



Natural Brilliance:
A Buddhist System for Uncovering Your Strengths
and Letting Them Shine
By Irini Rockwell

Reviews

Wildmind Buddhist Meditation, by Ashley Davis Bush

The subtitle of Irini Rockwell's new book, *Natural Brilliance: A Buddhist System for Uncovering Your Strengths and Letting them Shine*, reads like a self-help book, and, yes, it is emphatically about helping ourselves. Yet, as you might imagine from a Buddhist teacher, the emphasis of the book is very much about helping us *out of* ourselves. As Irini writes, "When we are fully present ... there is a tangible experience of the boundary of self dissolving and a sense of mingling with sights, sounds, smells, tastes." Throughout *Natural Brilliance*, Irini acknowledges the richness and basic goodness of our inner world and offers a set of teachings that mean to guide us on the path toward transcending our self by becoming our best self.

Irini Rockwell, is a senior teacher in the Shambhala community and a student of Tibetan Buddhist meditation master, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Her first book, *The Five Wisdom Energies: A Buddhist Way of Understanding Personalities, Emotions, and Relationships* (2002) grew out of her work with the Five Wisdoms Institute where she is currently the director and senior teacher.

The five wisdom energies are the dimensions of a comprehensive system in Tibetan Buddhism for describing and understanding everything we think, feel, say and do: in short, it is a conceptual system for making sense of our human experience. The five wisdom qualities are:

- Spaciousness (Buddha)
- Clarity (Vajra)
- Richness (Ratna)
- Passion (Padma)
- Activity (Karma).

Irini calls this system of qualities a “model of human dynamics.” Each of these qualities plays out in our personal experience in both dysfunctional and constructive traits. Gaining an understanding of our own unique energy patterns gives us a context for our strengths and weaknesses and the awareness to change in healthy ways. The energy of Karma, for example, can manifest in us skillfully as ‘productivity’ while at different times it can also manifest unskillfully as ‘manipulation’. The trick, as we gain awareness of these conditioned patterns, is to allow our inherent wisdom to guide us toward more skillful behavior.

In the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, these five qualities are overlapping aspects of an all-pervasive energetic dimension of reality that affects our inner world, our interpersonal world, and our relationship to our environment. The five wisdoms are inherent in all of us and can be drawn on at any time. When we begin to understand the unique ways that the wisdom energies play through our own person, we are enabled to redirect the energies in ways that offer us positivity, creativity, productivity, spaciousness and ultimately inner peace.

For Irini, “understanding sense perception is key to understanding reality.” Being grounded in a deep awareness of our sense perceptions frees us from attachment to our thoughts and feeling and grants us a certain spacious-

ness as we open out of the self-limiting world of thoughts and feelings. The experience of selflessness comes as we begin to drop our mental and emotional preoccupations (conditioning) and experience our wordless, thoughtless, immediate relationship with the world. In our day to day living, however, we become caught up in our busy minds and emotional reactivity and block our direct experience of our sense perceptions:

“In general, we don’t experience; we conceptualize...We cloud direct experience and thus have a dull, distorted view of our world. We cannot relate to ourselves or the world in a genuine way.” (*Natural Brilliance* page 37)

The five wisdoms are pointers that guide us back to a direct experience of our senses and back to an authentic relationship with ourselves and our world.

Natural Brilliance, in following its precursor, *The Five Wisdom Energies*, has the more directed purpose of applying the five wisdoms to our personal, social, and professional lives. The second part of “Natural Brilliance”, for example, a good two thirds of the book, is dedicated to applying the five wisdoms to leadership development and productivity in the workplace. Specific chapters address mindfulness, personal authenticity, intimate relationships, working with others and cultivating wisdom in our professional arenas.

In the chapter titled, “Engaging Effectively,” for example, Irini shares with us specifics about how to bring our understanding of the wisdom energies in ourselves and others to bear on workplace dynamics, communication, creativity and conflict resolution. Irini uses case studies, personal anecdotes and detailed exercises to explore the possibilities of engaging with others without reactivity and bias. She offers the five wisdom framework for skillful communication which is based on clear understanding and mindfulness.

