

“Chan is Not Just About Sitting” Gilbert Gutierrez’s Chan Teachings in Toronto

On Friday June 29, 2007, the Dharma Drum Mountain group in Toronto was pleased to welcome Gilbert Gutierrez, our seasoned Chan practitioner from the DDMBA Chapter in California. Gilbert was in Toronto for two Chan Buddhism talks, as well as to provide guidance to Toronto practitioners. Beginning with an introductory lecture on Chan Buddhism at the Snow Lion and continuing on Saturday July 30 with a one-day Teaching and Meditation retreat, Gilbert had inspiring words, both for those new to Chan and to more experienced practitioners. His teachings clearly reflected the wisdom of Shifu, Venerable Master Sheng-yen.

Gilbert began his talk on Friday, June 29 with a discussion of the origins of Chan, and its relation to Zen practice in Japan and Tibetan practices as brothers. Though all Buddhist traditions have a place and merit, Gilbert’s talk focussed on how deeply rooted Chan practice is to the traditions of the Buddha. On this vein, he emphasized the importance of cultivating Chan practice with a sense of purpose that is connected with Sakyamuni’s vision. As Chan practitioners, do we have a clear sense of the path on which we are going? Do we understand the Buddha’s path? And, for those new to Chan, why do they find themselves drawn to attend a Chan lecture? What are they searching for? We search out of a sincere wish to understand and give purpose to our lives, not simply to satisfy curiosity or to gain yet another piece of knowledge.

As long as we search, we haven’t realized the peaceful stillness of our original buddha nature. For beginners who are curious about Chan, this sense of purpose could begin with being aware that our way of perceiving the world is inverted. In our everyday life, we often move toward what we like and discount what we dislike, rather than first seeing mind as the basis for all reality. Chan is the way in which one can see how imprisoned our everyday consciousness is in its mental constructs, self-concepts and judgments. Gilbert suggested that meditation gives mind space to be aware of how beings are conditioned to approach and discriminate perceptions—what the Buddha in Surangama Sutra refers to as “your false thinking which arises from external objects, deludes your true nature and deceives you into mistaking, since the time without beginning, a thief for your own son.”¹ This realization in turn drives the compassionate purpose of helping others to see this also, and simply observe how the mind creates its own attachment and aversions to things. Gilbert urged newcomers to Chan to honour the search that brought them to this event, and accept the invitation to earnestly investigate Chan.

Of particular importance in Chan practice is the Mahayanist aim of helping others to escape from the suffering of rebirth, through continuous practice of one’s method. Gilbert mentioned that, without a sense of why one is taking up one’s method, the practice is sometimes bound to get stale, especially for people who have meditated for several years. When Chan is practiced with the awareness of the Four Noble Truths, meditation can be seen as a tool for liberation. Only with a clear understanding of its value is meditation not taken for granted as one of the many routines we engage in. It’s when we recognize what a break meditation is for the mind that we approach it with joy and a sense of newness every day. This is perhaps the best way practitioners can maintain a beginner’s mind at all times. Practitioners were urged not to lose spirit and faith in practice to the forces of habit and familiarity that can blunt awareness.

If there was a single overriding theme to Gilbert’s Chan talks, perhaps it could be summed up in this statement: “Chan is more than just sitting on a cushion.” A common misunderstanding about Chan practice is that it starts and ends with sitting meditation. However, as Gilbert pointed out, meditation is simply the most opportune way to calm the mind, since it takes place in a relatively isolated and stable environment. What happens to our practice when we are faced with the inevitable stresses and crises of everyday life? Do we just leave it on the cushion or do we take the effects of meditation practice with us? More importantly, how do we extend Chan practice itself to each moment of our life?

Gilbert reminded us that every moment of our lives is an opportunity to practice: to choose between the way of the Buddha or the way of obstructions that arise in mind. Just as a person can choose to

¹ Surangama Sutra, tr. Charles Luk, p.41.

grasp thoughts while seated in a cushion or mindfully let go of the thoughts as they arise, a person can also choose how they will approach the thoughts that arise in everyday life. Here, the key is to use one's method to calm the mind sufficiently so that the practitioner is aware that situations arise in mind. With repeated Chan practice, a person has a better glimpse of what is arising within one's mind before it turns into a fixed behaviour or response. One could describe this as seeing what arises in mind from the view of original, non-arising awareness. Gilbert aptly compared this non-arising awareness to a screen upon which all thoughts and phenomena are projected. Though the thoughts and phenomena change every second, the screen remains the same; it forms the condition upon which all phenomena and thoughts can exist.

When we practice Chan, are we in danger of becoming a robot by losing the self? On the contrary, Gilbert suggested: we remain robots when we mindlessly react to the preferences and prejudices of the grasping self. Gilbert referred to the self as a kind of judge of experience, approaching phenomena with the attitudes of dislike, like or neutrality. The self is built on previous conditions and, when taken for granted, often simply repeats the same conditions upon which it has been based in the past. Hence, people become "masters" of anger, jealousy, greed and ignorance because these tendencies of self are deeply rooted in past actions or attitudes. Somehow, in some way, they "work" to create the conditions we are most familiar with.

