

Open Question Podcast Episode 301: Sacred World: Through the Eyes of Prajnaparamita with Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel

Most spiritual traditions offer teachings on “*sacred world*”—the promise of a life beyond struggle—the search for a place of ease. This is a noble human quest. Perhaps we have tasted a moment of inner freedom and peace and find ourselves longing for that same experience of sacred again and again; sacred world often seems to be a place *other* than where we find ourselves now.

How do we reconcile the notion of a “sacred world” with:

- a world in distress
- a struggle with depression,
- or just losing our cell phone?

So what do we mean then when we say “sacred?”

We can cling to the *notion* of sacred as a way to hide behind the uncomfortable or more foreboding aspects of life. But in our attempt to live *around* these challenges we forfeit the empathy, courage, and responsiveness that comes from allowing the world to touch and transform us.

- How does the suffering we encounter in our own and others’ lives fit into our notion of sacred?
- Can we find sacred world *outside* the realm of human experience?
- Might we be deceiving ourselves in clinging to this outer notion of sacred?

On the other hand, if we dismiss our connection to the *sacred* as naive, impractical or indulgent, what kind of world would we create for ourselves? Insisting that *nothing* is sacred would be a very bleak outlook. Our view of life would be solely materialistic—nihilistic. *That’s* a frightening prospect. Contemplate that. I can’t think of anything worse.

So what do we mean when we say “sacred?”

This tension between the spiritual and temporal aspects of life is our conundrum. And this conundrum presents us with a genuine opportunity to explore something crucial to *our human being*.

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Welcome to the first episode of our third season! I’m Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel and this is OQ 301: Sacred World: Through the Eyes of Prajnaparamita.

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What do we *mean* when we say “sacred”?

That's the big question I want to open this year. When I invited my life into this investigation, things got lively fast. We learn so much from life and each other when we engage in open conversation, So I see every connection in my life as a precious resource. I want to invite you in too.

I began this investigation by contacting a group of friends in Brazil—and asking how they experience the word *sacred*.

One friend shared that the word for 'sacred' in Portuguese is *sagurado or sagurada* when used with a feminine noun. She told me that this word connotes "obligation" and she used the celebration of *carnival* as an example. "All Brazilians," she said, "are obliged to celebrate carnival."

I wondered how something so joyful could be seen as an "obligation." My friend explained, "Through celebrating carnival, we attend to something *essential* to our culture." In other words, Brazilians understand that to sing, to dance, to express joy, and to gather is essential to being human.

Words are like maps—elegant markers that can help us navigate and participate in life together. And yet words are mere references for direct experiences. They are not determinate structures. Like maps, they merely direct us to the territory they represent. When we release words into our lives, we begin to walk the lively and often messy *terrain* of an idea. Words can help us move from abstract ideas into a direct relationship with reality. Then, all kinds of personal and cultural information emerges. Our inquiry can open up the whole universe.

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A few days later, I took an excursion to a nearby hot springs. As I moved through the element of water, breathing the cold winter air, my mind became quiet...I reflected on the abundance of the natural elements that comprise all life.

Most indigenous cultures recognize and celebrate the sacredness of the natural world, a world humans will never be able to manufacture. When we marvel at the mystery and brilliance of the natural world, we encounter our own best qualities: humility and wonder.

We express our appreciation for the universe of appearances and possibilities in creative ways: through art, poetry and ritual.

In India you might pass a tree with a remarkable knot in one of its branches: someone has already been there, and offered a flower.

The patterning of the natural world intrigues our senses and our imagination. Geometries replicating themselves in fractal spirals in plants, seashells, and bird feathers...from the chaos of a brewing storm falls a unique, delicate and perfectly symmetrical snowflake.

Systems of mathematics and sacred geometry describe and mimic this natural order. We construct temples, mosques, religious monuments, and altars that follow the mysterious patterns we observe in nature.

When we walk into a grand cathedral it puts the sense of 'me' into perspective. "Oh, maybe I'm *not* the center of the universe!" This recognition of proportion puts us in healthy relationship with our world.

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The body is often called the temple of the soul...

[pause]

and we often refer to the heart as sacred.

Even from an ordinary perspective, we understand that the heart is not a mere lump of matter. We might marvel at the heart as the engine that pumps oxygenated blood throughout our body and synchronizes with all other systems. The heart is central to our wellbeing at every level.

Looking closer at the heart—or anything really—we find layer upon layer of intricate relationship that allows it to function the way it does. It's a wonder.

Once, when I was unwell, a friend who is a vascular surgeon wrote me a letter. It read:

"There is nothing like the intelligence of our natural human being. Nature has spent eons perfecting our human being in its relationship to all things of our natural world.

The immune system is controlled energetically by the heart, you know. All things related to the heart are the most important things to embrace. The greatest mysteries live there, in our hearts. It's fabulous. I know you understand."

To me, this letter was an ode to the sacred heart: a love poem of sorts.

I think we all intuit something when we hear the word *heart*. We understand what happens when it 'opens' and what happens when it closes.

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As we move about the world, we express our reverence for the sacred spatially. We don't place sacred books, or meaningful symbols, such as flags or statues on the floor or step over them.

