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The Five Buddha Families

BY IRINI ROCKWELL | SEPTEMBER 5, 2018



Of the many methods for understanding and working with the energies that pervade our existence, one of the most profound is the “five buddha families.”



Photo by Cesar Ojeda.

“I always seem to be fending him off,” Joan blurts out. She’s hosting a dinner party while her husband out of town and she’s aware of how little affection she shows him, while he is affectionate to a fault. Two of her guests, Andrea and Bill, laugh and then exchange quick glances. They’re in a new relationship and are beginning to see where they get stuck. Andrea wants to engage in an open, unobstructed way; Bill prefers quiet time alone. Michael, the other guest, still wounded from a divorce, launches into a speech about the women in his

relationships. “I always seem to fall for emotional women who can’t communicate well,” he says. “I like working with strong women who think clearly and get the job done,” he adds.

We don’t know the people at this dinner table, but we can learn a lot about each of them from the different kinds of energy they display. All of us express a unique mix of energy through our attitudes, emotions, decisions and actions. Although we often think of the world in terms of material existence, it is energy that’s the vibrant aspect of being: the quality, texture, ambiance or tone of people and environments.

Of the many methods for understanding and working with the energies that pervade our existence, one of the most profound is the “five buddha families,” an ancient Buddhist system of understanding enlightened mind and its various aspects. The five buddha family framework is an instrumental component in Buddhist tantra, a path of working with and transmuting mind energy.

“*The buddha families present us with a complete picture of both the sacred world of enlightened mind and the neurotic world of ego-centered existence.*”

The buddha families are traditionally displayed as the mandala of the five *tathagatas*, or buddhas. The mandala (from the Sanskrit for “circle”) aids meditators in understanding how different aspects of existence operate together in an integrated whole. Each of the buddhas in the mandala embodies one of the five different aspects of enlightenment. However, these manifest themselves not only as enlightened energies but also as neurotic states of mind. The buddha families therefore present us with a complete picture of both the sacred world of enlightened mind and the neurotic world of ego-centered existence. We see that they are indeed the same thing; the path of awakening is what makes the difference.

Traditionally, at the center of the mandala is Vairochana, lord of the buddha family, who is white and represents the wisdom of all-encompassing space and its opposite, the fundamental ignorance that is the source of cyclic existence (*samsara*). The dullness of ignorance is transmuted to a vast space that accommodates anything and everything.

In the east of the mandala is Akshobya, lord of the vajra family, who is blue and represents mirror-like wisdom and its opposite, aggression. The overwhelming directness of aggression is transmuted into the quality of a mirror, clearly reflecting all phenomena. Vajra is associated with the element water, with winter, and with sharpness and textures.

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In the south of the mandala is Ratnasambhava, buddha of the ratna family, who is yellow and represents the wisdom of equanimity and its opposite, pride. The fulsomeness of pride is transmuted into the quality of including all phenomena as elements in the rich display. Ratna is associated with the element earth, with autumn, with fertility and depth.

In the west of the mandala is Amitabha, buddha of the padma family, who is red and represents discriminating-awareness wisdom and its opposite, passion or grasping. The intense desire of passion is transmuted into an attention to the fine qualities of each and every detail. Padma is associated with the element fire, with spring, with façade and color.

In the north of the mandala is Amogasiddhi, buddha of the karma family, who is green and represents all-accomplishing wisdom and its opposite, jealousy or paranoia. The arrow-like pointedness of jealousy is transmuted into efficient action. Karma is associated with the element wind, with summer, with growing and completing.

“ *Just as light radiates, so does energy.* ”

In the early 1970s Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche taught the five wisdom energies to contemporary practitioners as a way of understanding who we are fundamentally: our personality, our emotional landscape, and how we relate to others and our world. He promoted the understanding that there is nothing inherently wrong or bad about the energy itself. He taught that to bring the wisdom energies to the path, we first learn to stay with them through mindfulness and awareness. Then we can work with these energies as they arise in our experience by applying loving-kindness. We allow them to express themselves openly rather than trying fruitlessly to manipulate and control them. The energies then become a way of celebrating our strengths and working with our weaknesses.

These energies are most easily identified by their colors, which hold the essence of their qualities. Just as light radiates, so does energy. The color of energy is like colored light. We can now look at the buddha families described in traditional terms above in terms of how they manifest themselves in our experience of ourselves and those around us, capturing both our wisdom and our confusion.

Spaciousness

The buddha family radiates a white energy, spacious and peaceful. Buddha energy is an all-pervasive, peaceful space. When people manifest the wisdom aspect of Buddha energy, they are receptive, accommodating, easygoing and content with just being. Buddha can also be solidly immobile with the density of ignoring or denying. When people manifest the confused quality of buddha, they can be dull, lazy, stubborn and insensitive.

Clarity

The vajra family reflects a blue energy like a crystal-clear mirror. Vajra energy reflects what it sees without bias. When people manifest the wisdom aspect of vajra, they are clear-minded with an intellectual brilliance, sharp and precise. They maintain a perspective and are full of integrity. Vajra also has a self-righteousness that can harden into cold or hot anger. When people manifest the confused quality of vajra, they can be overly analytical, critical, opinionated, authoritarian and demanding of perfection.

Richness

The ratna family exudes a golden yellow energy that encompasses and enriches everything. Ratna energy displays equanimity and satisfaction. When people manifest the wisdom aspect of ratna, they are expansive, resourceful, hospitable and appreciative. But ratna can also turn into greedy territoriality and puffed-up pride. When people manifest the neurotic quality of ratna, they can be arrogant, ostentatious, oppressive and emotionally needy.

