

# **The Five Wisdoms: A Contemplative Approach to Integrative Learning**

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“It is wisdom which is seeking for wisdom...

It is the readiness of the mind that is wisdom.” Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

Our education is a lifelong journey. From infancy to death we have the challenge and the opportunity to learn. It is fundamental to who we are as humans. Why then do we create institutions of higher education that promote lives full of confusion, stress, and turmoil when what we long for is well being, a fulfilling life, and happiness? Why do we get locked into systems and habitual ways of behavior that add to the confusion and turmoil? How can we create environments of learning that bring out the best of who we are?

Attempting to transform institutions of higher education could begin with external structures and systems. My life's work has led instead to focus on the human beings who invent these structures and systems, beginning with who we are right now in this moment. The approach that I work with in bringing about personal integration and wholeness is through an investigation of the five wisdom energies. As qualities or aspects of being fully human these five wisdom energies provide the framework for a contemplative approach to education. Contemplative education, an integration of contemplative understanding with contemporary fields of knowledge, is inspired by the Buddhist tradition of meditative disciplines, contemplative inquiry, and sacred view.

### **Five Ways of Knowing in Education**

The five wisdoms, in the context of contemplative education, are referred to as the five qualities of an educated person. As Peter Hurst, Dean of Faculty at Naropa University said, “They [the wisdoms] come from Vajrayana Buddhism and reflect five different aspects of awakened mind, five different ways in which one could be awake in five different styles... We are attempting to create an environment of study that encourages development of those five qualities.” (Hurst 1987) Emphasizing the development of these five qualities creates a balance between acquiring specific

disciplines and the enhancing of personal growth. They are aspects of a completely educated person from the contemplative perspective. We could think of them as “five ways of knowing.”

The Naropa mission statement goes on to say: “Our belief is that qualities such as these best prepare the individual for life in modern society. Difficulties of living in contemporary society are to a great extent the result of psychological hindrances such as emotional imbalance, confusion, the inability to communicate with others, lack of clear thinking, and narrowness in one’s understanding of life. Once one has had some sense of how to work effectively with such blocks, avenues of personal and professional effectiveness and satisfaction begin to open up”

By being curious about the uniqueness of each person’s journey, we educate a full human being, the whole person. We are as interested in students as people, as we are in their educational development. There is an allegiance to inherent well-being which creates friendliness and a ground of trust between fellow learners. So the focus is on process, as much as content; an emphasis on being as much as doing; an embodied knowing as much as an accumulation of knowledge.

### **Qualities of an Educated Person**

The following five qualities of an educated person are a way of looking at the five wisdoms within the context of contemplative education. They are adapted from the Naropa University catalogue. By working with them from a contemplative perspective, we discover the wisdoms within us.

#### ***1. Spaciousness: Openness and respect for immediate experience***

This quality cultivates awareness of the present moment, being in the here and now, a spontaneous presence. It acknowledges our direct perception of the present moment, including ambiguity and uncertainty, chaos and confusion, both in ourselves and in the environment. It involves developing a clear, accurate, and open-ended relationship to experience. It is twenty-four-hour-a-day attentiveness to whatever we are doing, even dreaming. In order to act with intelligence and confidence, we must proceed from a foundation of ongoing awareness and curiosity.

What is unique about the contemplative approach is the emphasis it puts on this first quality of openness and spaciousness; most educational institutions would

claim to promote the other qualities. This first quality provides the spacious ground for all the others to manifest their wisdom. To experience this we engage in practices of meditation and contemplative disciplines.

### *The Role of Meditation in Spaciousness*

The practice of sitting meditation trains our mind. We see how the mind functions and how we perceive others, the world, and ourselves. First we work with mindfulness, training in being attentive to each moment. By resting and taming the mind, we develop a mind that is stable and calm. This gives us a greater sense of openness and makes us more flexible. We realize that openness is actually quite natural to us. We feel synchronized, strong and content. We discover our best asset. We need this strength of mind so that thoughts and emotions do not destabilize us.

Then we work with awareness, an expanded view that brings the precision of mindfulness into whatever arises in our experience. This refines our sense perceptions, the antenna through which we engage with our world. We can see, hear, and feel more accurately. We can discriminate the phenomena of our world. What we experience slowly comes into who we are. We have more equanimity and our life becomes more workable.