To the uninitiated, the five wisdoms system can feel confusing and foreign. Like with reading a good novel, I was a few chapters in before I began to ‘get it’. Still, Irini writes with a real passion for the well-being of others and what seems like an uncompromising authenticity. Her personal narratives and real life examples are both instructive and entertaining. As a vehicle of self-understanding, personal enrichment and a tool for engaging with others, the five wisdoms model is intensely powerful.

For many of us, engaging with the five wisdoms will be an opportunity to release our attachment to our fixed views of ourselves and open to our beingness as a conduit for wisdom and deep interconnectedness with all things. The five wisdoms offer a thorough template through which to view our personal world, both inside and out. One could only benefit from integrating this perspective into their lives.

“What we come back to again and again is that fundamentally our sanity is intrinsic: we are good, sane, intelligent people. We have a soft spot and can relate to the world in a gentle way. When we experience a sense of well-being, we know this.” (*Natural Brilliance* page 73)

Buddha Space

Natural Brilliance is a beautiful book. Its presentation, from the tastefully flowery cover to the layout of the pages is nicely done, with the tidy use of little boxes that contain useful information generously sprinkled through its pages. It looks a bit like a typical new age work, with its pastel shades and somewhat misty references to Buddhism. Nowadays, there are many such books about, or inspired by, Buddhist teachings. Many of these take the form of new agey feel-good works, uplifting if a little vague, and bearing only a smidgin of a resemblance to the teachings of the Buddha. But is *Natural Brilliance* such a work, or is there more to it than that? The answers, of course, are in the book itself, so we will first take a broad look at its

claims and aims, and then delve a little deeper into its pages for a somewhat closer look.

The author of *Natural Brilliance: A Buddhist System for Uncovering Your Strengths and Letting Them Shine* is Irini Rockwell. She is a senior teacher in the lineage of the notorious Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa, and is the director of the Five Wisdoms Institute, an organization involved in promoting the system described in the book. Indeed, *Natural Brilliance* and the institute that Rockwell directs seem intertwined, as if the one complements, or promotes, the other. Clearly, the author is committed to the subject of which she writes, and holds a belief that its claims are genuine. So, what exactly, are the claims of *Natural Brilliance*?

The book claims that it contains a system that leads to a self-understanding that involves a satisfying relationship to life. Rockwell states that she presents a 'Buddhist model' that helps the reader to identify her or his personality traits that comprise one's 'innate intelligence.' These five qualities are presence, clarity, richness, passion, and action; by cultivating them one can enhance relationships, work, and creativity. Moreover, ultimately, the system shows us the interconnectedness of everyone and everything. Some pretty big claims there!

It's worth noting here that from the Buddhist perspective, the claims of the book are in line with some of the objectives found in the major movements of traditional Buddhism found around the world today. For, although it can be claimed that nirvana or enlightenment is the true destination of the Buddhist path, there are plenty of teachings and practices centered around making us happier and more productive human beings. *Natural Brilliance* seems more focused on these latter aims, rather than a breakthrough into an experience of awakening to our true nature. And, these are worthwhile objectives, for whilst no Buddhist worth their salt would deny the ultimate importance of enlightenment, it ain't for everyone right now; some people are more focused on their personality and its relationships,

and whilst this is the case, they will benefit from teachings and practices that make them happier and less harmful. So, does this book achieve this?

The question of the efficacy of the teachings and methods contained in the pages of *Natural Brilliance* is, in truth, impossible to answer unless one has read them thoroughly and put them into practice - neither of which this reviewer has done. What can be done is to present those teachings and explore them a little, before coming to a prediction on whether the claims made by Rockwell in the book are justified. So, rather than to continue to sum up her writings, it's time to quote a few passages from *Natural Brilliance* to allow the reader of this review to formulate their own opinions on its potential benefits.

