

Life Inspired by Juilliard Irina Nute Rockwell

Though my days at Juilliard seem like a distant memory, and though my life has taken many twists and turns, the essence of Juilliard is still within me.

I graduated in 1967 with a major in modern dance (Graham and Limon) and a minor in ballet (Tudor). Close friends Laura Glenn, Daniel Lewis, Linda Rabin and I created the Contemporary Dance Sextet, focusing on repertory learned at Juilliard. Though short lived, it was a great experience in bringing our talents into the world.

Moving to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1969, I co-created Open Arts, which focused on experimental work very much in the California flavor of the time: "anything goes." For several years after that I taught and performed in the dance department of the University of California, Berkeley, under the direction of David Wood (former principal dancer with Martha Graham.) Then several students from that department asked me to form a company.

Thus Footloose was born! In the ten years that I was artistic director, principal choreographer, and soloist, my full creative passion was allowed to flower. I became known for my particular genre of Movement Theater and humor. It was a very fertile time for art in the Bay Area. Our company enjoyed recognition by national, state, city and corporate funders. The critics loved us. We performed on stages, in museums and in the parks. We toured California and did performances and lecture demonstrations in colleges and high schools. At one point we were performing every other weekend.

Yet, I felt there was something missing. In the late 1970s I met Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche who became my Tibetan Buddhist teacher. Buddhism has become a beacon light for my life journey and for several years it took precedence over dance. I felt as though I had danced myself into stillness. Meditation was very healing. I lived on unemployment as much as I could, practiced and read about Buddhism during the day, and taught workshops in Movement Theater in the evenings. At this point I used a simpler model, focusing on solos and having a pick-up company to do specific pieces.

Then I was invited to head the Movement Studies department at the Naropa University. This fledgling institute, founded by Chögyam Trungpa's students, was inspired by principles of Buddhism but strongly flavored by the adventurous pulse of the counter culture of the 1960s and '70s. There was an ongoing feast of creativity and deep learning.

There, I primarily taught aspects of creative process: improvisation and choreography. I created a pedagogy strongly influenced by my Juilliard training. This brought about a further transformation. As Buddhism was deepening within me, I found myself more interested in my students as people. Their personal journey became more compelling to me than creating great works of art. As Mary Whitehouse, a founder of dance therapy, said, “I don’t teach dance; I teach people.” This led to my doing the Masters in Contemplative Psychotherapy at Naropa.

There was another unfolding taking place. As I wrote in my first book, *The Five Wisdom Energies, a Buddhist Understanding of Personalities, Emotions and Relationships*:

One summer day in 1976... I was reading [Chögyam Trungpa’s, book *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*.] The following passage caught my eye: “In the Tantric tradition energy is categorized in five basic qualities or Buddha Families: Vajra, Ratna, Padma, Karma and Buddha. Each Buddha family has an emotion associated with it, which is transmuted into a particular ‘wisdom’ or aspect of the awakened state of mind. The Buddha families are also associated with colors, elements, landscapes, directions, seasons, with any aspect of the phenomenal world.”

Reading those words aligned me with my world. It confirmed many feelings and experiences that I had had in my life. Though I had not yet begun to practice sitting meditation and knew almost nothing about contemplative traditions, somehow I instinctively knew about the energies of which he wrote.

My immediate connection came from my life as a dancer, choreographer, and teacher. I was passionately interested in examining the dynamic qualities of expressive movement. For example, I had choreographed a piece about animals called “In Wildness,” which explored how a prairie dog moves in contrast to a deer, how the energy of a flock of birds contrasts with the feeling of a lion coming in for the kill. In other dances I explored human emotions—the heat of love, the strength of anger, the stiffness of pride, the sparkle of joy.

Reading Chögyam Trungpa’s words that day changed my life. It led me to a contemplative tradition with an understanding of energy at its core that acknowledged the inherent sanity and richness of my art discipline—and life—while allowing me to step onto a meditative path. For the next few years, the five Buddha families increasingly became part of my dance work. As they did, my awareness of these energies began to color my perspective in other aspects of my life, particularly my relationships with people. Why was it that one man brought out my intellectual curiosity and another my physical desire? Why did I feel at ease with one person and anxious with another? Why would I feel powerful in one situation but inhibited and frustrated in another? What was the energetic relationship between myself, these people, and these situations?

Both as an artist and psychotherapist, I felt there was great potential in the Five Wisdoms. I began to create trainings incorporating them into contemplative approaches to education, health, leadership and the arts. From 1991 to the present day, I have led trainings in the United States, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and Canada. As well, I am a senior teacher in the Shambhala community and now a student of Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, Trungpa's son.

Through the years, I have deepened my understanding of the yogic practice of the Five Wisdoms. As an integral aspect of being fully human, they cultivate personal integration through working with the basic elements of our existence—body, emotions, mental activity and surroundings. The energies of both the outer, phenomenal world and the inner, psychological world can be experienced as five different patterns, with infinite permutations. We have the potential for all of the energies—the essence of which are spaciousness, clarity, richness, passion and activity—and can display different energies in different areas of our lives. Discovering the unique way we perceive and interact with the world can yield enormous insight into our patterns: what we think, feel, say and do. As we become familiar with our mix of energies, we uncover our strengths and let them shine, having a sense of unconditional positive regard towards ourselves. The practice is a vehicle for self-discovery and a ground for working with others, both personally and professionally. Five Wisdoms yoga—taking postures with colored glasses—meditation practice, and personal process work guide us to bring about embodied transformation.

When my book came out in 2002, I founded the Five Wisdoms Institute bringing together meditation, creative process and movement for the purposes of personal self-discovery, healing and leadership. www.fivewisdomsinstitute.com. Subsequently I created a training called Wisdoms@Work. As principal coach/trainer I work with people in personal and professional development. My new book, *Natural Brilliance: A Buddhist System for Uncovering Your Strengths and Letting Them Shine* will be available in March 2012.

I feel that everything I have done has led me to this. Cultivating a sense of excellence was instilled in me at Juilliard. For me this does not only apply to dance but rather, as they say in Bali, "We have no art; we do everything as well as possible."