There are many varieties of meditation. The most basic one is sitting meditation. Its very simplicity is its most challenging aspect. Just sitting, mindful of breathing and letting our thoughts dissolve can be excruciatingly irritating and boring. Everyone does not take to it, and for most of us it is a bumpy journey. Other possibilities are walking meditation, contemplating a phrase, or visualizing something. People also practice traditional mind-body disciplines such as tai chi or yoga. Sometimes these are less challenging because there is something to do and that something is inherently calming.

The power of meditation is that it trains our body, speech and mind, integrating who we are. We learn to embody our body and synchronize its movements. We refine our speech by paying attention to breathing, thus working with our thoughts and emotions so they are an expression of our intelligence rather than our confusion. Meditation hones, sharpens and primes our mind, enabling us to apply

our intelligence in the study of a specific discipline. Synchronizing body, speech and mind in this way develops an authentic presence.

Meditation enables us to take ourselves as the subject, the thing to be studied. We take the time to be with ourselves and take note of our experience in a simple way. It enables us to change. All the talk in the world fundamentally has very little effect on our day-to-day life. Change comes about in the doing, in the being. The commitment to work with ourselves puts us onto a genuine path that evolves in our own unique style. Concurrent with academic studies, we engage in a personal journey. We reeducate ourselves, transform ourselves. It is self-empowering and brings about confidence.

One on one meditation instruction is helpful in guiding people along this path. Whether a student, staff person or faculty member becomes a meditator or not is less important than creating a genuine atmosphere, a genuine relationship. As a meditation instructor I have often been in a situation where someone is enthused with everything about contemplative education, but does not want to practice meditation. That's fine too. In our relationship I still find ways to help them work with their mind and body.

To quote Richard Brown, Department Head of the Masters Program in Contemplative Education at Naropa University: "Meditation practice profoundly affects how we learn and the depth of our knowledge. Meditative knowing is holistic, encompassing multiple dimensions of experience, frequently crossing disciplines, and intermingling who we are with what we learn. A spiritual or transcendent quality underlies such breadth and depth of knowledge, because of the interconnected nature of the elements of knower and known. If this sacred knowledge is met directly, it invites complete, compassionate and skillful engagement with the world." (Brown, 1996)

## ***2. Clarity: Intellect and insight***

This has to do with passion and curiosity for learning. Intelligence includes critical thinking, analysis, and sharpening insight. It facilitates understanding the world and ourselves and enables us to articulate it in precise and creative ways. This quality involves proficiency in understanding principles, structures, logic, and

relationships. It is the willingness to maintain a larger view and to regard situations beyond our own self-interest, including being able to take another's perspective.

### *The Role of Meditation in Clarity*

Meditation makes us better learners. We need to be present to be able to learn, a "readiness of mind" as Zen master Suzuki Roshi calls it, which is open, flexible and inquisitive. Mindfulness is our ability to stay engaged with an object. Our mind is not jammed up and doesn't jump all over the place; we can just be here with what we are doing. As Chögyam Trungpa, founder of Naropa University, said at a 1975 faculty meeting, "We should encourage people to calm down and slow down and do something properly. Again and again and again. It takes a lot of training and discipline. Learning means not just snatching but digesting, chewing, swallowing."

A mind of meditation gets us beyond the words and concepts and makes what we are studying our own. We not only understand it, but incorporate it into who we are. As Sebo Ebbens, senior consultant at the National Institute for School Improvement (The Netherlands) says, "...The contemplative always involves experiencing a situation personally... students should feel space. Only then does openness develop... In order to achieve this, a teacher must regularly slow down the class. In this way he makes students connect with their inner selves...space is a great and endless source of creativity." (Ebbens 1996) Working with both form and formlessness, our topic of study (the form), when infused with space (formlessness), could be seen in a new light. Rather than trying to churn something out, we have insights.

