

Chapter 20

Karma: The Wisdom Energy of Wind

As the bardo text reads:

O son of Noble Family, Listen without distraction.
On the fifth day, a green light, the purified element
of air, will shine, and at the same time Blessed
Amoghasiddhi, lord of the circle will appear before
you from the green northern realm, Accumulated
Actions. (Freemantle & Trungpa, p. 48)

Known as the wisdom of all-accomplishing action, this wisdom energy has to do with bringing the power of unconditioned mind directly to bear on the situations of daily life. This is the psychological energy that gets things done. The colour green evokes the quality of this wisdom energy of wind, as does the buzzing, blooming profusion of activity and growth that happens in the spring and early summer. In its constricted form, it becomes the self-conscious emotional experiences of envy, jealousy, and paranoia, which can ultimately lead to the abuse of power and terrible acts of aggression. We speak of being green with envy; and Shakespeare's Othello refers to jealousy as the 'green-eyed monster.'

The most basic meaning of the Sanskrit word karma is 'action,' and in this usage, as a title for the buddha family related to the air element, it refers to activity.¹ This activity from the wisdom perspective is enlightened Buddha activity, while from the neurotic perspective, it refers to the confused activity that originates from our clinging to the false belief in an ego.

When this energy is liberated from the constricted self-conscious approach, it can be directed outward as a positive force to work for the benefit of self and others. Just as a gust of wind sweeping down over the land touches everything in its path, this wisdom energy accomplishes whatever needs to be accomplished and fulfills whatever needs to be fulfilled. The liberated energy of the wind element is free from hesitation and excessive deliberation. It is simple and direct, pure appropriate action.²

Imagine that you are in a mountain meadow in the north country in June or early July. The tundra is soft and spongy under your feet. At a closer look it appears to be a veritable explosion of life. There are dozens of different types of grasses, as well as mosses and other ground coverings in every conceivable shade of green, sprouting forth and competing for a hold on the precious bits of available soil. This is complemented by a plethora of tiny, brightly coloured wildflowers that seem to be popping up right before your eyes. Even the vivid, multi-coloured lichens covering the rocks seem to vibrate with life. Everywhere, the air is filled with the frenetic buzzing of tiny insects of many different species, as well as the larger ones like dragonflies and mosquito hawks that prey upon the smaller. The ground, too, is covered with crawling insects foraging for plant food as well as eating one another. Little mice and shrews and moles scamper about in the grass, while higher

up the screech of marmots echoes in the rocks and hawks circle high above the meadow waiting to strike. Below in the pine forest, the calls of crows and jays join the chattering of squirrels and chipmunks. As evening comes, more bugs arise from the marshes, and spiders stir to collect their hard-earned catch. Fish jump from pools in the stream, feeding. And finally, as the sky darkens further, it is filled with the fluttering wings of bats also feasting on the insects.

This energy of profuse activity is often observed in elementary classrooms. An outside observer can often note easily whether the activity in a classroom is unfolding in a healthy, productive and positive direction, or if it is 'out of control,' chaotic, dissonant, and troubling. Small children seem to thrive on activity, especially when it is spontaneous and playful. There are those educators and thinkers who would say that children, when left on their own to explore their spontaneous activity and inherent curiosity, will learn whatever it is that they need to learn. On the other hand, there still seems to be a need for containment, guidance and modeling, so that children can learn the ways of self-discipline. The manner in which a teacher responds to the inherently healthy activity of children will for the most part, determine whether or not that activity will tend to go in a positive direction of diverse self-directed learning or whether it will degenerate into the chaos and confusion that necessitate rigid discipline and external control. Furthermore, as with all the other elemental energies, the way that a teacher regards and works with her own energy of activity will directly influence the way she teaches and encourages her students.

One way to talk about the psychological tone of the wind energy might be to describe it as a dichotomy between a self-conscious need to control, on the one hand, and the enjoyment of spontaneous, healthy activity within a strong container, on the other. Let us first look at the wisdom side of appropriate containment and the enjoyment of spontaneous and healthy activity, and secondly, at the emotional confusion behind the need to dominate and control. Being clear and firm about boundaries is as essential to a teacher as it is to any leader. The wisdom of the wind element has to do with fearlessly protecting the appropriate boundaries of a particular classroom activity. If a teacher is uneasy with the wind element energy and afraid to use it appropriately, students will sense the teacher's fear and take advantage of the situation in any way they can. Yet if the teacher simply has a presence of strength and power, augmented by a keen awareness, this creates a natural container which students will not even question. This container gives the students a feeling of safety and allows them to explore within that particular boundary a wide range of spontaneous and healthy learning activities.

