

Open Question 207: OUR HUMAN BEING

We're all humans...at least I think that's correct to assume! And I'm only half joking here, because as electronic communication, machine intelligence and global culture become more a part of our world...I've been feeling a deep personal need to examine and clarify what it means to be human.

We often don't appreciate the power of our plight, and gifts, as humans. There is something both tragic and touching about it all.

I want to explore OUR HUMAN BEING.

Typically, when we say "human being" we are referring to our person as some *thing*. We are using that label as a noun.

Let's instead consider the word *human* as an adverb: our way of being is a *human* way of being. As opposed to a horse or honeybee, or something else. *Human* comes with its unique conditions and possibilities of experience.

The act of our "being"—which we're using as a verb here—doesn't mean to exist in a static way. Coming into being is an act of continuous creation—of actualizing who we are as we move about the world of dynamic relationships.

Each human being has their own way of perceiving life. Each of us is at the center of our own universe. And yet, we often share moments of complete synchronicity with others. In *our human being*, we recognize the overlapping vulnerabilities, joys, and foibles that bind us together in our common human condition.

The Buddha said something curious about *human being*, and it's something that speaks to our tendency to diminish our human being. He explained that: "It is in a human body—endowed with faith, empathy and the ability to self-reflect—that we find the great potential for unconditional wellbeing."

For these qualities to come together, along with the outer condition of freedom, is rare...

"As rare," said the Buddha, "as it would be for a blind turtle living at the bottom of a great ocean, who rises to the surface only every hundred years, to put its head through the hole of a yoke tossed about on the surface of the waves."

He called the convergence of these unlikely conditions "a precious human birth." How do we understand and make use of such an opportunity?

Welcome to Open Question: A Call to Inner Brilliance. I'm Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel.
This is OQ 207: OUR HUMAN BEING.

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The Buddha's description of our precious human birth is best understood in the context of multiple realms of being. The Buddha described a multitude of realms: the animal realm, the hell realm, and hungry ghost realm, just to name a few. And he gave detailed accounts of these realms as conditions of being.

Realms are not something we have to "*believe*" in. We can observe realms all around us. A realm can refer to: life in a drop of seawater; the ecosystem in a pile of manure; a household, or a war zone. A realm could also define limitless space and the appearances and possibilities that arise within that space.

Our physical bodies ground us in this realm. But we also have the agility of mind to move in and out of overlapping environments and emotional and mental states. As humans we encounter a wide range of experiences; the extreme notions of heaven and hell are not entirely divorced from our experience. We can relate to them because we experience pain and pleasure as they show up in our own lives. And we can recognize these states in others.

For instance, we may be causally sitting on the subway on our way to work, when we notice that the person sitting next to us seems to be encountering a world fraught with danger. We might wonder if this person has a chemical imbalance or maybe they're a prophet. It's hard to say. We can see them struggle, but we can't see the causes and conditions for their pain. In this way, a realm can be a psychological environment or a dreamscape.

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In all realms described by the Buddha reside beings with their own characteristics, challenges, abilities and superpowers. Some have clairvoyance, possess magical weapons, or enjoy abundant wealth. As I prepared this episode, I challenged myself to identify attributes that I observed are unique to humans. One of the most remarkable features I came up with is the capacity to imagine.

Due to our imagination we can aspire, envision and innovate. We build houses to live in and have created systems of agriculture to produce food. But survival is not enough for humans. We have pressing philosophical questions about our place in the universe. We have moments when we step outside our habitual reality to glimpse the magnificence of the world around us. We have an impulse toward devotion and a longing to express it.

Humans also have the need to interact socially. We create systems that allow us to participate with each other in life and society. We develop languages to communicate with one another

based on random sounds, we call words...and using words, we can reason.

For instance, we can empathize with others: “What would it be like to be in their shoes?” “What would it be like to see the world through another person’s eyes, or the eyes of a different species?”

Humans often choose to work against their lesser impulses. That power of choice requires ingenuity and a strong sense of personal agency.

At the same there’s also something embarrassing and clumsy about humans. We move about the world as if we were entering a room full of people and not sure where to sit. We have all kinds of emotional and conceptual conundrums, including feeling unsure as to who we are.

Luckily, humans share a geographical space with animals. Animals, especially those living in the wild, exhibit so much natural grace. They are not self-conscious or awkward in their being. They don’t mess up the environment on a massive scale, or try to kill each other for anything other than survival.

Animals are not complicated. A bear knows how to be a bear. A deer navigates its world without too much trouble. But we humans, by comparison, struggle with our humanness. I have always thought there is something about being human that doesn’t come naturally to us.

Our struggle is both touching and painful to witness. Luckily, we humans have the capacity to laugh at ourselves. That we can find humor in our lack of composure is another of our superpowers. Laughter comes from our ability to expose ourselves to ourselves! And that definitely requires imagination.