Through meditation we train in joining intellect and intuition, mind and heart. When intellect is exaggerated, we are too abstract; relying too much on intuition, we lack precision. In our Western world we emphasize intellect: we differentiate, make distinctions, create boundaries, have concepts about this and that. Intuition is opening to the unconditional and undifferentiated, being undivided, in the moment, immediate. It is harder to train. When intellect and intuition are in balance we experience more harmony in our lives. The mistake we habitually make is that we feel them as separate. The key is opening our heart; it connects us to whatever we are doing. "We trust in the heart and rest in the mind." (Hayward, 1984) Joining heart and mind, intellect and intuition, we become more spontaneous. As Suzuki

Roshi, puts it, "When the heart is purified, actions are precise, involved wholeheartedly and one does not hesitate."

The Latin word "educare," which means to draw out, is the root of the word education. This is telling. The intelligence is already there; it is a matter of drawing it out. So we are interested in learning how to learn. The approach we take is that knowledge is realized through three stages of learning: 1. listening to what is taught, hearing the words, 2. contemplating or reflecting, determining whether it rings true, and 3. embodying or manifesting, taking the subject to heart, making it one's own. Knowledge becomes first hand; we personalize it. It becomes relevant to our life. We take delight in our discipline and are able to share it, radiate it. Our knowledge becomes our wisdom. When the learning experience is given this sense of path, the role of the teacher becomes more of environmental support. "A situation develops that sustains itself." (Ebbens 1996)

Focusing on a particular discipline or body of knowledge and immersing ourselves in its traditions is a way of deepening. Each discipline or field of study is a vehicle, a skillful means, a way of contacting the world. All paths lead to deeper understanding, as a quote from a traditional Buddhist text says, "Whatever the virtues of the many fields of knowledge, all are steps on the path of omniscience." Our chosen discipline provides a form to come back to the now, an opportunity to be present. At a Naropa faculty meeting in 1982 Trungpa Rinpoche said, "Contemplative means being with a discipline fully and thoroughly, as a hungry man eats food or a thirsty man drinks water. It's genuine, immediate, "love of wisdom puts you on the spot all the time."

### ***3. Resourcefulness and appreciation of the richness of the world***

By increasing our knowledge and appreciation of the world in its diversity, creativity and resourcefulness are evoked. We can tap the resources we have and cultivate hidden inner talents—intellectual, emotional, and pragmatic. This quality involves developing our ability to respect the many modes of human expression, experiences, creativity, and cultural backgrounds.

### *The Role of Meditation in Resourcefulness*

This quality comes from the expanded awareness that meditation engenders. Having deepened a sense of who we are, we can lift our gaze and welcome in the world's richness and diversity. We are able to be resourceful in our own creative endeavors, generous with what we have to offer to others, and hospitable to what others have to give. Embracing the wisdom and intelligence of our world cultures and religions comes naturally from developing a sense of generosity and hospitality. Traveling and studying abroad is a way to develop this quality. Grounded in our own ways of knowing and being, we are able to welcome diverse views and possibilities. This expands a sense of who we are.

This quality also creates a rich ground for interdisciplinary work. We are able to express who we are regardless of what "department" we fall into. My own journey, inspired by the contemplative way, led me from my first career in dance as a performer, teacher, choreographer and dance company director, to so delighting in working with others that I took a degree in Contemplative Psychology / Psychotherapy. Embedded in that body of knowledge, I saw the work could be designed for anyone desiring to work with others in **healthy** and effective ways. Crossing disciplines and engaging in a truly integrative course of study encourages bigger vision.

#### *4. Interpersonal and communication skills*

This is the ability to relate and communicate effectively with people. It begins with valuing the experiences of others and allowing them to teach us about themselves. From this follows work on the various modes of interpersonal communication—effective reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. It includes communication through nonverbal artistic media like music, movement, and visual arts. This quality also includes an ability to connect to others empathetically, an interest and curiosity about other people's lives. It is the ability to give and receive feedback skillfully.