Teachers who work freely with this wisdom energy never give up in the face of adversity, but rather become more inspired and energized by greater and greater challenges. They have the ability to remove obstacles and are wise in knowing how to overcome the tricks and cunning of

egocentric and negative forces in any situation, whether these come from within themselves or from their students. They are the people who maintain a cheerful disposition even in the midst of a crisis, or when seemingly burdened by an inhumane workload and totally packed schedule. They seem to take on one challenge after another within the blink of an eye. Their timing is impeccable, they always seem to be in the right place at the right time and they never hesitate to extend themselves to another's aid. They are always organized and prepared, making sure that they have whatever it is they need to accomplish the task at hand. They always deal with one thing at a time, despite the fact that it appears that they are juggling sixteen different things at once.

Like a juggler, they deal with each thing that comes at them thoroughly and properly without worrying about what has just passed, or what is about to come. That is not to say that they are ignorant of the larger picture. On the contrary, their intuition is highly attuned, and their awareness is all-pervasive, picking up on any movement or significant change within a three-hundred-and-sixty degree radius that includes patterns from the past and the potentials in the future, as well as the structure and texture of energy in the present. However, they are not obsessed with the meaning of these perceptions, nor do they feel weighed down by what they know. Rather, they maintain a light and airy disposition, and like the trade winds that move large ships, they use the force of what they know in a focused and well-directed manner. They seem to be in touch with the pulse of every situation and with the rhythm of activity itself. They understand how to pace a project, when to lie back, and when to pour on the steam.

Few people demonstrate these almost miraculous abilities consistently. However, it is easy to recognize that some people are more accomplished in this wisdom of action than others. Abraham Maslow's (1971) category of Self-Actualization brings to mind many of these same personality traits of skilful action.

The psychological quality of this energy has to do with power. In the West, we have developed a deep-rooted cynicism concerning the corruption of power. People tend to use power to their own advantage. Lord Acton's famous words: 'Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely' seems to be an ingrained axiom in our culture. Nevertheless, the appropriate use of benevolent power is an essential aspect of true wisdom. What good is the wisdom of knowing something if there is no power to make things happen that will somehow bring benefit to oneself and others?

Related in many ways to the archetype of the warrior,³ a useful analogy that can help convey the essence of this wisdom energy of action is to imagine a highly accomplished martial artist taking on a team of trained fighters. Such a highly skilled warrior works from a deep inner place of peace, stillness and quiet. When attacked by violent energy, he or she is immediately in touch with that

energy and accustomed to feelings of fear. By riding the feelings of fear, such a person is able to accurately assess the quality, direction and power in the energy of the attacker, and he or she is able to redirect the original aggressive energy back at the attacker with the slightest movement. Through vigilant awareness and highly tuned senses, the peaceful warrior effortlessly defeats aggression by reflecting it back on the attacker.

Such an approach is used by Richard Heckler,⁴ a master of the Japanese martial art aikido and founder of the Lomi school of body-oriented psychotherapy. He describes working with aggressive male adolescents in a juvenile detention home. His approach is to directly make contact with the aggression of these young men. This is not done without fear, yet Heckler explains that through the mutual experience of fear a strong bond is set up between himself and his most difficult students, and they are then encouraged to embark upon a path of discipline and self-discovery.

This example illustrates that the wisdom of action ideally comes from a place of stillness, non-aggression, and receptive awareness. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the energy of wise action comes directly out of the energy of the situation itself rather than from any forced effort or aggressive manipulation.⁵ When mind and body are completely synchronized, there is no separation between thought and action. Appropriate activity flows naturally from accurate perception of what is needed in the present moment. If we apply this analogy to teaching, it can be quite helpful. If a teacher tries to impose control on his or her class, it is perceived by the students as an unnatural and unnecessary restriction which provokes their natural and intelligent sense of rebellion. This is like a fighter who is coming from a place of aggression, wanting to subdue his enemy. In the practice of contemplative psychotherapy, I have recognized that such aggression can manifest itself in very subtle ways. For example, any impulse to impose my agenda on my clients is a form of therapeutic aggression which I learn to avoid or at least note and gradually renounce. On the other hand, it is possible to have positive power in a therapeutic or teaching relationship. This power is rooted in non-aggression and a receptive, accurate perception. Like the martial artist described above, a teacher who is acutely aware of his or her students – their strengths and weaknesses, their style of learning, the rise and fall of their elemental energies – is well armed as a warrior of the classroom to redirect even the most chaotic forces back into their natural direction of learning and development. The great master warrior Sun Tzu writes in his famous text, *The Art of War*:

For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.