"When we get right down to it, what most of us really want more than anything - more than the newest smartphone, job promotion, or getaway vacation - is inner peace. The radical message of the Buddhist tradition comes down to this: the peace and fulfillment we are seeking are present in us right now. They have never really left us - and can never leave us."
(*Natural Brilliance*, p.1)

"When we accommodate the parts of ourselves that we like the least and energies in others that feel threatening, we are allowing the full spectrum of human experience to display itself. One of the essential lessons of the five wisdom energies is that in embracing our confusion, we discover that our wisdom is right there. When we are familiar with the characteristics of each energy style, we immediately know where the sanity is and where the neurosis is. We can align ourselves with the sanity, with the wisdom aspect. At that point we have discovered the best within us, our unique brand of brilliance. We discover we have great liberty to be who we are, and we can celebrate that."
(Ibid. pp.13-14)

"Bringing Out the Best of Who You Are

- Recollect three times in your life when you felt the best of who you are.

- What outer circumstances made that possible?
 - What qualities in you began to shine?"
- (Ibid. p.14)

"We are affected by the energy around us whether we are aware of it or not. When we are unaware, energy has the upper hand and we feel tossed around by life's circumstances. When we are aware of the play of energy, we can ride it. With awareness, we can gauge our atmospheric condition in a given situation, sensing the energy of the moment, whether 'open' or 'closed.' We can begin to see that habitual patterns of closing take us out of the moment. We literally lose track of where we are."

(Ibid. p.70)

From the first of the extracts above, the link between the five energies system and Buddhism can be seen - albeit a somewhat tenuous one at first glance. Reading in-between the lines however, a slightly closer connection can be made, when noting references to "inner peace," "wisdom," and "awareness." That no more explicit Buddhist language and concepts are used much in the book can be taken two ways. In a positive light, the book can be seen to be communicating Buddhist teachings in modern English as opposed to obscure Asian languages; a negative appraisal might conclude that in fact there's little genuine Buddhism in *Natural Brilliance* to begin with.

The quotation above that is entitled "Bringing Out the Best of Who You Are" is included here for two reasons. The first is that it highlights a central theme of the book, which is the importance given to discovering and living from "who you are" - a loaded phrase if there ever was one in Buddhist thought. This isn't the unconditioned 'true nature' that Buddhism teaches lies at the heart of every sentient being, but more the essential ego or conditioned personality that each of us is conventionally said to possess. The second importance of this particular quote is that it is an example of the reflections that appear throughout the book. Here, Rockwell has assembled a

useful collection of exercises that encourage her readers to explore their selves. A useful undertaking for sure.

The emphasis that Rockwell puts on awareness is certainly something she shares with Buddhists of whatever persuasion, including those of the Tibetan tradition from which she draws her primary influences for the five wisdom energies. In encouraging her readers to increase their levels of awareness she is doing them a great service, and with the many awareness-based exercises in *Natural Brilliance* she gives them the means to do so. For this alone, the book is worthy of some praise, as is the eloquent and clear manner in which the author communicates her message. Another laudable aspect to the book is the abundance of real-life examples that Rockwell has woven into its pages, which lend it a vibrancy that would otherwise be missing:

"Jane had a pattern of getting speeding tickets when driving home from visiting her family. She would often be in emotional turmoil and put her foot on the gas. Then one day she practiced simply paying attention to (being mindful of) the speedometer. This allowed her to relax. No speeding ticket."

(Ibid. p.86)

"Becoming single, I took up the tango. I joke that, living on the edge of mainstream society as I do, I have never made much money, which gives me great freedom to move from one thing to the next. Nothing to lose! At various times, my husband and son have said, 'Why don't you get a real job?' I simply cannot. I have been stubborn about sticking to my passions, which in turn allows me to give the world my best."

