Shrink Rap Radio #56, October 24, 2006. Film and Personal Growth

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka "Dr. Dave" interviews Dr. Tui Wilchinsky (transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Jo Kelly)

Excerpt: "You have got to realise that in cinema it's very much a strange process. You pay money to go into a darkened room, and relax your being and let somebody else mess with your mind; show you images, and make sounds, and music and story lines that they have some idea about. Yet you are open to this, you are very open – this is another connection to the dream state – the body goes into this theta state which is the same thing that happens in dreams. You are open to suggestion, your body is relaxed, and things can get in there."

Introduction: That was the voice of my friend and former student **Tui Wilchinsky, Ph.D.**, who recently completed his doctoral dissertation on film as a medium for personal growth. I first got to know Tui some years back when he was working on a Master's degree at Sonoma State University. The two of us are about the same age and we really clicked when we discovered we were both big fans of folk music and, also, of good movies. It was later my privilege to be the outside member of Tui's doctoral committee, through the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. Tui teaches expressive arts and Sufi dancing in workshops throughout the U.S. and abroad.

Dr. Dave: Dr. Tui Wilchinsky – thanks so much for agreeing to be my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Wilchinsky: Happy to be here.

Dr. Dave: I haven't had too many chances to address you as "Dr. Wilchinsky" in as much as you finished up your Doctoral studies fairly recently.

Wilchinsky: That's right; last June.

Dr. Dave: Yes, and how has it been?

Wilchinsky: I feel like a new person.

(laughter)

Dr. Dave: Right. Just for our audience: you did your Doctoral work at the California Institute of Integral Studies – and what was the title of your Doctoral dissertation?

Wilchinsky: It was called "Experiencing and Reflecting on Cinema as a Modality for Personal Growth."

Dr. Dave: Alright. Some people are probably going to wonder, they are going to say "what? You can get a Ph.D. in that?" but we will come back to that question later.

Wilchinsky: Anytime.

Dr. Dave: So, let's back up and start somewhere near the beginning. When did it first occur to you that there is a connection between film and psychology that needs to be explored?

Wilchinsky: Well if you consider psychology to be human behaviour.

Dr. Dave: Which I do.

Wilchinsky: That's a pretty broad subject: that's everything that happens that involves human beings. And one of the things human beings do is they go to movies, on occasions. Even if they don't go to movies, the culture is affected by movies or by cinema, or motion pictures or however you want to call it, and they ultimately are affected by it somehow.

Dr. Dave: That's interesting; as you say that I get the picture of a feedback loop between culture and cinema – that cinema's depicting culture but it's also driving it at the same time.

Wilchinsky: Yes, you don't know where the chicken or the egg begin; movies reflect the culture, they also help create the culture.

Dr. Dave: Yes that's an interesting perspective. Your dissertation title though talks about personal growth, so do you remember at what point in time you started to make that connection in your own mind about "hmm, movies, personal growth"?

Wilchinsky: Well originally it wasn't about personal growth. You know how dissertations go, they evolve – like pumpkins on the vine, they may start out as something, then they become a pumpkin.

Dr. Dave: Well I'm thinking actually further back than the dissertation, I'm trying to go back even before you taught your class, there was a glimmer in your mind.

Wilchinsky: Yes, well I was born at a very young age (laughing) in Brooklyn, New York; and we didn't have much access to media except for motion pictures, and it was a very enlivening part of my life as a youngster. Years later I ended up running a cinema in Taos, New Mexico.

Dr. Dave: Oh, actually running a theatre?

Wilchinsky: Yes; and I selected the programs and created the environment of the theatre, and after each film we would have a discussion group; and I noticed that as people discussed the films, they were actually talking about themselves. So they were revealing parts of their own being in discussing the film. So this is where, if you might consider it, psychology enters the picture, because people were revealing parts of their being by how their reactions to the film were elicited.

Dr. Dave: Ah, very very interesting. Taos, New Mexico I guess was a very – was this in the 60s perchance?

Wilchinsky: This was in the 70s and 80s.

Dr. Dave: OK, so it was a very happening place, right? With artists, and spirituality, and what else?