Nonetheless, it is sometimes necessary to wield a swift 'sword' that cuts confusion. In accomplishing the wisdom of the wind element, a teacher can manifest firmness and the power to stop the escalation of negative forces. When it

would be harmful to allow neurotic confusion to perpetuate, the compassionate thing to do is to destroy it. If this is done completely without aggression, there will be a sense of relief afterwards for everyone involved.

The distorted energy of the wind element in contrast to the wisdom is characterized by a lack of synchronization between body and mind. Often mind is racing ahead of body, causing confusion by continuously projecting future possibilities and clinging to them with the emotions of hope or fear. Or there is the other extreme, where body is ahead of mind, leaping blindly into action without adequate awareness or forethought. For most of us, truly synchronizing body and mind is a rare occurrence that has something of the flavor and feel of what Maslow (1971) called peak experiences. Most of us normally function at a level that is less than ideal in relation to this energy of action, meaning that our bodies and our minds are more or less desynchronized most of the time. Because we cling to our sense of a separate self-identity, body, mind and environment, are all slightly desynchronized, and we are continuously left with a feeling that things are not quite right. The false self is like a conceptual boundary or a dam that breaks the flow, separating elemental qualities in the environment from those experienced within our psychophysical system. The result is perceptual distortion and conflicting emotions. At some level, we are aware that our perception is somewhat distorted, inaccurate and not always complete or trustworthy. This awareness of our desynchronization, although positive in and of itself,⁶ generates a vague and ever-present fear which can escalate into becoming a feeling that we are being threatened from an unknown power outside ourselves. We might be conscious of it as an anxious feeling that at any time something could go wrong or something might happen that could undermine us or our position. Then we can become vigilant in a paranoid way, fearing that if we miss something it could be our downfall.

When these feelings escalate, diverting the natural wisdom energy of the wind element into a reverberation of thoughts and feelings in a self-perpetuating cycle, one experiences what is known in Buddhist language as the Realm of the Jealous Gods. The Jealous God Realm is dominated by concerns for power, achievement, the need to win and a basic sense of the struggle to maintain territory and to survive. The jealous gods, or asuras in Indian mythology, are described as very intelligent and powerful demigods who yearn intensely for the full bliss of godhood and therefore will do anything to get it. Meanwhile, they are also threatened from others like themselves and therefore must also fight to hold on to what they have. A predominant feeling in this realm is one of suspicion and paranoia; there is a chance that everyone you know is plotting a conspiracy against you.

This state of mind is preoccupied with gaining territory, whether literal territory, like enemy armies fighting over a scrap of land, or territory as a metaphor for those rôles or aspects of our lives with which we over-identify, such as our

jobs, our social status, our marriages or relationships, our positions of power and authority, etc. We feel our territory is under threat. Someone out there is trying to undermine us. We can become defensive, then offensive, and eventually aggressive and violent.

The subtle escalations that can turn tiny flickers of envy or jealousy into full-blown paranoia and eventual acts of aggression and violence are brilliantly portrayed in Shakespeare's plays, such as in *Othello* and *Macbeth*. Also, I have found that the *Godfather* movies portray this sophisticated and cunning realm of kill-or-be-killed so well that my state of mind and my style of perception are altered, bent toward clinging to power and an edge of paranoia, for some time after watching these films.

Similar in some ways to the hell realm, in that this realm deals with anger and aggression, it differs in that the *vajra* style wishes to maintain distance, while this mentality engages right away. Also similar to the yearning and aspiring of the human realm that always compares oneself with others, this approach goes further with a fierce and unscrupulous competitiveness. This style is obsessed with comparing self to other, for the continual sense of struggle to gain and maintain territory is always seen in reference to what is possessed by others. All of us at one time or another have compared ourselves with others who, like the description of the self-actualized person given above, seem to be more efficient, more capable, more content and more relaxed than ourselves. They seem to get all the lucky breaks and always seem to enjoy their life, while we are cursed with a lesser fate and strive to be like them. We envy them, secretly wishing we had their knowledge, their skills and their success. Living life from the perspective of this twisted, neurotic energy is very intense and very demanding because one is always striving for perfection.