Passion

The padma family glows with the vitality of red energy. Padma sanity is a finely-tuned intuition that discriminates subtle experiences without bias. When people manifest the wisdom aspect of padma, they are engaging, magnetizing and charming. This energy listens deeply and speaks from the heart. Padma also can have an obsessive desire to magnetize and grasp the most pleasurable and ideal situations. When people manifest its confused quality,

they can cling to what gives pleasure, are overly emotional, and perpetually seek confirmation.

Activity

The karma family emits a green energy, swift and energetic like the wind. Karma sanity is all-accomplishing action for the benefit of others. When people exhibit the sanity of karma, they can be efficient, effective and practical. Full of confident energy, they act in timely and appropriate ways in synchronicity with the world. Karma can also be restless and speedy, and when people manifest its neurotic side, they can be power-hungry, competitive, manipulative, controlling and dominating. They fear failure, so they are paranoid and jealous.

Now, if we return to our dinner party, we can see how the party-goers exhibit the various wisdom energies. Michael, who displayed such strong opinions about the women in his life, manifests vajra clarity in his thinking, which sometimes gets fixated into rigid views about things. He also shows some ratna qualities in loving to hang out with family and friends sharing a big meal and life stories.

Andrea is all fun and engagement. People contact is very important to her. She has lots of friends and makes connections with people easily. She is dominantly padma but also loves the richness, expansiveness and caring for others that is her ratna side.

Bill, who rarely spoke during the party, is more inwardly directed. He radiates a spacious warmth and easy-going manner, and buddha qualities are quite strong in him. There is also a tinge of padma in his coloring.

Joan, who loves to cook for her husband but finds his physical affection a bit much at times, displays several qualities in equal measure. Fending off her husband is a vajra quality, which is also reflected in a general sense of propriety about what should and should not happen. Though she does not talk much in the group, her padma qualities come out in private conversations: talking about how she feels and always longing to connect more closely with others and situations. Wanting to keep busy is her karma side.

“ *When I first learned of the energies, they began to color my perspective in many aspects of my life.* ”

It is interesting to identify energies in others as we observe their behavior, but the wisdom energies are much more than a classification scheme. They can help us to work with our emotions creatively and openly, appreciating the basic energies and seeing the various ways they manifest in our everyday actions. When I first learned of the energies, they began to color my perspective in many aspects of my life. Why was it that one man brought out my intellectual curiosity and another my 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?

Eventually I came to understand that we are a mix of colors. We are born with certain energies; others we learn as an enhancement to who we are; still others arise as we adapt to life. Some energy patterns are more dominant, others more background. 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 seeing ourselves as red or blue or green energy, we can perceive our experience more as a rainbow or kaleidoscope.

Working with the energies, we always bring our understanding of who we are back to immediate experience, rather than to our conceptualization of who we are. Through our thoughts and emotions, we experience the energy of our inner being; through our sense perceptions, we experience the energies of the outer world. All of these energies—inner and outer—are accessible to us at any time. They are an experience of a subtle level of being and communication with our world.

To work with energy, we first 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 clarity and an inherent mental strength. As well, sitting meditation acts like a lightning rod. It grounds overly volatile energy in the simplicity of just being there.

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. If we feel the sharpness and directness of vajra as we encounter our daughter's wild defiance, we can just let it be there. If we find ourselves filled with the wind of karmic accomplishment, we can just let it get down to business. Suddenly flirtatious, we can let the padma energy bubble and spark. Reveling in

the earthy richness of possibilities, we can enjoy the ratna feast without gluttony. Simple and calm, we can let buddha reign. 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 solidify and fixate, rather than ride the energy. We feel awkward at best or stuck in strong emotions at worst.

Usually we flip-flop between 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 they show 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. In fact, it is when we experience intense emotion that wisdom is closest at hand. Fully embracing the emotions that bind us can liberate us.

When energy becomes heightened we need a very powerful tool—the tool of unconditional loving-kindness, or *maitri*—to allow us to be who we are unreservedly. Accepting ourselves as we are, in both our sanity and our confusion, is the key that unlocks our heart. It allows us to be in the present moment just as it is, without trying to cling or push away. Accepting ourselves fully is what stops our struggle, and 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.

“ *Maitri also 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.* ”

Maitri is not one-dimensional, but has various facets, each of which sharpens our understanding of how it works. First off, maitri has an element of *familiarity*. We know our habitual patterns like old friends, so they don't throw us off so much. Since 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 also *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 also allows us to see our life experiences are *workable*. When we encounter an unwanted circumstance, we don't contract and close but rather open ourselves to the situation. We see it not as a crisis but as an opportunity. Finally, 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.

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, self-serving and 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 encounter an intensified emotion with these aspects of maitri, a transformative process occurs. 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 storyline and the quality of the basic energy may differ, but the process remains the same. Each energy has an emotion associated with it that is transmuted into a particular 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, which displays itself as a colorful mandala of liberated qualities.



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ABOUT IRINI ROCKWELL

Irimi Rockwell is the author of *The Five Wisdom Energies: A Buddhist Way of Understanding Personalities, Emotions and Relationships* (Shambhala, 2002). She leads workshops on the buddha families throughout North America and Europe.

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[...] Tibetan Buddhism teaches the concept of coemergence. Buddhist teacher Ethan Nichtern describes it as “the ability of any particular phenomenon or experience to manifest as either wisdom or confusion, helpful or harmful, a weapon or a prison.” The idea goes that there are five basic mind-states, which aren’t inherently good or bad. From each of these basic mind-states, we can go down either a wise or a confused path. Relevant here, the

mind-state Vajra can lead to clear-seeing or to anger. In this worldview, clear-seeing and anger are closely related and share the same root. These five mind-states are symbolized by five Buddha families. [...]



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