic life just kind of tore something open in me. A whole new level of compassion and concern for the world arose.

And I said, “This needs to be addressed. This needs to be met.”

I didn’t have any ideas of what, but it had a big impact on me. And then at one point, after being in the monastery for, I suspect, a little over a year—so after all this kind of stuff had unfolded—I think it was a year and a half. One summer in July, the abbot was going to come to visit. The abbot at the time didn’t come very often to the monastery, and there weren’t that many opportunities to meet and talk with him one-on-one. We were lucky; maybe we could do it two times a year, sometimes maybe three.

But he was making an unusual visit to the monastery, and I knew that I had a chance to ask to see him. And so I did, and I had a time to see him. But I didn’t know what I was going to talk about. So I sat looking at the river. The monastery is at the Tassajara River, such a wonderful river. It’s somewhat—not a creek; it’s a real river.

And so I sat at the edge of the river, looking at it and thinking again, “What should I do? What should I do with my life?” And here I’m going to have a chance to talk to the abbot. And so there was a kind of concentration of maybe attention and presence and the need to do that because of this meeting with the abbot. Sitting there, suddenly there was this kind of like an explosion inside. Again, this body had the answer; I didn’t have the answer.

And the body said, “Become a monk. Get ordained. Become ordained as a *Zen* monk.” And it was so clear. The knowing was absolute; like, there was no question that I knew that’s what I was going to do. But because I’m a rational person, I guess, I felt like I should have reasons. So after the knowing that that was the case, then I came up with reasons.

So if the abbot asked me, you know, because I was going to ask him if I could be ordained, the reasons were that I wanted to respond to the suffering of the world from the deepest place that I know where it can be addressed. I felt if I go off in the world and deal with soil erosion in the world, it’s extremely important to do that. But it’s not going to touch the people that I support and help. It’s wonderful, but it doesn’t touch the deepest place of suffering in them.

And I felt like I’m going to have a dissatisfied life if I’m not able to meet suffering at its root. And I don’t know if I’m going to be effective. I don’t know if there’s something I can do, but I want to have the satisfaction of being able to meet suffering at the deepest place. And the only way I knew to do that in my limited life was through Buddhism.

So I went to the abbot and asked him if I could be ordained. And to my surprise, he kind of quickly said yes. I thought it would be a bigger process. And he told me to—in *Zen*, you have to sew your own robes to be ready for the ordination—so he told me to start sewing. So I

did.

And I thought it would be a few years before I'd be ordained. Then, by the end of the summer, he told me, "Be ready to be ordained in December." And I was kind of surprised again at how quickly it was. It turned out to be January of 1982 that I was ordained, and that was meant to be for a lifetime. Stepping into this deeper world of being a monk, which I loved being, and being a monk in some way that would be able to meet the suffering of the world.

So that brings me to the next. That was one phase, and tomorrow I'll tell you the story of the next phase. So thank you very much.