From this particularly twisted view of life, relationships with others are all seen in relation to one's position on the imaginary ladder of achievement. As this neurotic style involves always comparing oneself with others that are higher up or lower down, one is constantly driven by a relentless sense of competition. One looks up to those ahead, perhaps sometimes with admiration, but more likely with envy and resentment. One sneers and condescends in relation to those below, while also fearing that they might overtake one. This neurotic style of relating leaves very little room for genuine friendship or concern for others. The whole affair is taken to be very serious, a life-or-death struggle wherein there is no room left for joy or a sense of humour. Even if one reaches the top, there is a fear that someone will come to knock one from the pinnacle and take one's place there.

Quite often, the intense sense of competition in this realm of perverted wind energy is more subtle, as when one competes against oneself. Nevertheless, this can be just as narrow-minded and painful because the mental image of oneself, against which one competes, is so totally perfect that it never allows a chance to accept one's imperfections

or show a little kindness towards oneself.

When mind and body are desynchronized, the energy of activity can sometimes run out of control, like a tornado. People can whip themselves into a frenzy of activity. Their mind becomes locked in on a vaguely unreachable goal that drives them into cycles of ever-increasing speed, panic and confusion. Some people thrive on this sense of panic. They feel they need stress and excitement in order to keep them acting at the peak of their ability. They are only happy when the demands around them far exceed their ability to meet them, and they are called on to greater and greater challenges. Meanwhile, they may be deluding themselves. Perhaps the needs being expressed are not as urgent as they perceive them, and all their apparent diligence is for naught. Perhaps all they are really doing is chasing their own tail or creating a tempest in a teacup. They stir up trouble in one place with all their frenetic activity, then rush off to another place to solve the problems that, unbeknownst to them, were caused by their last visit there.

The ultimate caricature of this style might be imagined as a character in an absurd play who is always rushing from one place to the next but never actually arrives anywhere. Before he has arrived at one stop on his agenda he is rushing off to the next. We have all seen in others, or know what it is like in ourselves, to be so busy going somewhere that we never allow ourselves to arrive, or similarly, are so busy doing that we never stop to savour our accomplishments.

Another typical example of this style is the person who has twelve different projects going at once. Like the performer who is spinning many plates balanced on sticks, he or she has just enough time to run from one to the next in order to merely keep the whole thing up and running. Perhaps if they had the chance to step back from the situation, they might wonder what are they actually accomplishing. This tremendously speedy state of mind can generate endless confusion, not only for oneself, but also for everyone else that comes in contact with it. Others are often left to clean up the messes left behind by someone in a whirlwind of manic, self-perpetuating activity.

This neurotic obsession with keeping oneself busy can be a powerful form of denial. To avoid feeling anxiety, grief or the intensity of other emotions, people will drive themselves without ceasing in their work, recreation, or social life. Experiencing a gap, with nothing to do, can be extremely frightening for such people, as it allows whatever emotions they have been warding off to rise up into their consciousness. This socially acceptable mode of denial with its frantic pace, made in some way legitimate by the Protestant work ethic, seems to be taken for granted in North America as the norm. Beyond this it is even regarded as an enviable behaviour of the highly successful by those who also yearn for success.

This confused energy that spins itself in endless cycles of excessive busy work is also evidenced in bureaucracies.

Governmental agencies and other types of huge bureaucracies are famous for generating a tremendous fury of activity but never really accomplishing very much.

An altogether different way in which this energy of activity becomes confused is in the frozen space of procrastination and indecision. In its most exaggerated state, this style of mind can manifest as a catatonic stillness where even the slightest move is restricted by the overwhelming power of indecision. This freezing of activity is actually a manifestation of a mind overrun by an extremely rapid succession of reversing thought patterns. Because the mind is overly engaged in projecting all the possible outcomes of even the slightest movement, there is no possibility of simply taking a step into the unknown. In less extreme cases, this constant second guessing leads to hesitation and incompetence, feelings of laziness, depression, and lack of motivation.

Teachers of young children and adolescents know that one moment of hesitation or indecision can result in half an hour or more of chaos and disruption. If teachers doubt themselves and their intuition, the children pick up on it as a lack of clear direction and take advantage of the moment to release their energy in undirected and even harmful ways. On the other hand, if a teacher is overly controlling of students, based on a fear of chaos and misbehaviour, the classroom environment takes on the quality of a prison in which students become resentful, and any meaningful learning is denied them.