(Ibid. p.98)

"At the time my sister was put under the care of San Diego Hospice, Dr. Charles Lewis, a meditator, was on her team. He is the medical director of both the Inpatient Care Center and their Institute for Palliative Care. I was present at the intake interview. He radiated a calm presence and, from his

questions, you felt that he was seeing a whole person. In the two hours he spent with her and later in my conversations with him, he was attentive to every nuance my sister displayed. He created a healing environment not only for my sister, but also her caregiver, Jenna, and myself."

(Ibid. p.174)

So, returning to the question posed at the top of this review, as to whether *Natural Brilliance* is just another wishy-washy new age book, or something more substantial, this reviewer has come to his conclusion: the latter. For, whilst the Buddhist elements in the book are more implicit than explicit, and many traditionalist Buddhists may find it not to their tastes at all, *Natural Brilliance* does have an integrity to it that is impressive, the motives of Irini Rockwell appearing to be wholly genuine. The actual details of the five wisdom energies themselves are too complicated to go into in this review, and are therefore left to those that choose to read the book itself and reflect upon them. But it is the conviction of this reviewer that if they do so, they will reap worthwhile rewards.

Spirituality and Practice by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat

Irini Rockwell is a senior teacher in the Buddhist lineage of Tibetan master Chogyam Trungpa. She is director of the Five Wisdoms Institute, an organization offering training programs to enhance self-awareness, communication, and effectiveness. For more information, visit www.fivewisdomsinstitute.com.

Rockwell is convinced that our educational system is built not on wisdom but on the accumulation of knowledge. It values facts and other information whereas wisdom is a state of being. "We become wise; we don't acquire wisdom," the author writes. In this engaging paperback, Rockwell leads us on a contemplative inner journey to connect with our inherent wisdom. She quotes her teacher Chogyam Trungpa: "We all have our own style and our

own particular nature. We can't avoid it. The enlightened expression of yourself is in accord with your inherent nature."

The foundation of understanding and appreciating the human adventure are the Five Wisdoms — qualities or energies within people, places, and situations:

- spaciousness
- clarity
- richness
- passion
- activity

Each of these teachings has an enlightened and a confused aspect. For example, passion at its best can be empathetic, compassionate, caring, and thriving in relationship. Passion at its worst can be obsessively wanting to possess someone or something — a significant other, a job, a dress; the result is a needy and clinging behavior. Even in our confusion, there are spiritual lessons to be learned. Rockwell presents exercises and thought-piece lists on these energies, coming into balance, the triggers and catalysts of situational energies, and more.

In the last section, Rockwell examines the application of the Five Wisdoms to intimate relationships, work life, leadership, education, and the serving professions, and the arts. The author concludes with "A Summary of the Five Wisdoms in Three Slogans:

1. Be who you are: enjoy your energies and they will dawn as wisdoms.
2. Ride the coincident of the moment.
3. Align the best of who you are with whatever is needed.

Publishers Weekly

Understanding yourself is the key to dealing with—and even enjoying—the inevitable complexity of life. Irini Rockwell presents us with a powerful system for the kind of self-understanding that leads to just that kind of satisfying relationship with life. It's a Buddhist model for identifying your unique mix of personality traits that make up your innate intelligence. All five qualities—presence, clarity, richness, passion, and action—are your rich resource. By cultivating them you begin to see how you can use this remarkable system to enhance your relationships, your work, and your creativity. Ultimately, this system introduces us to a larger world: the totality and interconnectedness of everyone and everything.

As usual, Shambhala published lovely book that has a calming effect, even without reading it. I love the Buddhists. This is a journey into discovering our divine self and translating it into our outer world. The way it is written is rich and engaging.

Library Journal

Rockwell underscores her lessons with remarkably concrete suggestions and lists. This work nicely bridges the gap between understanding and practice for contemporary Buddhist believers; excellent for the busy practitioner.

The Messenger

Natural Brilliance: A Buddhist System for Uncovering Your Strengths and Letting Them Shine by Irini Rockwell offers a simple yet profound Buddhist typology system that can enhance self-awareness, improve relationship dynamics, and boost effectiveness.