

Dharmette; Stories (5 of 5) Zen and Beyond

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So, hello and welcome to this fifth talk on telling stories from my practice life, and with the hope that somehow my little practice stories maybe touch something in you and encourage you in your practice and trusting the engagement in this, you know, in this spiritual life.

So I was ordained at San Francisco Zen Center in January of 1982, and went back to Tassajara, the Zen monastery, for another nine months. During that time, a few things happened that were interesting for me.

One was during the summer. They have a four-month, five-month, what's called the guest season. In the wintertime, it's an intensive monastic life for six months. Then there's about five months or so, four and a half months, where it's called the guest season, and people come back then. People came to be guests, and it was a little bit like a resort. They got a little taste of Zen life, but they didn't have to meditate. They could just be there, and there were nice meals.

There were hot baths there, natural hot springs to use. There was a beautiful river. And I was made what was called the guest student manager. The guest student manager was someone who, throughout the summer, met the people who were coming—not to be guests, but the ones who were called guest students. These were the people who were coming to practice Zen and participate in and support the monastery during the summer.

It was very popular. A lot of people came, and they would live the life of the Zen students for that summer, which included meditation and eating together, being together with the students, with the Zen practitioners. It was a very rich culture. People came from all over the world to do that. There were all kinds of ages and people, and they would help with some of the work through the day and participate in the Zen side of things.

And I was the one who received them and was their host and cared for them. I did a lot of orientations, and I also received the guests. I would do much of what's called the meditation instructions every afternoon. I think at three thirty, for all the guests coming in, I would meet them in the meditation hall and give them meditation instructions.

And so for those months, I gave myself over to being the host, the person who received people and welcomed people. It was kind of a wonderful role, a wonderful job of receiving and welcoming and discovering who people were and being connected to them. It was a wonderful way to begin my life as a Zen priest, Zen monk, to be able to just care for people in the simple way, just as a host. And I think it opened something very important in my heart about, you know, a certain kind of delight in people and all the varieties and meeting them. It was nice.

And I just said now that, you know, being a Zen priest. The odd thing that happened was that when I was ordained, it was called the monk ordination. I thought I was being ordained as a monk, and that's kind of what I really thought that I was going to be. But a few months later, the abbot gathered all the people who were ordained as monks, men and women, and there were a lot of them at that San Francisco Zen Center by that time. He said that they were going to change the name and now call you priests rather than monks.

And I was kind of stunned, because for me a priest was a radically different species of clergy than a monk, and I had no interest in being a priest. I thought, but now I had to live with this new title, and so it was a little bit awkward for me. But I got used to it.

And so, at the end of that, one thing that happened during that summer is my sister came to visit the monastery. It was open during the summer, and she was very sick, and she liked it there a lot. I asked the abbot if she could stay for the summer. And to my surprise, he said, "Sure, she can stay. Just stay there for free." She couldn't work; she could hardly walk.

But he said, "She has to—we don't have room—so she has to have your room, and you'll have to sleep in the meditation hall." So that's what I did that summer. It was kind of, as a monk, having this renunciate lifestyle, sleeping in the *zendō*, in the meditation hall, not having my own room, and having my sister there to care for her. And I didn't care that much for her, in a sense. The community did.

She had to be driven to go to the baths, where I don't know how far away they were, but maybe four hundred feet, five hundred feet. They would come with a pickup truck and driver. It was quite a touching thing to see that it might have saved my sister's life to be in that community. She sat in a chair, kind of in the middle of the community all day long, and people

said hello to her and talked to her, and it kind of really revived her.

And then I was asked, at the end of the summer, to move back up to San Francisco Zen Center. Later, I found out that they wanted me to be the head of the stitchery. Zen Center had a lot of businesses, and they had a stitchery where they made Zen clothes and Zen cushions and different things, robes. They wanted me to be the head of the stitchery, maybe because I'd spent time sewing my own robes and things like that. So they thought I had a skill or an interest, or I don't know what.