The simplicity of Chan allows the practitioner to express the Dharma in any situation. Even as simple an action as holding the door for someone or washing one's clothes could become a form of Chan practice. Once the mind is settled and we are aware of the precepts, one has the opportunity to "follow function": that is, to do only that which is necessary to a situation without the need to embellish, to label a situation or cater to desires. As an example, Gilbert related the story of the actor Robert Preston. Preston's first acting lesson was the instruction to put everything that is needed for the role within the camera's border: nothing more and nothing less. This story illustrates how we as practitioners can learn to approach situations in everyday practice, with the attitude of not needing to manipulate an event in the effort to advance or defend the self.

Here, we are simply doing what the situation calls for. Once the mind begins to follow function, it begins to view each moment as discrete and having its own peculiar energy. Following function means being able to engage in an action or a moment with the appropriate level of attention and sincere effort. Why think about work when I am meditating, and, conversely, why think about meditating while I am at work? To do so is to go against the function of mind called for in the situation. Ideally, the practitioner learns to let thoughts settle by themselves, so that our original nature can meld with whatever needs to be done, be it working, cleaning, parenting, teaching, learning, etc.

Gilbert compared the Dharma to a kind of instruction manual of the mind. We follow Buddha's precepts not because we will be punished if we don't do so, but because very clear consequences flow from our choices and actions. Without the Dharma, practitioners don't have a clear path to what precepts generate good karmic conditions. The precepts further the meditation practice by giving people a sense of how their actions generate consequences, whether good or bad. With the help of meditative practice, the Chan practitioner can use the precepts to inform their decisions, as well as distinguish thoughts arising from precepts from thoughts arising from attachment. Gilbert reminded us again that Chan is happening at the level of everyday choice; we are wholly responsible for what happens in our lives. We benefit from our efforts in Chan practice by cultivating the simple nobility of the practice: helping where help is needed, and tending to what is required in everyday life. In this respect, little acts can build a force of character that leads to better consequences.

Just as Chan is not just about sitting meditation, Gilbert emphasized also that meditation itself is not about "having no thoughts". To have no thoughts at all would be considered unnatural. The key, rather, is to let thoughts arise but to condition the mind, through meditation, not to approach those thoughts--- to simply let them be, while sticking to our chosen method. Gilbert identified two obstacles to this state of quietly observing whatever thoughts arise. The first is that people have a tendency to react to thoughts by adding more thoughts to it—a behaviour which Gilbert likened to magicians who keep spinning plates to keep them balanced on poles. Once the tendency to add our thoughts to existing ones ceases, the thoughts will fall away by themselves. Another, opposite, tendency is to narrow awareness by suppressing thoughts

altogether, which is like sitting in a dark cave. Meditation has to straddle a middle ground between these two extremes, if it is to benefit a practitioner's life.

Gilbert had much to say about how we can recognize when the notion of self is colouring what we see. During the Saturday teaching retreat, he introduced practitioners to an exercise called "Cat and Mouse". This exercise attempts to give the practitioner a feel for what it means to simply watch thoughts arise, catching them and then letting them go the way a cat catches mice and lets them go. The second half of this exercise added a twist of asking the practitioner to watch the cat as it watches the mice. This kind of experiment provides an ideal condition for the practitioner to observe how the "self" we maintain is going out to approach thoughts. Without the standpoint of calm detached mind, notions of selfhood and self-interest fuse with thoughts and affect how these thoughts will be received. However, many people on the retreat reported a more powerful experience of doubt, in response to: "who" is watching the cat? One attendee viewed the cat as an unnecessary intermediary between the thoughts and mind that is seeing. For a very lucid moment, practitioners could, and did, get a glimpse into how mind sees the way a mirror reflects, not governed by the anxious, grasping agendas of the self.

In the last part of the Saturday retreat, Gilbert briefly discussed the various kinds of methods that are used by Chan practitioners. He clarified many misconceptions about these methods. For instance, although observing or counting the breath is considered a method that is only for beginners, Gilbert reminded us that this method is a powerful way to concentrate the mind and lead to unified mind. Equally effective is the method of chanting the Buddha or a specific bodhisattva's name, which also has the added benefit of allowing practitioners to transfer merit to those in need.

Regarding the method of silent illumination, Gilbert remarked that this method is much more subtle than simply watching scattered thoughts. This method involves watching thoughts arise, but from the perspective of the unarisen mind. The term "silent illumination" even illustrates the core of the method, by suggesting mind as shining a light on itself and all of its activities. Clearly it takes focus and practice in concentrating mental energy to reach this point where the mind is being illuminated.

In his discussion of gong'an or huatou practice, Gilbert distinguished between the "hard" huatou, which is practised with a kind of intense and dogged persistence to answer a question that is posed within the mind; and "soft" huatou, which is often used to calm the mind after an intense huatou practice. His suggestion was to pose the question, wait for an answer from mind, then illuminate the question itself. The emphasis of huatou practice is to sincerely examine the question's implication while it's being posed in the mind. One must persist in posing the question even after the mind is being led into a profound doubt experience by the huatou itself.

Gilbert ended his Saturday retreat by mentioning his intention to come back to Toronto to discuss the methods of practice in much more detail. However, we needn't wait until Gilbert's next visit to take inspiration from what he has taught us. Gilbert's challenge was for DDMBA Toronto practitioners to try to understand the meaning of their practice, as well as see it as a greater purpose for others in our community. It is not just to calm or even stop the mind that we practice, but to give ourselves the capacity and ability to see through the self, and compassionately extend this more liberated awareness to help others. Most important of all, Gilbert has urged us to always remember that we are practitioners, and bring that practice off the cushion and into our work, our homes, and our environment.

---Keith Brown
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