

Gil's Story (2 of 5) Getting Ready for Zen

November 28, 2023

Keyword Summary

Transcendental meditation, dropping out, The Farm, honesty, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, Norway, college.

Gil Fronsdal

Hello, and welcome to the second talk about how I came into my Dharma life, and how it began.

My interest in Buddhism began in college. I engaged in it at first mostly as an intellectual interest. At the end of my second year of college, I became interested in meditation. I was initiated into TM (transcendental meditation). I took a class and received a mantra. I began meditating for about twenty minutes a day. I did that for two or three months. I felt quite calm with it. It was very nice.

At the end of that school year, I decided to drop out of college. I was happy enough being there, but after two years of college, I hadn't found a passion to study any particular subject. I thought that going to college and getting a degree was too important. It seemed I should

only go to college if I had a passion for something. Since I didn't have that passion, I dropped out of college. Dropping out of college was relatively common back then. "Dropping out" was a current expression, as in dropping out of society.

That summer I had an opportunity to crew on a sailboat across the Atlantic. I spent about six or seven weeks on the boat. It was an amazing experience to be away from society and the busyness of school and college. I spent long hours at the helm of the boat. My favorite was being out in the middle of the night. It was amazing to be in the middle of the Atlantic with all the stars and peacefulness far away from everything. I could feel danger just a few feet away – if I fell in the water no one would ever find me, and the boat would just sail along.

Something in me settled during that trip. I decided at the beginning of that trip that there was nothing wrong with having a fantasy life. I was disinclined to censor myself in any way. Something fascinating happened. At the helm we didn't have auto steer back then, so we had to be at the wheel of the boat all the time. It was like driving a car on the freeway but more dramatic. You had to check the compass every few seconds to make sure the boat was not off course. You were constantly checking the sails and the waves and then adjusting. You couldn't take your attention away for very long. Big waves came from behind the sailboat. If you weren't

paying attention those waves could cause major problems for the boat.

At the same time, I let my thoughts be free. I let my fantasies go free. The combination of giving my mind the freedom to do whatever it wanted and then coming back every couple of seconds to the present moment proved to be a wonderful recipe for getting settled and peaceful. By the end of this trip across the Atlantic, I was quite ecstatic.

This combination of inner freedom and staying present became a guide for me when I eventually started doing Zen practice. It helped guide me on how to practice. I felt quite ecstatic. I even had the thought that I would never be depressed again.

So that fall I dropped out of college, and I moved to Berkeley. I tried to find my way in life and figure out what to do. I tried to find work, but things proved difficult during that time. I couldn't find work. I had no skills. I didn't know what to do. I got more depressed than I had ever been in my life.

What happened next was in a bookstore called Cody Bookstore on Telegraph Avenue, I found a booklet about a very large hippie commune in Tennessee. It was the largest hippie commune in the United States at the time, in 1974. About 700 people were living there. It

had its genesis in Haight-Ashbury, LSD, and psychedelics. The primary teachers of the lead teacher were LSD and the Zen master Suzuki Roshi. I read about this place, and I thought that it was interesting. I wanted to see it.

In January of that year, I had an occasion to take a Greyhound bus across the country. I stopped in Memphis and took a local bus to this commune called The Farm. I encountered two things there that changed my life.

This community had been based on using LSD. Taking LSD was a spiritual practice for them. They had a lot of integrity in doing this, but the founder and a few of the leaders had gotten arrested for using LSD. In Tennessee, you couldn't do this, so the leaders of this community were in jail.

They had been looking for another practice that they could do legally in Tennessee. They wanted a practice that was as valuable as LSD for a spiritual connection and a profound way of being. What they had found was honesty. I had never been in a community of people who were so honest. Whenever there was any social tension, their practice was to stop and have a conversation about the tension and what was going on. The conversation continued until there was real honesty, and the individuals had a deep understanding

of themselves and what they were doing. I would watch these conversations and the honesty with which people practiced. It was so inspiring.

I was inspired by how skilled they got at having these conversations. After a while, some people could have the conversations very quickly. Initially, the conversations would take a long time, but they always stopped for honest conversation. That was their practice. This idea that people could practice this kind of honesty inspired me to no end.

Being introduced to the Bible of this large commune was the second thing that I encountered at The Farm that changed my life. This important book was *Zen Mind Beginners Mind*, which only had come out a couple of years before. It was the Zen teachings of the Zen master Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center.

This blew me away because as I read this book, I had the distinct feeling that he was saying things that I knew but didn't know consciously. As I read the book there was a recognition, "Oh yes, oh yes." It seemed the book talked a lot about Zazen, or Zen meditation. We didn't do much meditation on the farm. We did a lot of work and a lot of truth-telling.

Another thing was that this was a large community of overall middle-class, white, American, hippies. I was more or less one of them. In some ways, I felt very comfortable there. Because I grew up quite a bit in Europe, I had a sort of cosmopolitan upbringing. I changed schools twelve times in the first twelve years of my life. Sometimes I went back to the same school. I lived in Italy, Switzerland, Norway, and the United States. I think because of that experience I felt very cautious about homogeneity. I felt that being around a whole bunch of people who were just like me was not a safe thing to do. It would be easy to all be caught up in the same delusions and the same way of thinking.

Because of this, I left the commune. After I left, I went to check out the San Francisco Zen Center. I showed up there and was impressed. I wanted to go back so I went back for two weeks as a guest student. Something in me felt at home. This was the practice I wanted to do. There was clarity around it.

But at the time I was twenty or maybe twenty-one. I felt it was too early for me to make this kind of decision, so I decided to go back to Norway where I was still a Norwegian citizen. That was my home country. I had to go back to Norway to figure out my relationship with my home country, and what I was going to do in relation to it. I felt I had some things to take care of before I could decide to give myself over to Zen.

So that is what I did. I caught a ride with a ride service that I found on a ride bulletin board. Back then in colleges there were bulletin boards matching people looking for rides and riders. I got a ride to the East Coast and then I worked my way across the Atlantic on a freighter. It took me to Spain. I took a bus to Holland. In Holland, I got passage again on another small cargo boat back to my home country.

Now I was interested in Zen, and I also had an interest in Sufism. This was mostly from reading about it. I went back to my home country with this question. Do I want to study Zen, or do I want to study Sufism? I was there to explore my roots and figure out what to do. I had two strong influences – Zen meditation, and the focus on honesty that I learned at the farm. I was going to find my way while living in Norway.

Thank you, and I will continue tomorrow.