In any relationship, we have to first be present, open and receptive to another. Then we can meet them, join with them. The direct intuitive experience or natural process of merging with another is called "exchange" or "energetic exchange." There is an unobstructed sharing of energy, an emotional identification. It is an open moment with the intention of relating without interpretation, concepts, or projections. We

have an inner feeling of being able to tune into the underlying quality of a person. It is commonly talked about as empathy. The basic premise is that we can not relate with depth if there is not shared experience. When we drop our own story line and put ourselves in someone's shoes, we enter their world. Then we can see our interconnectedness. We can acknowledge the intrinsic wisdom and inherent intelligence in every human being. **No** matter how confused or distraught they may appear. There is fundamentally not a problem with who they are.

Exchanging with another arouses our compassion. With compassion, we see others more clearly. We have insights into who they are. Insight is experienced as tangible, a physical sensation of being synchronized, a feeling of "clicking in." Clear seeing joins heart and mind, intellect and intuition. It has a sharp quality and so we are able to penetrate and reveal situations that might go unnoticed with a more diffuse mind. Insight is sensing the energy of the situation and letting it be in its own state without appropriating, rejecting, or ignoring.

### *The Role of Meditation in Interpersonal Skills*

In working with creative expression or communication of any kind, we begin with being present and open. Inspiration or first thought arises out of that space. It comes to us; it is not created by us. There is a sense of "ah" to it. Then our creation or communication, as it evolves and begins to manifest, is ventilated by a spacious mind. Communicating from a cluttered state of mind is like throwing a bucket of paint at a canvas. Instead we could apply brush to canvas with discrimination and precision. With a spacious mind our expression and communication is more genuine.

Our greatest obstacle to relating with others is that we all carry around our own version of reality. When we are absorbed in our own version, we project it onto others and situations rather than perceiving them accurately. We tend to see people and events in terms of our own interpretation and develop expectations based on how we think things are. We also have emotional reactions to what we perceive to be real. So it becomes very confusing. When we do not practice exchange, everything is a projection. They can become very convincing and solid.

Relating and communicating with others is central to our lives as human beings. However, we inevitably find relationships that are inspiring and meaningful and

those that are challenging. Even with the best intentions, too often relationships do not go smoothly or reach their full potential. Putting some effort into making good relationships brings out the best qualities in each person. The more we work with ourselves, the more we open to working with others; the more we know ourselves, the more we can know others. There is a potent combination of a personal and interpersonal path. Our relationships with others can be a vehicle for essential change. We can share our being, the best of who we are, in a compassionate way. The commitment to working with others in this way is a big leap. It goes beyond professionalism and beyond the safety of a one-up relationship.

### *5. Effective action*

This is the ability to apply our learning and insight effectively in the world, putting openness, insights, knowledge, and communicative capacities into action. It involves becoming organized, responding effectively to demands, sustaining interest, and being committed to carrying projects through to completion.

As we gain familiarity with the five wisdoms, we can integrate them into whatever we do. We can embody them in our presence and in environments we create. We can recognize the energies in others and align with their sanity, the best of who they are. And we can act. Taking action in this context has a very different quality than in our normal way of operating. A ground of openness, sharpened intellect, resourcefulness, and genuine relationship integrates the fullness of who we are in relating to situations. We align ourselves with the totality of the five energies and ride the energy of the moment. Then our actions have integrity.

We can work creatively with the five qualities. Connecting to something with passion and making it manifest brings a sense of satisfaction and joy. For instance, in writing this chapter, all the energies were called forth. In the beginning there was sense of open ground full of lots of possibility, but also lots of uncertainty. Then I became clearer as to how to proceed and the paper started having a structure. Bringing in the resources and richness from my own and other people's perspectives and experience, the writing began to fill out, became more substantial. There was also a desire to communicate, to try to convey what I was saying in a

clear and heartfelt way. As well there was an effort to work efficiently and to get it done in a timely manner.

### *The Role of Meditation in Effective Action*

When we are in tune with the energies, we align with the inherent wisdom of our world and experience our connection to everyone and everything in an energetic matrix. We sense a totality and interconnectedness that is not self-referential. Yet it would be pretentious to say that we can create a perfect learning environment this way. People always need to work with their limited understanding and deeply ingrained obstacles. For instance, one person might be very spacious but somewhat stuck there, with an inability to act. Another might drive things forward without much forethought or relating to others.