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According to the Buddha, the human realm is defined by the human drive to find happiness in external things and the dissatisfaction that ensues from not finding what we truly need. Humans suffer from change, loss and grief; old age, sickness and death; from not getting what we want; and from getting what we don’t want. As my teacher says: humans are plagued with the propensity to be constantly bothered.

Our realm is characterized by dissatisfaction, or *dukha*, as it’s called in Sanskrit. We are always trying to get rid of this thirst, and don’t seem to recognize that the conditioned world will never quench our desire for the lasting satisfaction we seek.

When exploring the realms, it turns out that dukha or dissatisfaction actually motivates us to seek wellbeing. Dukha is a defining attribute of our human being and a central condition for awakening. Coming to grips with dukha protects us from unknowingly slipping into a god-like experience in this and future lives.

In Buddhist cosmology, the description of the god realm gives human beings a clear reflection of what it means to waste our precious human life. We can relate to the god realm as a geographical dimension, or a psychological state. It really doesn't matter. The important thing is that we use the god realm as a tool of reflection.

The beings in this realm—the gods—have inconceivably long lives. They remain youthful, fresh and attractive for eons, and live in uninterrupted safety and comfort. The thought of death, impermanence and suffering never occurs to the gods, because they live in a static state of peaceful equilibrium with no desire to improve or renounce anything. In their contentment, the gods lack imagination, and the possibilities for growth and evolution.

But even in the state of self-satisfaction, the god realm reverberates with the sound of wisdom—the Buddha's teaching, the four seals of Dharma, the true nature of things:

1. All things are impermanent and subject to decay.
2. The sensory world won't bring unconditional wellbeing.
3. The true nature of things bursts from the seams, beyond all concepts.
4. Liberation is unrestricted by hope and fear.

These verses repeat, accompanied by the resounding beat of a drum, their rhythmic message a wake-up call to the gods...but the gods will never hear it. They are too enraptured in their own comfort and enjoyment.

During a god's eons-long life, their distracted state is interrupted only when one of their companions begins to show the signs of decay. In these moments, a god will encounter a glimmer of impermanence. But the sight of this change will repulse and frighten them. Instead of approaching their companion, the gods will throw flowers from afar and call out platitudes and best wishes, such as: "May you again take birth amongst the gods!"

Then, without a moment of reflection that this will one day happen to them, the gods return to their amusements, leaving their friend, who has wasted his long life in distraction, to suffer the unbearable loneliness and agony of confronting his death.

It says in texts, such as *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, that the mental anguish experienced by the gods at the end of their lives is worse than that in the hell realm. At least in the hell realm, there is the potential for compassion, renunciation or regret. It is said that in one of his previous lives, the Buddha, through one altruistic thought that arose in his mind upon seeing someone suffer, was lifted out of the depths of hell.

As humans we must ask, "What is a life without altruism, without renunciation and the courage to see the truth?" And what would be life be like without dissatisfaction? If we can see the value of dissatisfaction rather than resenting and trying to get rid of it, we are protected from falling into the stupor of the gods. In this way, dukha becomes the cause of our awakening.

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We humans seem to believe that awakening requires that we transcend our humanness. But is that true? Is that what a spiritual path is about?

We live our lives embarrassed of ourselves, of our perceived limitations...then we can't accept or relax into who we are at the moment. This is an obstacle, this tendency to resist our human being. This indicates that we lack tenderness and affection toward our own experience, for the struggles and frailties we face as humans.

Without tenderness we can't appreciate the tremendous resources intrinsic to our human being: the ability to play, to reflect, to empathize, to weep, to see irony. The irony here is that there is nothing but ourselves keeping us from our natural human inheritance.

When we look at our species in a mechanistic or material way, we view everything that occurred before this very moment of our human history as lesser. And define evolution as an endeavor to transcend human frailties. We see aging and death as pathologies, rather than honoring the natural cycle of life, and reject outright the poignant truth that all things will change.

We use our imagination to innovate ways to improve our species, but in truth, the most elegant technology, the most productive idea, or the most powerful medicine will never deliver what we truly long for. These external developments might bring some temporary benefit, but at the same time might dull or distract us into a god-like existence. Material improvements will never bring an unconditional sense of wellbeing.

It is not that I think the human struggle will ever be a thing of the past. We are complex, we are who we are. And yet the stories of humans rising to the level of their nobility in the face of overwhelming odds is a remarkable part of the human legacy. Why would we not honor and cultivate affection for our human being?

I often think about what the Buddha said—about the precious human birth—and how it provides us with the conditions we need to awaken. And then I understand that the whole point of the spiritual path is not to transcend our humanness, but rather to become fully human.

*Open Question is produced by Michael Velasco
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