Wilchinsky: All kinds of stuff: New Age people, lots of people who had been there for 400 years. A great mix of all kinds of people: Native Americans who had been there from the dawn of people on this continent, more recent people of Spanish origin, and then the more recent arrivals.

Dr. Dave: Yes. So eventually that experience of running your own "cinema" led to you teaching a class on psychology and film. What was the title of that class?

Wilchinsky: Well it went through a couple of different manifestations. First it was called probably "Psychology and Film", then it became "Cinema as Rorschach". And the reason I used that title is that the same group of people could look at a film and each person would have a different reaction to it, just as if a group of people looked at a Rorschach card each one would have a different reaction to it.

Dr. Dave: Yes

Wilchinsky: Then I felt there was a connection between dreams and cinema, and the course eventually became called "Cinema as Collective Dreaming".

Dr. Dave: Ah very good, and now you know you are pushing one of my buttons. This is a class that you taught I guess over several semesters while you were a Masters student at Sonoma State University, and I guess even after.

Wilchinsky: Yes.

Dr. Dave: So tell us about the class: how was it structured, and what did you hope to accomplish in that class?

Wilchinsky: Well during the class we basically had three parts: in the first part of the class we would discuss the previous week's film and discuss the film that was coming up. We would watch the film – which took about two hours or so. Then afterwards, after a break, we would talk about the film we saw and even do expressive arts processes around the film: we would draw or write about it, or work in clay, or write poetry, and share our reactions to the film

Dr. Dave: This is way too much fun to be educational (laughing).

Wilchinsky: It was very educational, and education can be fun.

Dr. Dave: Yes, OK. So what did you hope to accomplish in that class?

Wilchinsky: Well I wanted people to think about their inner life, and also their connection to the world, at the same time. I selected films that had the ability to evoke people's reflection on who they were, and how they got that way, and also how they relate to the world.

Dr. Dave: OK, so what films did you choose?

Wilchinsky: Well let me give you an idea. Each semester there were different films, but this is sort of a composite list. We showed "Zorba The Greek"; "Woman in the Dunes" which is a Japanese film, also called "Sand Woman" I think; "Strictly Ballroom" which is a lot of fun; a wonderful series from England called "The Singing Detective" which is probably my favourite film, it's actually a 7 hour TV series.

Dr. Dave: You turned me on to that, and I did end up watching it.

Wilchinsky: Yes. "Shirley Valentine"; "Seventh Samurai"; "Resurrection"; "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest"; "Never Cry Wolf"; another film that's my favourite "King of Hearts"; "Harold and Maud"; "Ground Hog Day"; "Cinema Paradiso", and "Brazil".

Dr. Dave: You know I think I have seen every one of those films.

Wilchinsky: I'm so glad you did. I love those films.

Dr. Dave: And I didn't even take the course; because I'm a cinema addict as well.

So when you chose those films, was there a topic that you had in mind for each one? Did you go into it expecting to direct it in a certain way; or did you just choose them because you like them?

Wilchinsky: Each film has a slightly different orientation, but again it comes back to that place I was looking for – a film that would make people think about their lives and about their world. For instance if you look at "King of Hearts": it's a film made about World War I and how people reacted to that. It's about a town where everyone leaves the town because they hear that a bomb is planted in the town; and one soldier, one Scottish soldier comes into the town, and the people who are in the insane asylum get loose and take over the town. He has no idea that everyone who is personifying all the different roles in town are out of this madhouse.

Dr. Dave: Just like we don't (laughing).

Wilchinsky: Just like we don't. And these people are actually wonderful people, and are not into war, and he tries to explain to them about the war – and they are not into it. He can't imagine why they are not into the war – and it's a wonderful film that reflects on the insanity of war, and the power of love, and the ability to see illusion, and see through illusion.

Dr. Dave: OK, let me hear you rhapsodize a little about "Shirley Valentine".

Wilchinsky: "Shirley Valentine" is about a woman who talks to the wall. In other words, she shares her inner thoughts with the audience by talking to the wall. It's about a woman who has a very compressed life: her husband

and her used to be very happy and had a joyous relationship until they got more rigidified and crystallized, and now their lives were set in patterns.