But instead, they sent me to work at Greens Restaurant. I heard that later. They had the idea that I was going to train there to be the head lunch cook. So Zen Center had this very nice restaurant, one of the premier vegetarian restaurants in San Francisco in the early '80s. They wanted me, as a priest, to be a cook and lunch cook.

And very luckily for me, the person who was going to be leaving the job decided to keep the job as head lunch cook. So then I was freed from maybe having to step into that role. And of course, I would step into it because I was a monk, a priest, and I just kind of—I was there to train, and whatever they asked me to do, I was going to do. But then I was freed from that, and that gave me a certain freedom that I didn't realize at the time, but was very important for me.

And so I worked at Greens for about a year—the Greens Restaurant—as a cook, and I kind of loved doing it and the activity of it all. This idea of participation, being fully present, kind of came to fruition as a fast-order cook for lunch for two or three hundred people every day. I was just kind of spinning and cooking many meals, many plates at once. It was fun, and I would leave feeling much more concentrated and quiet than when I came at the beginning of the day, because I gave myself completely to just that activity.

But by the spring of that year, so it must have been April of 1983, I was beginning to feel there was something a little bit claustrophobic for me at the San Francisco Zen Center. Something wasn't quite, you know, open enough for something to happen. I felt I needed fresh air. I wasn't going to leave Zen or leave Buddhism, but I needed something to have a more experience that was wider, bigger than what Zen Center could provide.

It might have been that the Zen Center was a little bit cultic back then. It was a little bit kind of insular and felt that it was a special—this was the special place to be in the world, and this is where real Buddhism was. And something like that, that I kind of felt was in the air—and maybe it was mostly produced by me—but still, I felt claustrophobic.

And then this amazing thing happened. For the first time, I was telling a friend of mine that

this was the case, that I was feeling I needed fresh air from Zen Center. And I couldn't really leave because I had been ordained only a year, and I had this idea you should stay training with your ordination teacher for five years before going forth as a monk, as a priest.

And I was sitting in the outdoor courtyard at the San Francisco Zen Center in the city. I was sitting there outside, and Ed Brown, who wrote the *Tassajara Cookbooks*, was on the Zen Center board. He came over to me and kind of interrupted me while I was just about, in the middle of telling my friend I needed fresh air, and said, "Gail, I'm on the board of Zen Center, and I need to talk to you. When you finish this conversation, come to see me."

So I thought I was in big trouble, that a board person would want to talk to me. So I went, after the meal, after the discussion with my friend, to talk to him. I remember sitting there, and he told me that the abbot had just been revealed, at the level of the board, to be involved in serious ethical transgressions. As I heard him tell me this, my response inside was not to be horrified or angry or upset at the ethical transgression of the abbot. Rather, the feeling was, "Oh, now I'm free. I'm free to go."

And added to this was that I'd already been invited by a relative who offered to pay for a ticket for me to fly to Japan to be in Japan for a while. My relative was going to be there, so, "Come join me." And I'd said, "No, I can't. I'm just being trained as a monk." So suddenly I was free, and I was free to go to Japan.

And so for me, learning about the ethical transgressions of the teacher kind of set me free. It was just a wonderful thing. So that was in April, and I think in September of that year, I had it organized, and I went to Japan to practice Zen in Japan. That opened a whole new world for me.

And I'm so glad that I went forth to get that fresh air. I did go back to Zen Center at some point, and a few times. I'm very grateful for my time there and my practice there. I feel maybe eternally grateful, and just would like to support the practice there in whatever way I can. And I was so glad to have that chance to step away and see the world with fresh eyes, and see Zen Center with fresh eyes.

And so then I came to Japan, and then from there, I went to Thailand and from Burma. And so that's a whole other phase. So I thought I could tell my stories in five days. But it seems like maybe I'm only halfway through.

So hopefully you don't mind that maybe when I come back—I'm not going to be here next week. I'm off back to teacher retreat. Hopefully you don't mind that I continue with these life stories of mine. And so I want to thank you all very much, and look forward to coming back

in about ten days, nine days. Thank you.