

Five Wisdom Energies

Transforming Confusion into Wisdom

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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. 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: soft rolling hills and jagged peaks; winter and summer; a cozy living room and an airport.

The five wisdom energies are traditionally called the five Buddha families. Historically, these teachings are found in early vajrayana or tantric Buddhist texts in India around 400-500 AD. Later these teachings took root and flourished within Tibetan Buddhism. Thirty years ago, in 1972, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche began teaching to his Western students the traditional principles of Tibetan Buddhist yoga whereby particular postures and colors evoke specific psychological qualities. These practices enabled anyone—Buddhist and non-Buddhists alike—to access the powerful energies of our mind and body in an immediate and direct way.

Fundamentally, whether we are aware of it or not, energy is all-pervasive. Energy is the basic vitality of our existence, the vibrant aspect of being: the quality, texture, ambiance, and tone of the animate and the inanimate, the visible and the invisible. The world we perceive, conceptualize, and think we know is only a surface reality. Underneath it lies a magical realm, more elusive and yet more vivid. Every philosophical, spiritual, and religious tradition, every art form, in every corner of the globe, in every century of human existence, teaches about this deeper reality.

We each display energy through body posture, facial expressions, mannerisms, word choices, the tone and tempo of our voice. We also express our energy through attitudes, emotions, decisions, and actions. Some personality traits we consider dysfunctional or neurotic and some we consider constructive or wise. However we classify our energy displays, they are a way of celebrating our strengths and working with our weaknesses.

Here is a brief description of each:

Spaciousness

A white, spacious and peaceful energy pervades the *buddha wisdom*. Buddha sanity is an all-pervasive, peaceful space: contemplative, receptive, accommodating, simple, easy going, and content with just being. Its confused quality can be solidly immobile with the density of ignoring or denying: dull, lazy, humorless, stubborn, and insensitive. In general it is associated with space, all sense perceptions, and the color white.

Clarity

The *vajra wisdom* reflects a blue energy like a crystal-clear mirror. Vajra sanity reflects what it sees without bias. It is clear minded with an intellectual brilliance, sharp and precise. It maintains a perspective and is full of integrity. Its confused quality has a self-righteousness that can harden into cold or hot anger. It can be overly analytical, critical, opinionated, authoritarian, and demanding perfection. In general it is associated with water, the sense perception of sight, and the color blue.

Richness

The *ratna wisdom* exudes a golden yellow energy that is enriching. The sanity of ratna energy is equanimity and satisfaction. It is expansive, resourceful, and full of potential. It can also be hospitable, generous and appreciative. Its confused quality can have a greedy territoriality and puffed-up pride. It can be self-important, ostentatious, oppressive, over-indulgent, and emotionally needy and possessive. In general it is associated with earth, the senses perceptions of taste and smell, and the color yellow.

Passion

The *padma wisdom* glows with the vitality of red energy. Padma sanity is a finely tuned intuition discriminates subtle experiences without bias. It can be engaging, magnetizing, and charming. This energy listens deeply and speaks from the heart. Its confused quality manifests as grasping. It can cling obsessively to what gives pleasure, is preoccupied by desire, and manipulative. It is overly emotional, insecure, and seeks confirmation. In general it is associated with fire, the sense perception of hearing, and the color red.

Activity

The *karma wisdom* emits a green energy, swift and energetic like the wind. Karma sanity is all accomplishing action for the benefit of others. It can be efficient, effective, and practical. It is full of positive energy, confident, and acts in timely and appropriate ways in synchronicity with the world. Its confused quality is restless and speedy. It can be power-hungry, competitive, manipulative, and wanting to control and dominate. Filled with a fear of failure, it can be paranoid and jealous. In general it is associated with air, the sense perception of touch (as in making contact), and the color green.

Levels of Understanding and Experience

The energies are not based in concept or theory; they are an experience of a subtle level of being and communicating with our world. 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.

When we are 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 is the foundation for how we work with ourselves, others, and the phenomenal world. It is not that we filter every minute of our day through the perspective of the five colors. However, some situations become clear and workable only when we connect to their energetic dynamic.

In first learning how to work with them, awareness of the energies began to color my perspective in many 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?

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. As well, sitting meditation acts like a lightning rod. It grounds overly volatile energy in the simplicity of just being here. This is buddha energy: when spaciousness is realized it liberates all the energies.

With training, we become a psychophysical barometer, a finely-tuned sensing device. We pick up on the energetic climate of anyone or any situation. By recognizing our energetic make-up, we learn to appreciate our natural traits and those of others. When we work with energetic reality, we can creatively apply our understanding anywhere, anytime, no matter what we are doing. We can work in any situation to improve self-awareness, communication and creative expression. We see that everyone has his or her capacities, aptitudes and preferences. Everyone engages the world in a unique way.