Dr. Dave: And now she's in mid life, right?

Wilchinsky: Yes. One day her wealthy neighbour asks her to watch her vegetarian bloodhound: and Shirley Valentine has just gone shopping and gotten a steak for her husband, and she goes by to dog sit the vegetarian bloodhound, and she can see the bloodhound really would like the steak. So she gives the steak to the bloodhound; and when she comes home she makes her husband eggs and chips that night, instead of his usual steak and chips. Now it's Tuesday night, and they always have steak and chips on Tuesday night. He is very upset about it – he throws the eggs and chips at her – she realises it's time for a change. Someone tells her about a trip to Greece and she decides to go to Greece; and during this adventure going to Greece she discovers more than Greece, she discovers herself.

Dr. Dave: OK, so what kind of discussion would this evoke with the students. What kinds of openings, insights might occur?

Wilchinsky: Well all of us get stuck in patterns in our life; even young people, even students, there are certain ways we do things and we think this is how it always has to be done. And here is a film that says you can change: you can change what you are doing and how you are doing things; you can change your perspective on the world. Each person in their writing, and usually they wrote about – the requirement for the course was that you wrote about how the film affected you – even though we did some expressive arts processes, the key instrument was writing about what it brought up for you. The students weren't just to recreate a synopsis of the film, they were to write about what came up for them.

Dr. Dave: OK.

Wilchinsky: So it was a stimulus, to see what came up for them. So many students wrote about the places in their life – or their parents' lives – that were stuck.

Dr. Dave: And writing is kind of a private activity, so they would be more likely to talk about things that are close to the bone I think in writing, than if you just immediately tried to get them to bring it out in discussion.

Wilchinsky: Yes; they also had time, they had a whole week to think about it, and allow inner material to come up.

Dr. Dave: Boy; we could go on exploring the list, it would be fun to talk about them, but I think we will move on.

So I gather that while you were teaching this class, at some point you started collecting some qualitative data from the students which you were later able to use for your Doctoral dissertation. So what sorts of information did you seek from the students?

Wilchinsky: Well originally I was interested in writing about the relationship between dream and cinema. During the process of dissertationism (laughing) – you might want to call it academentia, another phrase for it – the topic changed, and I was required to change it, and it evolved into a new form.

Dr. Dave: As does happen.

Wilchinsky: I understand that. And the new form asked me to do more of an analytic process, than my more expansive theoretical process. So the students' papers were a vast wealth of information about their reactions, and I found out about a process called "grounded theory", which is actually a sociological technique, and I used that to look at the papers. The process is a process of refinement; first you look at the papers and you see what topics come up, and an interesting part was that you had to get lots of different colored highlighters.

Dr. Dave: Because you are coding them, right?

Wilchinsky: I really checked out every store that had highlighters. You wouldn't believe the different colors you have. In fact I ran out of colors so I had to use two different colors, or stripes, and circles. So I started delineating the different topics that appeared, and then you slowly condense them down to a certain number of topics, and then from that you find elements that link up various topics, and then from that you can condense a more generalized idea of what is going on.

Dr. Dave: So basically, it was the student papers that served as the raw data for the study; and then you went in, and in as open minded a way as you could, without having pre-set categories in your mind, you tried to see what themes leapt out at you.

Wilchinsky: Yes, you define your own biases at first, so that you are aware of them. Of course being human beings we always have biases. I think

there was a paper published years ago by Rosenthal and Rosenthal, that said if you have any study involving human beings there is going to be some kind of bias – even if it is double, triple blind, there is going to be some kind of effect happening on – because human beings communicate so well, even unconsciously.

So this method says, yes there is some kind of bias, but let's look at it, let's notice it, and let's look at what comes up.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Now what you really wanted to do in the first place was talk about dreams and cinema, or film and dream. Briefly: what was your notion; what was your hypothesis about that?

Wilchinsky: Well they are both visual phenomena for the most part.

Dr. Dave: Good point.