Objects are often made sacred through ritual. Through ritual we align circumstances for something meaningful to happen: a rite of passage, the consecration of a statue, a baptism or a wedding.

Sometimes through ritual, or when causes and conditions auspiciously come together, we experience sacred moments—moments of grace—when deep learning, unconditional love or creativity can happen.

It is important to recognize these moments when they occur in our lives.

I often recall a sacred moment when my grandmother emerged from her dementia to express how much she loved me and to reveal the location of a necklace she wanted to give me, but for many years, couldn't recall where she had hidden it.

In the 20 minute window that she could again access her memory and gain use of the words to communicate with me, she instructed me to open the closet and take out her bathrobe. There she had sewn the necklace into the hem. It relieved her to know the necklace was in my possession, before she again retreated back into a state where communication was no longer possible.

Those 20 minutes, laying on the bed with my beloved grandmother, will always remain sacred for me—set apart from all other moments.

[music]

My inquiry into the term *sacred* continues to yield wonder and appreciation for life. I find that Sacred doesn't reveal itself *only* in those moments that shine. Sacred includes the foreboding areas of our lives. The dark nights of the soul...the aspects of our lives that we need to let touch us so that we no longer fear them. We might ask ourselves: what happens when we don't turn away from such experiences?

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Once, many years ago I did a meditation retreat. Every day I looked out a large window overlooking a vast valley. To the north I could see a bucolic mountain range, with snowcapped mountains. Looking in that direction brought a sense of comfort and ease to my heart and mind.

To the south lay a stretch of misty open landscape that evoked an unbearable sense of loneliness in me.

At first I situated my cushion toward the friendly side of the valley. But gradually I found myself shifting, bit by bit, toward the south. One day, I allowed myself to look directly into the heart of that lonely landscape, and discovered a reservoir of love and connection to the world of infinite beings I had never felt before—a connection that included both the love and loss of being alive. The lonely part of the valley became a source of Sacred World—an experience of unconditional wellbeing.

When we talk about unconditional wellbeing, it doesn't mean that everything is 'perfect' according to our preferences. Unconditional wellbeing is the liberation that comes from our ability to include more life; moments of seeing that everything is of value; times when our life is no longer too beautiful, too scary, or too complex for us. We *can* be big enough for our life. Humans have the capacity for the enormity of this experience, which I would like to call here: Grace.

[music]

Grace is often used in religious contexts. But in fact, we use the term *grace* in ordinary ways... *grace* describes being in healthy relationship with our world.

For instance, we refer to someone as gracious when they invite us inside their home and make us feel welcome. "*Mi casa, es su casa.*" Such sentiments are an extension of warmth and care.

We often use the term graceful to describe a dancer, who, through intensive training in strength and flexibility in movement, expresses balance in the field of gravity.

Grace is not something we either have or don't have. We move in and out of grace as we move through the world of relationship. Sometimes we feel awkward, don't know who we are, where to sit, what to say. This can be a valuable experience. We don't live in a vacuum. Life is a dynamic exchange between our inner and outer worlds—a continuous and dynamic process of reflection and responsiveness.

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Life shapes and influences what we know and how we perceive things, and in turn, how we perceive our life depends upon *how* we poise our mind in relation to it.

- *Can we truly separate ourselves from the world we experience?*
- *Where does the mind end and the world begin?*

These questions reflect a wisdom taught by the beloved 2nd century Indian master, Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna clarified and revived the Buddha's teachings on interdependence, or *dependent arising*, through a series of profound inquiries into the nature of relationship. We can investigate for ourselves how nothing exists outside the nature of relationship...everything is conditioned by other elements.

If we bring Nagarjuna's insight into our investigation of sacred world, we can observe that, because mind and its world are *in relationship*, they are not the same, they are not separate; they are not one, nor are they two.

And if this is the case, then the way we poise the mind in relationship to its world is *fundamentally* connected to our wellbeing and the world in which we live.

[music]

I wanted to release the topic of *Sacred World* as my first episode of the year. I have an exciting vision for how to use the OQ podcast and focus my work in 2022.

From the Buddhist Mahayana point of view, Sacred World is the world as seen through the eyes of Prajnaparamita. *Prajnaparamita* is a Sanskrit term that refers to the awareness poised to encounter the nature of reality without confusion. We might also describe Prajnaparamita as the experience of being in *healthy* relationship with our world—which ties into the experience of grace.

The literal translation of Prajnaparamita—*transcendent wisdom*—gives us a lot to unpack.

This year my teachings through the Middle Way Initiative will continue with our OQ podcast series. I'm excited to announce that we are going to complement the podcast with a new series of live video dialogues. Podcast episodes will provide context for the dialogues. I have invited some respected Buddhist teachers, scholars, translators and artists to join us in opening up the topic of Sacred World. We welcome your engagement through discussion and questions.

I am excited for a year of learning and contemplation that will focus on this essential and illuminating Mahayana theme. Please join me for this inquiry into ***Sacred World: through the eyes of Prajnaparamita!***

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Open Question podcast is a production of the Middle Way Initiative by Michael Velasco, with original music from Chime Mattis.

Please join us live on April 24th for a conversation with Jakob Leschly on Confidence in the Grace of Openness.

For more info visit middlewayinitiative.org