It is important to know that we are a mix of colors. We are born with certain energies. Others we learn. Still others arise as we adapt to life. Some energy patterns are more dominant; others more background. Recognizing our style has to do with paying close attention to our habitual patterns from day to day, moment to moment, in different situations. When we become aware of our mix of colors, we no longer identify with just one energy. Defining ourselves as one or the other solidifies and centralizes our sense of who we are. By boxing ourselves in, we miss the play of totality. Rather than saying we are red, or blue or green energy, it is more accurate to say we are more like a rainbow or kaleidoscope.

Embracing Who We Are

We all have moments when we feel synchronized with ourselves and our world. We experience a quality of openness, relaxation, and inner strength. At these times our concepts drop away and we ride the energy of the moment. These are times when we shine and are the best of who we are. At other times we can't get out of our own way. We feel awkward at best or stuck in strong emotions at worst.

We flip flop between these extremes of feeling good or bad about ourselves, and never find any real bridge or connection between these two states. The power of the teachings on the five wisdom energies is that it shows us how we can find our wisdom within the very darkness of our confusion.

Energy itself is neutral; it is our attitude towards it that determines whether we are open (sane) or closed (confused). When we are open to our own energy, we experience ourselves as warm and clear. When we are closed to our energy, we feel confused and stuck. Being open or closed determines how we view ourselves and consequently the world.

We need to learn to welcome our emotions as a vivid display of energy. When our energy is most negatively intensified, it is also the most brilliant. Our wisdom is very close at hand. So intensifying emotion—when we experience the energy most vividly—is a way to break through to our wisdom. Fully embracing the emotions that bind us can liberate us.

During periods when I find myself in a lot of intensified emotion, often triggered by external circumstances, I know that I am going through a major life change. At times it can be excruciatingly painful. I have practiced making friends with my stuck places knowing that is the catalyst for turning my energy around from feeling constricted to feeling expansive. I realize that I do not have to discard as bad what I think of as my “negative qualities”; by embracing them I see they are my best assets.

To work with the intensity of emotions, it is best to work with someone who understands energetic work. For instance, the five wisdoms practice of taking postures in colored environments is done as an intensive meditation retreat in a group setting with trained staff. This creates a safe and friendly container.

How Our Energies Get Stuck

An emotion is the peak experience of a speeding train of thoughts. Emotions begin with the smallest flicker of a thought. As thoughts pile upon thoughts with increasing speed, they solidify and intensify into an emotion: thought-thought-thought-thought, emotion. Then we “feel” the thought as a psychophysical experience.

When we experience an emotion neurotically, our mental chitchat cleverly builds a solid narrative to justify how we feel. We call this the story line. Since we tend to view our thoughts as totally believable, in turn, we identify heavily with our emotions. Our emotion has an object or a reference point (“I’m angry at so and so”) and justification for it (“because he did such and such”). Our thoughts feed and focus the feelings. Our story lines rekindle the emotions. We find ourselves entrenched in the cycle of emotional intensity. As well, though our energies are innate, external situations can exacerbate our neurosis: the aloofness of buddha exacerbating the clinging of padma or pervasive karma intensifying karma competitiveness.

Because we identify with our emotional story lines so strongly, it is hard to relinquish them. They justify and confirm us. "I want to be angry. I want to be jealous. I want to be morose. This is my truth!" We feel loyal to our version of reality. We hang on tight, as if by letting go of our emotions, we would dismantle our whole known world. If I am pining over a lost love, giving up that melancholy means that the whole drama of my affair is gone, which means that a part of me is gone as well.

When our emotions become too painful, our overwhelming desire is to get rid of them. We don't want to feel their intensity. We deal with not wanting to feel them in different ways. Some of us suppress our anger or jealousy or passion by denying that we are feeling it. Or we might be intensely angry, but we are so caught up in our story line that we are not even aware that we're feeling emotional. We latch onto our solid version of reality as a defense against feeling the emotion. Another strategy for trying to get rid of emotions is to act them out. We explode or otherwise indulge our feelings. Like suppression, this is just another way of not relating to the energy.

Whether our style is to dump the emotions on ourselves by bottling them up or to dump them on someone else by acting them out, there is an alternative to trying to get rid of them. The best way to work with our heightened states of energy is to befriend them. Difficult as they are to work with, intensified emotions and the projections that arise from them can be turned to our advantage.

Cultivating Loving-Kindness

When energy becomes heightened we need a very powerful tool—the tool of unconditional loving-kindness, or maitri, which allows us to be who we are unreservedly. Loving-kindness provides a catalyst for us to enter the process of transmutation, a fundamental change in energy. Working together, maitri and transmutation enable us to experience the inseparability of confusion and sanity, how sanity exists in the heart of our confusion

Accepting ourselves as we are, in both our sanity and our confusion, is the key to opening our heart. It allows us to be in the present moment just as it is, without trying to cling to it or push it away. Accepting ourselves fully is what stops our struggle. It allows us to appreciate ourselves and our world despite the obstacles. Only when we love ourselves in this unconditional way can we also love others. Only when we love ourselves can we be lovable. Maitri has a soft quality that is open, kind, relaxed, warm, and inclusive. It allows us to be who we are and let all our colors shine. We breathe easily.