Wilchinsky: You see usually in dreams – some people have other things going on in dreams – but for the most part people see a series of images. In dreams they are self generated, in movies they are generated by the director of the film and the whole process. At the same time, some directors have said they are just listening to the zeitgeist, they are listening to what is going on in the culture; so it could be that the directors who are clued into that are actually presenting cinema that is responding to people's consciousness.

Dr. Dave: Or to the collective unconscious, in the way that mythology did in the past; because we don't have myths that we recognise as myths today, very much, but we are really immersed in the world of cinema.

Wilchinsky: And there is a lot of unconsciousness in making films. Films that are just made to make economic gain – and some of them are affecting people in awful ways, because they just want to get people to come in and experience it – and the lowest common denominator is very often used. So I looked for films that were not like that; films that had some way of having you look at yourself.

Dr. Dave: They had an artistic dimension; they had a dimension of truth and universality.

Wilchinsky: Yes.

Dr. Dave: Yes, I like what you are saying. Definitely there are films that achieve that and there are ones that don't; and the ones that achieve it

perhaps also achieve tapping into the collective unconscious in ways that the creator may not even realise. But that we might come back 25, 50 years later, look at that and realise, oh my god, that foreshadowed what was going to happen just 10 years later.

Wilchinsky: Yes. In a way we are like the fish swimming in water, trying to examine the water. Films have such an effect on our culture – let me give you an example, OK?

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Wilchinsky: In the 20s and 30s the De Beers company – this is an African company that mined diamonds – came to Hollywood and bribed with diamonds the directors, writers, and producers to have a scene in every movie where the ingenue have a big diamond ring and say, "Look, he loves me!". She showed all of her friends, and people started getting the idea that you had to give someone a large diamond engagement ring; that wasn't part of our culture before that time, this was injected into our culture by the De Beers company. Now in our culture every young man will spend maybe a year or two of his salary buying a rock for his sweetheart – and that was done through the cinema.

Dr. Dave: Right. Now of course there are these glaring product placements that are just so much more obvious – at least they were subtle there, they were a little bit covert.

Wilchinsky: It's the sales stuff that's even stronger, like smoking for instance. Right now, at least in California, smoking has gotten very diminished; but you still see films that people are smoking or talking about their longing to smoke, or there will just be scenes of people relaxing and smoking; even though people know it will cause difficulty. I was just in UK, and when you buy a pack of cigarettes there, in big black letters it says "Smoking Kills" right on the packet. Here it's the more subtle thing, "This contains carbon monoxide". But they are pretty blatant about it – but they still sell them, and people still buy them.

Dr. Dave: Yes. OK I think we have drifted a bit off topic here, in terms of our main focus.

Wilchinsky: That's OK.

Dr. Dave: I know one phase of the Doctoral dissertation involves a literature review. Did you find much of a literature on film and psychology?

Wilchinsky: I did actually. One of the most interesting aspects had to do with training of medical students. There is a group that discovered that medical students sometimes had a hard time relating to homeless people. When they saw a movie that depicted doctors taking care of homeless people they developed more compassion.

Dr. Dave: Interesting.

Wilchinsky: There was a direct connection to watching the film to how these students acted afterwards; so that's more of a positive effect.

Dr. Dave: OK, yes.

Wilchinsky: There was another person who collected films that had to do with increasing paranoia in the culture, and noticed that students had more paranoia after watching the film. So I looked at films that had neither of those qualities – I wouldn't mind increasing compassion in the world, since we need that – but the films I selected were more about "have you noticed your own being".

Dr. Dave: I just came across a book that I think you might be interested in, with a very catchy title, and I think I might try to track the authors down for interview at some point. It's written by a couple of therapists who use cinema as part of their treatment, and it's got this great title: "Rent Two Films and Let's Talk in the Morning".

Wilchinsky: Sounds very medical to me (laughter). There are people who do prescribe films – we do it to our friends.

Dr. Dave: Yes, we do.

Wilchinsky: If someone's in a certain state, "Well you ought to see this, it will show you that about yourself" or something. We do it automatically; it's become like books used to be.

Dr. Dave: Yes

Wilchinsky: Unfortunately a lot of people have stopped reading, and they do watch movies.