With enough of the students, faculty and administration tuned into this work, a path quality can unfold. At best, this kind of perspective allows us to be truly collaborative, engaging with others in a life-affirming rather than selfaggrandizing way. When we have a sense of how to work with energetic reality, we can creatively apply our understanding anywhere, anytime, no matter what we are doing. It is an opportunity to see and engage with the world through five wisdoms.

## **The Five Wisdom Energies**

The five wisdom energies are a way of understanding who we are, our personality, emotional landscape, and how we relate to others and our world. We each display energy in our own unique ways—through body posture, facial expressions, mannerisms, word choices, the tone and tempo of our voice. We express our energy through attitudes, emotions, decisions, and actions. Each of the energies is associated with particular ways of perceiving and interacting with the world. The energies also pervade every aspect of the phenomenal world. They manifest themselves in landscapes, seasons, and environments. They also manifest themselves in the systems and structures we create.

Each of the five energies has its unique wisdom, but also its unstable manifestation. This approach is a way of celebrating our strengths and working with our weaknesses, an attitude of unconditional friendliness toward whatever arises in our being as the catalyst for turning our energy around: from feeling constricted to feeling expansive with who we are. When we make friends with ourselves—experience warmth, relaxation and openness—we embrace the best of who we are. We do not have to discard as bad what we think are our negative qualities; by embracing them we discover they are our best assets. Our wisdom embraces both our confused and our healthy states.

Fundamentally, whether we are aware of it or not, energy is pervasive. It is the vibrant aspect of being—the quality, texture, ambiance, and tone of the animate and the inanimate, the visible and the invisible. It is the basic vitality of our existence. Becoming familiar with the energies allows an integration that is transpersonal, opening the door to subtler levels of being. Through our thoughts and emotions, we experience the energy of our inner being; through our sense perceptions (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching), we experience the energies of the outer world.

All of these energies—inner and outer—are very accessible and immediate to us at any time. To work with energy, we need to cultivate awareness, attending to the present moment by observing what is happening. We can train ourselves to do this. Mindfulness and awareness are the basic components of sitting meditation practice, which plays a key role. Through this practice we can stabilize our minds,

which, in turn, brings mental clarity and an inherent strength. We become better able to work with our own psychology and interactions with our world.

**The five wisdom energies can take either open or closed aspects:**

Spaciousness

**Balanced:** peaceful, accommodating, contemplative, receptive, simple, easy going, content with just being.

**Confused:** dull, lazy, immobile, humorless, stubborn, insensitive, ignoring, denying.

**In general:** associated with space, all sense perceptions, the color white.

Clarity

**Balanced:** clear minded, intellectual brilliance, sharp and precise, maintains perspective, not biased, full of integrity.

**Confused:** overly analytical, critical, self-righteous, opinionated, authoritarian, demanding perfection, angry.

**In general:** associated with water, sense of sight, the color blue.

Richness

**Balanced:** deeply satisfied, self-fulfilled, enriching, expansive, resourceful, full of potential, hospitable, generous, appreciative.

**Confused:** self-important, arrogant, ostentatious, oppressive, greedy, overindulgent, emotionally needy, possessive.

**In general:** associated with earth, senses of taste and smell, the color yellow.

Passion

**Balanced:** engaging, radiating warmth, magnetizing, charming, listens deeply, speaks from the heart, intuitive, discriminating subtle experience, sensual.

**Confused:** insecure, seeking confirmation, preoccupied by desire, obsessively grasping, pleasure seeking, manipulative, overly emotional.

**In general:** associated with fire, sense of hearing, the color red.

Activity

**Balanced:** efficient, effective, practical, full of positive energy, confident in abilities, timely and appropriate action, synchronicity with world.

**Confused:** restless, speedy, controlling, dominating, power hungry, competitive, fear of failure, paranoid, jealous.

**In general:** associated with air, sense of touch, the color green.

## **Levels of Understanding and Experience**

When we begin to become aware of the energies, we see how our patterns of behavior, emotions, and thinking correspond to one or more of the five energies. This awareness can become the foundation for developing a practical way of working with others, the phenomenal world, and with ourselves. It is not that we will filter every minute of our day through the perspective of the five colors. However, we will find that some situations become clear and workable only when we connect to their energetic dynamic.