If teachers work to master their own personal wisdom of benevolent power, effortless effort, skilful means, and spontaneous, joyful activity, they will naturally encourage their students to develop in the same direction.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

1—*The active quality of air and wind element in our lives can be compared to Kolb's pole of active experimentation (1979) and to Jung's sensing types (1923). However, any comparison is speculation because there are no fundamentally common criteria in these different systems of classification. This is evident in McCarthy's system (1980) as I see karma energy corresponding to her type four dynamic learners, but also to her problem-solving type three common-sense learners. McCarthy says of her type four dynamic learners that they seek hidden possibilities, take risks and learn by trial-and-error, while type three common sense learners are pragmatic and skills-oriented, they value strategic thinking and like to tinker with things. The choleric temperament (Harwood, 1958; Littauer, 1983) seems to correspond quite well in its qualities to those of the karma family: dynamic and active, strong-willed and decisive, not easily discouraged, independent, confident, leader traits, organized, goal-oriented, practical, oppositional and competitive.*

2—*From the ultimate perspective of enlightenment, this*

non-dual wisdom of action transcends the inner outer duality of Kolb's processing continuum which polarizes the need to internalize and the need to act (discussed earlier in chapter 6; see Kolb, 1979, 1983; McCarthy, 1980). Ideally, these two become one as 'meditation in action' or a synchronization of mind and environment (see Trungpa 1976). This contemplative approach which merges inner and outer, thought and action is also expressed in the neo-Confucian philosophy of Wang Yang Ming in his 'Instructions for Practical Living' (Chan, 1963, pp. 667-691).

3—The warrior archetype encompasses the hero archetype, which Campbell (1949) explores through world mythology in the journey of departure, initiation and return. Moore and Gillette (1990), investigating male psychology, explain how the Hero energy calls upon a boy to establish independence and competence in defeating immature energies of the Hero-shadow, which they call the 'Grandstander Bully,' who insists on centre stage, and the 'Coward,' who is afraid to fight. Yet the energy of the Hero, according to their view, is still only an advanced stage of adolescent 'boy psychology.' The energy of the hero finds its ultimate manifestation in the Warrior, who harnesses the power of aggression and overcomes the shadow aspects of Sadist and Masochist through extensive training and discipline of body and mind. The mature Warrior binds himself to transpersonal commitments, transcending petty ego concerns and with an ever-present awareness of his own imminent death he is able to focus and direct his life force with a concentrated intensity. Pearson (1991) tells us that 'Warring is about claiming our power in the world, establishing our place in the world, and making that world a better place.' Furthermore, she says that 'The well-developed internal warrior is necessary, above all, to protect our boundaries. Without courageous, disciplined, and well-trained warriors, the kingdom is always in danger of being overrun by barbarians. Without a strong internal warrior, we have no defence against the demands and intrusions of others.' She also reminds us that we live at present in a 'Warrior culture wherein all of our institutions from education to the judicial system, from capitalist economics, to sports and politics are based on competition' (p. 95). At the higher levels of this archetype, victory is achieved without bloodshed, and ideally it is a victory for all concerned, a win/win situation without loss of face for any party concerned (pp. 104-106). Fields (1991) examines principles of warriorship in the history of diverse cultures worldwide and Trungpa (1988) describes what he calls the 'Sacred path of the warrior': 'here the word "warrior" is taken from the Tibetan "pawo," which literally means "one who is brave." Warriorship in this context is the tradition of human bravery, or the tradition of fearlessness' (p. 28). 'The essence of warriorship, or the essence of human bravery, is refusing to give up on anyone or anything' (p. 33).

4—Heckler, 'Entering Into The Place Of Conflict,' in Wellwood (Ed.) (1983).

5—Fields (1991) says that some consider akido to be the evolutionary apex of the way of the warrior.

Ueshiba, the founder of akido, able to easily defeat five or six simultaneous attackers in his eighties, explains: "Regardless of how quickly an opponent attacks or how slowly I respond, I cannot be defeated. It is not that my techniques are faster than those of my opponent. It has nothing to do with speed or slowness. I am victorious right from the start. As soon as the thought of attack crosses my opponent's mind, he shatters the harmony of the universe and is instantly defeated regardless of how quickly he attacks' (Stevens, 1987, p. 112, quoted in Fields, 1991, p. 205).

6—This naked awareness of a distortion can serve as the motivating factor to relax ego clinging and resolve the problem. However, for this to happen, a certain level of fear and uncertainty or 'groundlessness,' which Trungpa speaks of, must be tolerated so that the escalation of the process described here can be short-circuited or boycotted (see Trungpa, 1973, 1988).

7—For a description of paralysis due to speed of mind, see Podvoll, *The Seduction of Madness*, chapter four: 'Major Ordeals of Psychotic Mind.'