Loving-kindness is lacking when we feel bad about ourselves. When we judge ourselves or react to someone else's judgment about us, we are more neurotic. We raise our defenses, project onto others, and close down. It may seem impossible to think of ourselves as lovable when heavy negativity is coming toward us. At such times it is natural to build a defensive wall to justify ourselves.

Maitri has several aspects, each of which sharpens our understanding of how it works. This is the intelligence of maitri. Maitri has an element of *familiarity*. We know our habitual patterns like old friends so they don't throw us off so much.

Maitri is *accommodating*. When we see the intensity of our closed energy we no longer try to avoid what's happening. We allow it to be and so expand our palette of acceptable energy states. Maitri *relaxes* us and allows us to be gentle and kind toward ourselves. Our pain is still there, but instead of avoiding it, we care for it as we would care for an open wound. Working with maitri enables us to develop *bravery*, which means that we can touch our vulnerable, raw spots and still stay open. Maitri allows us to see our life experiences are *workable*. When we encounter an unwanted circumstance, we don't contract and close, but open to the situation. We see it not as a crisis but as an opportunity. Most importantly, the quality of friendliness toward ourselves is *unconditional*. We are friendly toward all aspects of our experience, especially the facets of ourselves that we like the least. We can love ourselves without reserve, with zero stipulations.

Transmutation in Five Colors

The wisdom or brilliant sanity of each energy is open, warm, clear and spontaneous. When the very same energy manifests neurotically it is frozen, blocked or constricted by a manipulating and self-serving solidified sense of self. When we make friends with and become fully aware of the constricted quality of our neurosis we realize we are not connecting to the liberated aspect of the energy, but a distorted manifestation of it. When we apply the six aspects of maitri to an intensified emotion, we engage in a transformative process. We move from letting go to letting be. The pith instruction is to stay with the primary emotion we're feeling. Making friends with the essential nature of the emotion that binds us offers the possibility of liberating it. Both the story line and the quality of the basic energy may differ, but the process remains the same. Each energy has an emotion associated with it which is transmuted into a particular wisdom.

A person with buddha energy ignores as a way to create, fabricate space. However, he realizes that this fabricated space is not really spacious, but rather is claustrophobic and painful. With the liberating quality of loving-kindness he begins to tune into the naturally existing spaciousness of the world that does not have to be created or maintained, but is everywhere. When this is realized, he embodies an all-encompassing spaciousness, his wisdom.

A vajra person is angry because she insists on being “right” with a strong sense of how things “should” be. However, a vajra person’s clarity can be so sharp that she realizes that her sense of being “right” is something she made up, and is therefore “wrong.” She clearly sees her demand for perfection is imprisoning her into a rigid, iron-clad world. She softens and realizes that her clarity does not have to be dictated, but can reflect the self-existing clarity in the world. Her anger transmutes into sharp intelligence and mirror-like clarity, her wisdom.

Someone with ratna energy dominant gets stuck in a sense of inadequacy—feeling needy and greedy—with an armoring of puffed-up pride. When he realizes his feeling of poverty is self-created and is ironically another expression of his richness, he relaxes and sees that the richness he longs for from others and the world is within himself. He feels enriched by and appreciative of his world and experiences a sense of equanimity, his wisdom.

A padma person grasps as a way to possess an object of passion to get what she wants and jealously guards it. However, she realizes that grasping aspect of the passion and the manipulating aspect of the jealousy [not too be too rigid with the categories, but isn’t jealousy supposed to be a more karma kind of thing? that’s how you lay it out above when you first describe the energies] is a distortion of genuine passion. It destroys her very desires for intimate connection. [does it destroy her passion? or does padma just move on to another object? I wonder if this line could read, “However, she realizes that her unrelenting search for and grasping to an object of passion never satisfies her passion, but that the passion itself has an unquenchable fire to it.] When maitri softens her, she opens to the self-existing warmth of her heart and of the world in an intimate way without self-referencing. This subtle and refined awareness is her wisdom.

Underlying someone's driven busyness of stuck karma energy is a feeling of being incompetent and needing to take control. When he realizes with a sad smile that he has created a competitive, paranoid world that actually prevents him from getting the job done properly, he begins to make friends with his neurotic energy. He transmutes his neurosis by seeing that most of his projects were just his own creation and therefore were unconnected to what really needed to be done. Now, by relaxing and connecting directly to the world, he can see what is timely and appropriate to be done and so accomplish it with ease, since the time is right. This is his all-accomplishing wisdom.

When we use maitri as a tool, we find that we could either laugh or cry. At the point when we laugh or cry, the struggle is over. There is a sense of breakthrough. We have broken through our sense of constricted self. We have touched our heart. We have found the key to the wisdom within us.