With training, we can become a psychophysical barometer, a finely tuned sensing device. We can pick up on the energetic climate of anyone or any situation. By recognizing our energetic makeup, we can learn to appreciate our natural traits and those of others. We can work with them in any situation to improve self awareness, communication and creative expression.

There are many ways to train with the energies. Just being aware of them is a first step. For more intensive work the practice of taking particular postures in colored environments evokes the specific psychological qualities of each energy in an immediate and direct way. Once said, everyone has his or her capacities, aptitudes and preferences. Everyone engages in their own unique way. Some people find five wisdoms work extremely immediate and are able to apply it to their life and work quite quickly and spontaneously. Five wisdoms work might not penetrate others as much. In working with people, I have found that the length or intensity of someone's engagement with the energies does not necessarily matter; it has more to do with a person's propensities.

## **Applications**

There are limitless applications, both personal and professional for five wisdoms work. It is very adaptable to the needs and interests of different professions as well as for personal growth. Over the last twenty five years I have worked in a variety of settings, tailoring the material to the needs and interests of each group. At Naropa

University (Boulder, Colorado) I worked within the full array of five wisdom courses offered in the departments of psychology, education, the arts, and religious studies. At The National Institute for School Improvement (The Netherlands), I work with trainers of teachers who then go out and work in schools. Training programs of varying lengths from four hours to three years, have been offered for organizational leaders, health professionals and artists.

Orienting the presentation of the work in each learning environment meets the needs of different professions. For example, when used in the context of training psychotherapists, program participants go through a deep psychological process that can be life transforming. These are longer programs where we work with the specific postures and colors to evoke the energies. The energies become very vivid so people have a firsthand experience of their energetic makeup. It has never ceased to amaze me that someone with no prior knowledge of the qualities of a particular energy can do the posture for twenty minutes and give a textbook description of their experience. In engaging deeply and immediately with their own psychological process, they become better prepared to tune into the extreme states of mind of others.

Working through the medium of sense perceptions using creative expressions of all sorts—coloring, dancing, sounding, and music—is also very effective. In artistic work, the wisdoms are a bountiful resource for creative endeavor. As nonverbal expression often speaks louder than words, people may have major shifts in their perception of themselves and their world.

Where the intention is to provide a simple common language to aid self-awareness, communication and collaboration programs can be shorter. I work with a series of exercises that allow people to incorporate the wisdoms into their understanding very quickly. For instance, I start by grounding the five wisdoms in personal experience, by giving short descriptions of the wisdoms and having people contemplate when and where in their lives they have felt that quality. Then they contemplate which of the five might be most dominant, most at one's core. Grouping themselves with others who have made that choice, they ask each other, "Why are you here?" They can also group themselves to explore what energy seems to enhance who they are, or feels false, or that which they are attracted to in others. Then they can begin to work relationally, noticing in which groups others with whom they have a relationship are placing themselves.

### **In Summary**

The educational environment created by the understanding and application of the five wisdoms is powerful and can be challenging. Once at a faculty meeting at Naropa the idea of calling what we do "hot contemplative" provoked much amusement. But, nevertheless, working in this way does make for a juicy stew. Yet

we sense that something real is happening. There is a sense of genuineness that is atmospheric.

No statistical material or quantitative studies have been done as yet in working with the five wisdoms in an educational setting. Although at Naropa University, the qualities of spaciousness, clarity, richness, passion, and activity are tangible. Often not cognitively aware, people tune into them intuitively.

Only a learning environment that enhances the many aspects of who we are can foster a sense of personal integration. Creating a psychologically healthy environment and a learning community allows a dialogue which both sharpen intellect and melts hearts. Different points of view rub up against each other but there is an open-heartedness that is fundamentally accepting. In general, everyone is involved in creating an atmosphere that is gentle, dignified and committed to intellectual, artistic and spiritual development. This atmosphere instills a sense that learning is lifelong and omnipresent, not confined to time and place. It is a life transforming experience. Learning is a way of being and takes us into the world, open, inquisitive, resourceful, communicative, and willing to act. Then we are better able to meet the diverse demands of our world. This is the essence of contemplative education.

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