Dr. Dave: Or they listen to podcasts (laughing) which is good.

Wilchinsky: Which is happening right now.

You have got to realise that in cinema it's very much a strange process. You pay money to go into a darkened room, and relax your being and let somebody else mess with your mind; show you images, and make sounds, and music and story lines that they have some idea about. Yet you are open to this, you are very open – this is another connection to the dream state – the body goes into this theta state which is the same thing that happens in dreams. You are open to suggestion, your body is relaxed, and things can get in there.

Dr. Dave: Yes; well again that's another whole road that we could go down, and it would be an interesting one to explore more. This is the whole thing about manipulation through film, propagandizing, etc.

How about giving us a little summary – I say little, because it is a dissertation – give us a little summary of your dissertation findings.

Wilchinsky: Well the groups of related experiences that appeared in the students' papers were called theme clusters. Let me give you an example of some of them. These are things that come up – they come up for all people, but these are the ones that happened in the classes. Experiencing emotions, learning lessons, provoking curiosity, projecting, mirroring life experience, nostalgia or memories, awakening self examination and exploration, reflecting on the very process of viewing cinema, opinions about specific movies, reflecting on the culture and the society, generalizing, extrapolating, noticing your biases, noticing the effect of mood that you have when you watch a certain film (you can watch a certain film in two different moods and have two different experiences), confessing, therapy and catharsis, escape, perceptions which vary with time. That's pretty much a list of the things that came up.

Dr. Dave: OK, and then you had instances illustrating each of those kinds of themes.

Wilchinsky: And these things got condensed down – these theme clusters got condensed into another group which was sort of a distillation – these are called consistent themes. These are words that come from grounded theory. So the theme clusters evolve into six consistent themes, which were: self awareness and healing, analogies of real experience, becoming conscious of issues, learning, cinematic awareness, and escape.

Dr. Dave: Escape.

Wilchinsky: Escape. Many of us go to the films for escape.

Dr. Dave: I would never do that (laughing) I'm one of the most compulsive film goers around as you know, second only maybe to you.

Wilchinsky: I'm not that compulsive these days.

There is a cartoon that I have that shows a guy going into a movie house with a bag of popcorn, and he says "gee I can't remember what film I came in here to see". And the next picture says "I can't remember what day it is". And then he says "I can't remember who I am". Then he says "It doesn't get any better than this!"

Dr. Dave: (laughing) Ego loss – very good.

Well backing away from the film stuff a bit, you have a very interesting life, you are leading a very interesting life these days; and you always have as a matter of fact from what I know of you. You have just returned from Scotland I understand. What were you doing there?

Wilchinsky: Yes I was at a place called Findhorn, in Northern Scotland – a marvellous place. I was visiting friends and doing some teaching.

Dr. Dave: And what were you teaching?

Wilchinsky: I was teaching the Dances of Universal Peace, as well as using the expressive arts as ways to look at our specific personal journeys.

Dr. Dave: Yes I know that you do a lot of dance teaching, and this is remarkable because I should share with the audience – they can't see you as I see you right now – and you don't have your artificial leg on at this moment. So we have a one legged dance teacher.

Wilchinsky: I am a one legged dance teacher.

Dr. Dave: And that almost sounds like a joke – or the punch line of a joke.

Wilchinsky: God knows, or goddess knows.

Dr. Dave: (laughing) but in fact you are in great demand for your services as a dance teacher.

Wilchinsky: Relatively, yes.

Dr. Dave: It has sort of pulled you to a number of different places around the country and around the world.

Wilchinsky: It's not just being a dance teacher; it's more like being a facilitator of a certain kind of experience, which are called Dances of Universal Peace, which is rooted in a Universalist Sufi tradition.

Dr. Dave: You are a Sufi, right?

Wilchinsky: I'm on that path.

Dr. Dave: You're on the Sufi path.

Wilchinsky: But I'm on a certain kind of Sufi path; it's the Universalist one. There are many kinds of Sufis like you have many kinds of Christians and many kinds of Jews; this is a Universalist one that honors all traditions. Music and dance are part of the ways that people work together, and pray together.

