

Robert “Willow” Jacobs is his name. Life’s his game. He’s a “culture vulture...experience junkie,” a sentient, epic volume of life experiences collected while journeying around Planet Earth 14 times in 81 years. He’s touched the lives of people throughout 43 countries, amid every continent except Africa. Nowadays, his travel-ship is docked mostly at a humble abode in the outskirts of Chiang Mai.

“I’ve never been a tourist,” proclaims Willow. “I would go somewhere and stay there, until they threw me out.” However, “When I arrived in Thailand, I had no desire to move on again. This was the end of the trail...I knew this when I got here, that this is where I want to spend the rest of my life.”

Clad in a sleeveless shirt and tie-dyed shorts, Willow was sprawled upon the strung hammock, dangling from the ceiling of his sala. The white, shoulder length hair framing long-life earned wrinkles branching across his face served to enhance his powerfully youthful eyes, that still dart forth an eagle-eyed gaze.

“I’m here (on earth) to learn what I can learn. Then, I’m outta here! Yeah. That’s my purpose. It’s certainly not to be important.

“I’m bumbling and stumbling through life, happy as a lark, as though I had good sense,” added this humble sage, prior to bellowing the joyous, cackling laughter which he shares frequently and with fervor.

Whether it’s Willow’s in-depth reference to world cultures and his seemingly endless array of related life stories – or his trademark inquiries into someone’s Chinese animal sign, often prior to sequestering a birth name or engaging in an initial conversation – his presence carries with it the potential for jostling someone into realizing that there’s an enormous world out there to explore.

He’s seemingly pretty much done it all, and then some. For the sake of nicking the surface related to this, Willow was born in Ohio and raised amid the streets of Brooklyn, New York City, before shipping off to Florida as an 8-year-old. Here, he rejected public schooling at the age of 16 and then served in the U.S. Air Force.

He soon after earned an M.D. - another, in Psychiatry - and practiced professionally while still in his 20s (and again in his 60s). Eventually, Willow became thoroughly disgruntled with Western medical practices - and the standardized, humdrum of North American culture as well - and “decided that I would never do anything again that I don’t really love to do.

“I put on my hat, headband, walked out to the road...hit the hippie trail and traveled for years and years and years with no money, living hand-to-mouth, no plans, just moving from place to place and experiencing whatever the Universe had to offer.”

He even lived for three-and-a-half of these 22 years in unbridged silence - two in India as a wandering, Sadhu monk - prior to later relinquishing this hushed “gift” upon ordering a cup of coffee in Spanish, while journeying to Panama. Willow has become so well-traveled that he’s sometimes been contracted as a personal, world travel guide.

“I’ve lived mostly in Third World countries, primarily because this is where freedom is...Three on a motorbike; living without anybody telling you what to do and how to do it,” said Willow. “However, of all the places I’ve been, Thailand has the happiest people, and I like to surround myself with happy people.

“I’ve never experienced a culture like this,” he added. “This is why I stay in Thailand, because the people here live so close to the teachings of the Buddha.”

What does this mean to Willow? Throughout much of his life, “I didn’t have a home. I didn’t have my place,” he admitted, while affectionately acknowledging Buti by his side. Now, “Her family is my family. And I married the family.”

Willow says his life has been based largely on belief systems. “And when I examine my belief systems, they become like sand slipping through my fingers. ‘Oh (*expletive*)! I lost that one! Now I have to get another one!’ So, I don’t look at my belief systems too closely now because I know they’re going to disappear.

“And when I’m finished with this last one, I likely won’t need this suit of clothes any more for this incarnation,” he added, while making a whistling noise and gesturing up toward the sky.

Willow’s life philosophies are a bi-product of his “living process,” which has evolved him from being strong yet inflexible like oak wood into a human being who is supple - like a willow tree. He referred to an “18-inch trip from the head to the heart,” and how feeling fear in life is a “future trip.”

“This is my mantra: ‘It’s all okay.’ It’s a simple mantra. Yet, it’s so profound” because it provides him with a “Terrible disease called contentedness, and this is what I have here in Thailand.

“I see what’s going on in the rest of the world. And every morning I wake up with my prayer of gratitude, which is my attitude. I am so happy to be here. ‘Thank you for allowing me to stay here!’

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Thailand provides him with “constant validation that I am in the right place at the right time. It’s really clear that this is a culture that enhances me. Philosophically speaking, it’s where I’m at.”

A primary attribute of Thai culture enlivening his thinking is the life philosophy connected with *may pen ray* (a commonly used expression meaning, “never mind; forget about it”). While some, particularly Westerners, maintain that this is merely a strategy that bandages a deep-rooted socioeconomic angst, Willow exclaims, “Thais aren’t suppressing their anger. They’re taking a moment’s pause. They’re choosing to respond one way, versus another. When a Western person would have road rage, a Thai will smile...They’re capable of everything, and they choose gentleness.”

Examples: Two motorists are having a mid-road conversation (damming the traffic) and most everyone else, including Willow, patiently wait. Another: A motorcyclist is stationed at a reddened traffic light, pecking away at an iPhone while others behind him or her are waiting in-cue. However, when the light rotates to green again, and this person continues with the cellular preoccupation, there’s no direct animosity expressed from those now being blocked from moving on with their lives.

“This is Thailand! This is the joy of being here! And I experience this joy every day. One of the reasons I’m here is because this stuff goes on, and people are okay with it. In the West, this is inconceivable!”

Furthermore, Willow maintains that, “In the West, independence and the intellect are each a shrine. Here in Thailand, life’s about interdependence.”

Likewise, he’s delving into yet another life treasure: his wife, Buti – an Akha hill person who is Willow’s “brown-skinned Goddess,” his “woman of the earth” – whom he met here in Pai nearly 10 years ago. There, they share farmland planted with 6,000 organically-grown coffee trees, with upcoming additions to an “off the grid” home powered entirely by green energy technology.

