



## QQ Open Question Podcast Episode 401: The Self: Beyond Existence and Extinction

I remember the first time, as a young girl, I was introduced to the notion of ‘nothing-ness’ -

the prospect that people and things could go away and never come back.

I recall, standing in my friend’s yard,

as she whispered in my ear - (in a dramatic and foreboding tone) -

*[whisper]: “everyone dies!”*

As I stood there immobilized, not knowing how to take this in, she added

*“my mom said: ‘never tell my little brother.’”*

Later that day,

I watched the neighborhood kids playing

from the steps of my house,

consumed by an impending sense of doom.

Before this I had a vague sense of the *word* ‘death’ and sometimes felt the *pangs* of separation when my mom dropped me off at school, But this was my first run-in with existential angst: the quandary of *existence* and *extinction*.

As children we possess a natural longing to make sense of the world - to find explanations for things that disturb or amaze us.

Throughout our lives we attribute meaning to these wondrous and puzzling encounters, influenced by pre-existing language and attitudes we absorb from our environment.

How do we straddle the tension between our longing to exist

and our fear of extinction?  
Are these dualistic constructs an accurate framework?  
What does it mean to either *be* or *not be*?

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Welcome to the 4th season of *Open Question: a call to inner brilliance*  
Our theme this year *The Self: Walking the Middle Way Path*  
I'm EMN and this is episode 401: *The Self Beyond Existence and Extinction*

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If one were to ask: "*What did the Buddha teach?*"  
It would be accurate to reply: "*The Middle Way*"  
MW wisdom challenges the unexamined assumptions we have about things,  
what the Buddha called 'extreme views.'

We tend to think that only "fundamentalists" have extreme views,  
and that extremism doesn't apply to *us*.  
But just check your own mind for a moment:  
you may have some extreme views too.  
We all experience the fear, rightness and inability to embrace complexity that hold such  
views in place.

If you look up 'extreme' in a standard English dictionary,  
you will probably find the definition: "*furthest from the center, or middle.*"  
The terms 'center' and 'extremes' here  
do not refer to physical locations.  
They refer to how -  
when the multidimensional facets of our world  
overwhelm us -  
when we can't seem to reconcile it all,  
we retreat to absolutes.  
Absolutes offer stark, abstract choices that are bereft of nuance.  
Absolutes create dualities:

*life and death;*  
*something and nothing;*  
*right and wrong;*  
*samsara and nirvana*

*hope and fear*

There's nothing in the middle.

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As we can see from these examples  
Extreme views are not *just* political, religious or philosophical -  
although, they most certainly can be!  
Extreme views can be insidious and unconscious, yet...  
influence our lives in deep and dramatic ways.

Clinging to beliefs brings out the worst in us.  
When we hide behind them,  
they give us a false sense of security.  
All it takes is a little opposition  
or  
a change in happenstance,  
to take down a belief.

Extreme views only maintain their absolute status when we keep them out of the fray of  
examination,  
in a sterile environment,  
untested and impervious to challenge.  
This is why, in the MW tradition, inquiry is the remedy for extreme thinking.

The Buddha referred to extreme views broadly as “eternalism” and “nihilism”.  
He taught how to bring them to the light of our discernment,  
and then to deeply consider them.

You might be asking yourself just now:  
“If I examine these beliefs, what will I find in the middle?”

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The Buddha made a profound Middle Way statement.  
He said:

*“That things exist is one extreme;  
that they do not is another;*

*but I the TTG accept neither is or is not;  
and I declare the truth from the Middle Position”*

What exactly does the Buddha mean by ‘middle’ here?

“Middle” has a specific meaning in the MW tradition.

It may not mean what we initially assume it does.

We may assume that the middle position of the Buddha refers to “moderation” or “balance”:

for instance,

eating just enough ice cream, but knowing when to stop.

- OR -

We might think of the Middle Way as

taking a ‘neutral’ position on an issue,

which sometimes means intentionally keeping things a bit vague and non-committal.

But it is important to understand that THERE’S NOTHING NEUTRAL or VAGUE ABOUT THE MIDDLE WAY

It’s an approach to life that’s AWAKE, ENGAGED AND DISCERNING.

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We have a lot to unpack here...

But for now let’s just say that

when we feel ready to question our beliefs

we can rely on the MW path to move us away from abstract ideas into a more direct relationship with reality.

As a famous Indian Buddhist philosopher, Aryadeva, once said: “*The moment you begin to question that things may not be as they seem, the whole structure of delusion begins to fall apart.*”

When we engage life in the spirit of the Buddha or Aryadeva, we find that:

Instead of clinging to views as either *right* or *wrong*, we turn to dialogue for learning and innovation

that beyond the static labels we hold of friends or enemies,  
we encounter a treasure trove of creative healing possibilities.

