

The Five Wisdoms Institute

Irini Rockwell takes the Five Wisdom Energies to New Audiences

- What is the Five Wisdoms Institute?

Irini Rockwell: The institute is an outgrowth of my book, *the Five Wisdom Energies, a Buddhist Way of Understanding Personalities, Emotions and Relationships*, but it is also the fruit of an earlier inspiration, developed to a large extent during the ten years I taught at Naropa University. In essence, the Institute's goal is to take what we know as dharma practitioners and offer it in any way we can to the greater world, finding skillful ways to make it accessible. Let's give the world the best of what we have to offer! Moreover, we can "contemplasize" any Western discipline with which we are involved. During the time I was writing, I began to see that the Five Wisdoms work has a huge potential, and that we have hardly scratched the surface. I also saw that there needed to be a vehicle with a somewhat entrepreneurial approach that could be independent of our larger organizations and move into places in a very personal way.

- How did you come to write *Five Wisdom Energies*?

IR: I have been very engaged with this work for almost twenty-five years, so the book is a culmination in that sense. I consider the practice of the postures and the teachings surrounding them Trungpa Rinpoche's terma. It is a very special teaching he gave us. Still, it took me six years to write the book—it was a very difficult book to write, aside from the fact that I was not a writer. The major challenge was taking material steeped in both Vajrayana Buddhism and Buddhist psychology, and making it into a book that anyone could understand.

I was teaching five wisdoms work and what I call "contemplative approaches to working with others" in a variety of places. So the work was informing the writing and the writing was informing the work. In most places I did not have the luxury of long programs, so I worked very hard on ways to get the essence across in shorter periods of time—in some cases without using the postures. I saw that everyone could benefit from this material even though they might not be practitioners. I also looked at my own journey and realized that I had read about, heard teachings on, thought about, and danced with the energies for seven years before I actually practiced the postures to any extent.

So I took up the challenge: creating a sense of the energies and the principles that surround the practice, solely through the written word. Luckily, I had a fantastic editor, Emily Sell. With her help I began to see that there are various levels of understanding and ways of focusing the material.

•What do you mean when you say that there are “levels of understanding and focusing the material?”

IR: I looked at the ways Trungpa Rinpoche presented the material to different groups, which we still follow in our sangha today. Mental health professionals in training do long practice retreats to experience first-hand extreme states of mind so they have more understanding of their clients. They focus on exploring the inner psychological landscape and experiencing the profound transformational process of the energies. In the book, I describe this process in the chapter called “Embracing Who We Are.”

However, artists are not necessarily interested in that and may not do the postures at all; they like to play with the energies through their chosen art forms. With art process, Trungpa Rinpoche emphasized working with sense perceptions, our antennae to the world. Interestingly, this is no less than a vehicle for teaching Mahamudra, so these teachings are both playful and profound.

The vision of contemplative education developed at Naropa University refers to the energies as five qualities of an educated person. They create an integrative approach to learning and can inform many aspects of an educational setting: the learning environment, teachers’ communication styles, curriculum development, and evaluation and guidance of students’ educational journey. Each quality is seen as a necessary ingredient of the learning process and the foundation for ongoing learning, understanding, and creativity throughout life.

The Maitri Council International (see sidebar on previous page,) with which I have been active since its inception in 1995, authorizes Maitri teachers who work with the postures. This is important, as the postures are very provocative. But anyone can work with the five wisdoms themselves—I feel that once you understand the mix of colors in yourself and others, you can use them anywhere, in any work. Every professional arena has a different culture and environment so with each you need a different language, and different modalities and formats.

I am continuing these explorations with people in a variety of places: at the Shambhala Institute for Authentic Leadership, Naropa University, and the Chicago School of Professional Psychology. I have also been working at the National

Institute for School Improvement in the Netherlands for five years with a group of trainers who work in schools, and are developing model elementary and secondary schools. We are dialoguing on how to incorporate the qualities into the schools' vision. The trainers love the work and are very transformed by it. However, they are not authorized to teach posture practice themselves. So together we are very creative in learning to present the material in short, experiential ways. I see that the same approach is needed in other organizations as well, with other formats and language.

- What do you feel is the essence of this work?

IR: Trungpa Rinpoche used to say, "People are our business." I really like that. I would say the essence is working with personal and interpersonal energy dynamics. This is very touchy and often subtle stuff. We tend to avoid this kind of penetrating, personal exploration. Even as practitioners, we would rather side step the really sticky stuff. But energy is always there. If we are not aware of it, it rules our lives; if we are aware of it we can learn to go for the ride. With this practice, over time, we see the inseparability of inner and outer mandala, inner and outer space awareness, and we transmute our confusion into wisdom. The power of the practice is that it has the ruggedness of the Vajrayana in penetrating the core of our being but it is presented through the warmth of the Mahayana, making friends with ourselves and others.

- Let's get back to the Institute. Say more about it's vision.

IR: The vision is to provide training programs in the five wisdoms to enhance self-awareness, communication, and effectiveness in professional arenas as well as for personal growth. Writing the book was extremely helpful in focusing these ideas and I realized there was a growing body of material that could be housed under one banner. It became obvious that we needed a website! The launching of the site—where the vision is presented quite clearly—in early 2002, was what I consider the birth of the institute.

- And you've been out teaching since then?

IR: Since the institute's inception, with the book out and the website up, I have been on the road teaching programs, giving talks at bookstores, and being interviewed by newspapers and on radio and television shows. The Water Horse Year was about

getting the word out, planting seeds. But it seems to have gathered some momentum. For one thing, it is being translated—possibly into nine languages, something I never would have imagined. Also, the Contemplative Mind in Higher Education group is editing a book entitled *Going Public with Spirituality*, which will have a chapter called *Five Qualities, A Contemplative Approach to Integrative Learning*. The Shambhala Sun published *Understanding who we are through The Five Buddha Families*, and Yoga in the Rockies has one called *Five Wisdoms Yoga* on the power of the postures.

I've had the opportunity to work with some wonderful people as well. Matthias Heidel and Elke Dobkowitz in Germany are fantastic at creating a container in which the varied qualities of the energies come out in the environment. With Philippe Ronce in France, I have been working on a documentary video. Jan and An van Bolhuis and Kees Blass in Amsterdam and I created a series of CDs which will be used at programs. Sebo Ebbens, one of the Dutch educators, and I have had a wonderful time working together on contemplative education. I come to the Netherlands to teach and then he takes it back to Naropa, full circle! We joke that you have to cross the ocean a few times to gain credibility.

- What lies in the future for you?

IR: In May I moved to Boulder, Colorado. My hope is to be able to create more of a base of operations there. I will also continue to travel, but I am hoping that the Water Sheep year will provide a little more ground. More writing seems inevitable, and I'm already forming ideas for a second book that will go further with the ways in which wisdoms can be useful in our world. I have been doing this work for many years, so I keep wondering when I am going to get bored with it, but it keeps changing. Mostly, it always comes back to the power of the practice and the people. Each person is so colorful and so unique. It is so heartening to see people soften, and open, and relax with who they are.

Irini Rockwell is director of The Five Wisdoms Institute and author of *The Five Wisdom Energies, a Buddhist Way of Understanding Personalities, Emotions and Relationships*. The book is based on teachings of the Five Buddha Families and Maitri Space Awareness practice. Irini travels internationally, training, consulting, and facilitating five wisdoms work for educators, health professionals, organizational leaders, artists, and for personal growth.