Dr. Dave: Yes. You know I've interviewed people about meditation, about Buddhism, and this is the first conversation we've had about Sufism. Isn't the poet Rumi – he comes out of that Sufi tradition doesn't he?

Wilchinsky: Rumi definitely is, and he has created his own tradition. Rumi is wonderful.

Dr. Dave: Are you one of these people who can recite Rumi?

Wilchinsky: I probably can, but off the top of my head it's not coming. But the other person I can recite is Hafiz, who was born about 100 years after Rumi, and is in the same tradition. This is a short poem by Hafiz, and he says, "Even after all this time, the Sun never says to the Earth 'You owe me!' Look what a love like that can do – it lights up the whole sky".

Dr. Dave: Good one. I hope everyone has been exposed to the poetry of Rumi and Hafiz as well. It is very much an ecstatic tradition, ecstatic relation to the divine, the love of life.

Wilchinsky: It's the path of the heart; eventually all paths lead to the same place but this one particularly uses the heart as the way to perceive the world.

Dr. Dave: And you first got, what, inducted into this? I can't think of the right word.

Wilchinsky: Inducted sounds very militaristic – initiated?

(laughter)

Dr. Dave: I know it's not the right word – drawn into it by a well known character during the period, by the name of Sufi Sam. Can you tell us about that?

Wilchinsky: Yes. Sam Lewis, Murshid Sam Lewis was a wonderful being. He lived in San Francisco, and he travelled the world; and everywhere he went he was recognised as a great teacher. If he went to a Zendo they called him the Rochi; if he went to a monastery he was called the abbot, if he went to a Jewish community he was called the Rabbi. He had this great, wonderful, awareness and depth of heart that was recognized by everyone.

Dr. Dave: And sense of humor too, right?

Wilchinsky: Great sense of humor; and also he somehow got the message that in the 60s there was a great need for spiritual return in many people, a way to focus their spiritual energy. And he decided to teach the hippies how to dance; and it evolved into a tradition – Dances of Universal Peace – which is now all around the world.

Dr. Dave: And you've really helped carry that tradition on.

Wilchinsky: I hope I have.

Dr. Dave: And you were with Ramdas for some number of years, weren't you?

Wilchinsky: Yes, I travelled with him; you might say I was his song and dance man for a little while – I led the dances, and led the music with him.

Dr. Dave: Some number of our listeners are students who are interested in psychology – some probably young students, and other adult students returning to school, as you were when we first met – and you've had an interesting scholastic career. Why don't you kind of take us through it?

Wilchinsky: Well I started in the sciences, in mathematics and chemistry and physics; and was searching for the humanities through the sciences and got into biology, and then psychology and took my B.A. in New York, in Psychology – I think with a minor in mathematics.

Dr. Dave: OK; and that was where?

Wilchinsky: CUNY – City University of New York at Brooklyn College.

Dr. Dave: OK, great.

Wilchinsky: Then I was interested in music therapy, and I was studying at California State, Long Beach; then I came up to Sonoma County and was continuing in my music studies but got interested in the psychology program, so I took my Masters in Psychology there. Then I went on to the California Institute of Integral Studies and got my Doctorate there.

Dr. Dave: And you were in a program there that was called East West Studies.

Wilchinsky: Well I went to a couple of programs there, and the last one was more of an individualized program. But the school itself has the quality of integrating East and West.

Dr. Dave: Well do you have any last thoughts that you would like to leave with our audience?

Wilchinsky: The last thing you mentioned about new students, there is a story – I think it's a Sufi story, maybe it's a kind of cosmic story – someone asked a teacher "How do I get enlightened?" And the teacher says, well you get that way from having good judgement. He says "How do I have good judgement?" You have that from experience. "Well how did I have experience?" You have experience from bad judgement.

So: face life, jump right in; it's all grist for the mill.

Dr. Dave: So that's the message, OK. Like Zorba The Greek.

Wilchinsky: Like Zorba The Greek.

Dr. Dave: OK. Well, Tui Wilchinsky thanks so much for being our guest here on Shrink Rap Radio – and as I've said to others – you can consider yourself shrunk and rapped.