

At Peace With His World: Tracy Zen Master Reflects on Lifelong Search for Centeredness

By Stefani Sobers

Sep. 22, 1996

The philosophy of Zen Buddhism has kept 87-year-old Don Gilbert focused throughout his life. Sitting quietly composed in his Tracy kitchen, the Zen master said spirituality and meditation aided in his success as a performing gymnast years ago and continue to inspire him as a teacher of the religion that encourages peace and harmony.

Throughout his life, Gilbert has performed on stage, run a theatrical production company, learned and mastered the philosophy of Zen Buddhism -- including the publication of two books celebrating it -- and has taught the philosophy locally and worldwide.

He's a wonderful strength for many people, said Jeri Vauquelin-LaPlante of Tracy who has studied with Gilbert for more than a year. He helped me to focus on myself, my mind and my actions to improve the way I live. Longtime student Dawn Bill describes Gilbert as gentle and aware of everyone and everything around him -- both as a person and a teacher. Her description seems aptly fitting for a man who describes Zen as a religious philosophy which emphasizes that reality is what you make of your surroundings.

Buddhism teaches that you can understand only what your mind can tell you. Buddha is not a god; he was a man who taught people to live to help each other, Gilbert said. He taught love and kindness and unselfish joy. Zen is an extension of that way of life, he explained. Zen does not depend on description. You can't define it and if it is defined, you have limited it, said the serene, soft-spoken teacher. Whatever the world looks like to you -- that's you. That's your reality.

A lifelong love

Gilbert's spiritual life began with a fascination with meditation at age 14. He found some of his mother's yoga books stashed away in their Oakland home. I figured if she was hiding them, they must be good, he said, chuckling. The meditation and breathing skills he learned from his readings came in handy in high school when Gilbert discovered his love and talent for gymnastics. He and a friend, Bud Mallard, practiced tricks and developed a routine. After graduating from high school, they started performing for money as the Gilbert Bros. We started in Los Angeles and eventually performed at places like the Orpheum Theatre and Radio City Music Hall, he said. Gilbert remembers one particular performance with a smile. My partner and I were set to perform at The Palace in New York, which was a really big deal, he said. We were both really nervous because we were the first act. We ended up

stopping the show, they loved us so much. I went out and bought myself a new suit and I thought I owned the world at 20 years old.

It was during his travels as an entertainer that he began to gather knowledge about Buddhism. I learned more from traveling than I could have from any book, he said. I had a friend in the business who worked as a Chinese ventriloquist. He knew I was interested in Buddhism, so he took me to his temple in New York. I was still quite young, then; it was the start of my serious involvement in the religion.

However, his show-business career was about to take a detour. Set to perform in Berlin on Sept. 1, 1939, Gilbert said he had a bad feeling about the journey. The Gilbert Bros. canceled their trip to Germany. I remember driving into a gas station on Sept. — and hearing that Hitler had invaded Poland, he said. After the United States entered the war, Gilbert joined the Marines. But his interest in Buddhism continued to influence his outlook on life — no matter where he was. His personal philosophy: You're stuck with what you've got, so do it as well as you know how and try to be nice to the people around you. And, he added, no matter where I was, I always kept up my meditation.

At the wars end, a 36-year-old Gilbert decided to move to Denver and re-enter show business. He started Don Gilbert Enterprises, a theatrical production company. I had a lot of show-business connections, so I thought it would be a good idea, he said. I booked many acts, including Milton Berle, who was one of the real nice ones.

The path

Through the years, Gilbert continued to grow spiritually. As he became more knowledgeable, he started speaking to different groups. It was while speaking at Martins, a private library in Walnut Creek, that he met the late Dr. Seo Kyung-Bo, a dhammaraja (a top Buddhist teacher. Seo ran more than 100 schools in Korea at the time and was responsible for the construction of a peace monument on the Korean coast near Panmunjom, on the truce line between North and South Korea.

The meeting was a great honor for Gilbert. Being the dhammaraja is like being the pope, he explained. He was very highly regarded. Gilbert said he kept in touch with Seo when the dhammaraja returned to Korea, and the two eventually formed a close relationship. They collaborated on a project to open Buddhist temples in the United States, beginning in 1969 with the Il Bung Zen Center in Huntsville, Ala. We opened six or seven schools, Gilbert said. I told him he could handle the business aspects and I would teach. Gilbert has taught intermittently at each of the schools over the years, except for the facility in New York City. Today only schools in New York, Huntsville and one in Orlando, Fla., remain.

As his calling to Zen Buddhism increased, Gilberts desire to continue working in show business fell. At age 62, after more than 25 years in the entertainment business, he wanted out and closed his production company in 1971. I was ready to retire. I wanted to go back to Oakland, he said. Then, he was free to devote all his time to teaching. For short periods, he also lived and taught at the Sambosa in Carmel and was one of several teachers at the

Internal School in Arcata, which focuses on martial arts and meditation. Those schools, were not established by Seo and Gilbert and are now closed.

Twilight

Seo ordained Gilbert a Zen master at a 1973 ceremony in Oakland. Along with a certificate of qualification, he also received the inka seal, a designation marking Gilbert as an equal in the understanding of Zen with his mentor.

Gilbert said, to his knowledge, he is the only one of four such U.S. Zen masters taught by Seo. That is the certificate that counts, Gilbert said. The other awards and certificates I have received over the years are an honor, but I don't place too much importance on them. Those other awards include two honorary doctorates. The first, in religion and philosophy, came in 1994 from Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical, a school affiliated with the International Association of Educators for World Peace. That organization also presented him with a doctorate in teaching peace earlier this year.

An even greater honor awaited, however. Shortly before Seo's death in June 1995, he named Gilbert his successor -- his dharma. My job is to carry on the Buddhist teachings in his spirit, Gilbert said. And so he has. He moved to Tracy nine years ago because he thought it would be a good, low-profile place to live. Students study with him in his home; he accepts no fees. The small nest egg he made of earnings from his production company see him through.

The Zen master shares his home with 20-year student Bill. He's taught me that it's OK to make mistakes in life, she said. He teaches us to see events in our lives with a different perspective -- to be less reactive when situations arise.

For the future, Gilbert said plans to turn much of his focus to making Zen more accessible to all people. Zen is very patriarchal, he said. I'm trying to put as much emphasis as I can on breaking those barriers that separate men and women. That goal includes teaching the kuan-yin theory, an old Chinese philosophy, which promotes caring and nurturing, qualities most often associated with women.

Gilbert may also break with tradition if he names a woman as his successor, he said. Some Zen masters may be upset with me, but I don't care, he said. I will choose the most qualified. His unconventional approach does not stop there. His books, published in the 80s -- Jellyfish Bones and The Upside Down Circle -- communicate Zen Buddhism through the written word and cartoon illustrations.

We put thoughts together with our own prejudices and shortcomings. There is no written word that defines the absolute truths. That truth is only in our minds, thus, the use of visual images. Though twice married, both relationships short-lived and Gilbert is childless. To both wives, it was a disappointment, but to me, it's just the way it worked out. I can't change history, I'm just a part of it, he said.

His regrets? None. I have an overall feeling of happiness and I have to fulfill each moment.'