AND

When we begin to question the very *nature* of existence and extinction,  
we encounter the liberating wisdom of what it truly means to be alive.

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A friend of mine once shared an insight she had at the birth of her son.  
Touched by the poignancy of meeting him for the first time, it occurred to her that:

*“The moment we are born we move closer to death.”*

Maybe you know what my friend meant when she described the bitter-sweetness of  
recognizing that, in fact, life and death converge in the experience of ‘being’ -  
that ‘life’ can be both powerful and fragile at the same time.

Can we bear the complexity of that?

Can we abide, at least for a moment, in the heart of the human conundrum?

If we do, we may find that it isn’t a conundrum at all,  
but rather a poignant awareness of what it means to be alive.

Conundrums have the potential to bring us to the middle -  
beyond dualities.

But it’s hard for us to stay there.

We quickly retreat to extremes again,

*...furthest from the center.*

When we leave the center,

the inevitability of death looks more like an existential defeat.

We resent, dread, and lament the fact that we will someday have to leave this world.

And ironically, the more we cling to life the more we fear extinction.

It’s worth asking ourselves why we turn away from our conundrums.

It may behoove us to examine them a little.

Have we explored the notion of existence and extinction?

Maybe we can poke just a little hole in these assumptions and take a peek around.

Maybe we’ll enjoy it.

Where was it ever written that we can’t *enjoy* a good conundrum?

Looking into conundrums is the starting point of the Middle Way path.

It certainly was for the Buddha.

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## ETERNALISM

The Buddha's entire life story follows his daring venture into the nature of extreme views and the discovery of the Middle Way.

The Buddha, in his early years known as Crown Prince Siddhartha, took birth in the Kingdom of *Kosala*, India. As he matured he began to ask big questions about suffering and happiness, life and death, and the human condition.

Troubled by the prospect that he might one day lose his son to a life of spiritual pursuit, his father, the King, confined Siddhartha to the palace, steering him toward palace politics, seductive women, finery and entertainments,

But this sheltering and distraction only ignited a sense of depression and unease in Siddhartha, whose secret outings beyond the palace walls led to encounters with old age, sickness and death. This made the Prince all the more aware of the vulnerability of being human.

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This period of Siddhartha's early life, is characterized by the extreme of eternalism.

Buddhist philosophical texts, describe eternalism with remarkable specificity. They argue that for something to be eternal it would have to possess certain characteristics. Anything eternal would have to be:

- everlasting;
- It would have to exist **outside** the nature of causes and conditions, so not to be susceptible to change;
- Moreover, in that an eternal 'thing' cannot change, it would have to possess inherent qualities, which means everyone would have to perceive it in the same way, at all times.

In the tradition of MW inquiry,  
we're encouraged to search for an eternal thing,  
although, as far as I know,  
no one has ever found one.  
...but let's save that conversation for another day.

What concerns us here is how all this shows up in our ordinary lives.  
Eternalism expresses itself in our craving for eternity: grasping to existence and dreading extinction

Of course, nothing lasts forever.

but that doesn't stop us from trying to bring life to a static state of peaceful equilibrium.

The King attempts to manufacture a perfect state of comfort for prince Siddhartha. He creates an insular environment to pacify the Prince's dissatisfaction with palace life. Instead, Siddhartha feels trapped and claustrophobic.

The king cannot maintain this illusion of security in the face of Siddhartha's authentic quest. His strategy conflicts with the nature of change, which produces a lot of angst for himself and the Prince.

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We might imagine what it would take to maintain eternal life.  
Technology enables us to pretend we can transcend our human limitations.  
We can store our brain in a jar to await technological salvation in the future.  
But what kind of world might we create from such an extreme fear of death?  
Imagine the horrors of being trapped in this extreme state of narcissism,-  
so devoid of humility and wonder.

Supposing this mechanistic approach to life *were* even possible,  
how would such a plan bring victory over death?

How would it ultimately solve the problems of existence and extinction?  
Not only would this vision for the future of our species minimize our humanness,  
it would disregard and undermine ALL forms of life and biological systems,  
not to mention the natural dynamic energetic flow of both creation and destruction.  
Who could possibly control that?!!!

unlike animals -  
humans are conscious of death  
This may very well be our greatest superpower...  
That is, if the opportunity of transformation and knowledge,  
is indeed important to us!

It WAS important for Siddhartha.  
and so he left the palace in fierce pursuit of unconditional wellbeing.

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## NIHILISM

Siddhartha entered the world outside the palace during a time of affluence and thriving spirituality in India.

Young Indian men,  
who in harder times,  
would have inherited their family caste occupation,  
were,  
like the Prince,  
also asking big questions about life and the nature of existence.  
They followed a growing trend of renunciants into a life of forest retreat,  
a tradition usually reserved for householders at the age of retirement.

Siddhartha studied with the accomplished teachers of his time. His practice included long periods of severe physical deprivation. For 6 years he sat diligently eating only the seeds and herbs that blew into his lap. These 6 years of austerities left him weak and depleted to the point that his mind could barely function. And although he had cultivated an unwavering ability to still his mind, none of these practices addressed the nature of suffering and the path to true inner freedom he so desperately sought.

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Nihilism presents itself in Siddhartha's life as a rejection of the physical world, where the body is seen as an obstruction to liberation.

The practices he engaged in taught that the only way toward liberation, was to desecrate the body.

This was the opposite approach to life in the palace, which promoted happiness through sensual pleasures.

Nihilism, isn't a formal philosophical system.

Would anyone actually want to *BE* a nihilist?

Nihilism first entered into the philosophical vocabulary as a way of referring to a particular weakness that accompanied specific systems of reasoning.

- If we can sum up eternalism as holding on to things and ideas as true, nihilism shows up when such beliefs fall apart or nothing makes sense.
- Eternalism describes surety, while nihilism haunts us with the promise of extinction and the separation of everything we hold dear.
- Nihilism moves us from hope to fear;
- from thing-ness to void;

and

- from inherent meaning to meaninglessness,

which is why nihilism always seems kind of depressing and dreary.

- eternalism concretizes, while nihilism destroys;
- eternalism affirms, while nihilism denies.

In the modern world

nihilism expresses itself as scientific materialism where consciousness is reduced to mere matter.

This mechanistic view of reality implies that we have no freedom of choice and are bound to our biological impulses.

We might recognize nihilism in a worldview that argues against the value of ethical conduct

or  
that doesn't see the need to connect the dots between cause and effect,  
to the point where the relative world gets a bit wobbly.

There is something dangerous about nihilism,  
It is always lurking in the shadows of eternalism as an ever-present possibility.

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Siddhartha exhausted his investment in the strategies of eternalism and nihilism,  
and  
he sat quietly beneath a bodhi tree,  
his mind open and at ease,  
more determined than ever to find the meaning of true inner freedom and unconditional  
wellbeing.

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Let's leave Siddhartha sitting under the Bodhi tree in meditation, for now.  
We will pick up the story in the next podcast.  
Something extraordinary is about to happen -  
the most pivotal moment in the Prince's journey -  
the dawn of his awakening.  
Siddhartha is ripe to encounter the essential meaning of the Middle Way,  
and become *The Buddha*.

But for now, let's return to our reflection on the ***middle*** and ***extremes***,  
and the creative potential and benefits of exploring conundrums.

If I could,  
I would summon - in us of all - the daring, spirit it takes to approach our human  
conundrum,  
as the Buddha so clearly did.  
However, that is something we all have to do for ourselves.

Why is it that we humans shy away from conundrums?

We can't seem to bear the potency of keeping our mind open, humble and curious to the field of possibility,  
We can't seem to trust that if we can just stay with it,  
this world has something spectacular to reveal to us.

Tragically,

We could go our entire life without wondering about this;  
it may never even occur to us that we have a choice in the matter;

But  
this is our life!  
How can we escape it?  
The predicament of *existence* and *extinction* is here  
literally pushing at us day after day,  
calling to our courage,  
our discernment,  
imploping us to pay attention;  
challenging us!  
Why do we ignore it?

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We are only just beginning our inquiry here...  
If we have the fortitude,  
The MW will take us into the heart of the issue:  
which is not simply adopting a belief in reincarnation as many people may assume.  
What is required on the MW path is a deep examination of the nature of SELF.  
This will take some work.  
The question here is: *are we up for the challenge?*

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Please join us live on: March 25th at 1 pm Mountain Time,  
for our first OQ LIVE CONVERSATION for 2023:  
*How We Live is How We Die*, with Pema Chodron.

In this live event I look forward to hearing about Pema's new book

also entitled "*How We Live is How We Die*," and what that idea means to her.  
And naturally, I will be asking her questions about the Self, the Human Conundrum, and  
How to find the Middle!  
Please do join us!

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For more info visit: <[middlewayinitiative.org](http://middlewayinitiative.org)>  
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by Michael Velasco  
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