

## Open Question 302: Sacred World: Awakening Natural Intelligence

A body of sacred literature in Mahayana Buddhism—referred to as the *Buddha Nature* teachings—offers an essential insight for us to consider: that all conscious beings possess natural intelligence.

In its raw expression, this innate feature of our mind reveals itself in our striving for wellbeing and freedom from suffering. We can observe in ourselves and others that the instinct for wellbeing drives everything we do. We bend toward wellbeing like a plant bends toward the light of a sunny window.

So, we might ask:

- How is it then, that we humans create the conditions for so much suffering?
- Why do we have the propensity for making such a mess of things?

When we honestly assess our human condition, we find that our aspiration for wellbeing can be selfishly driven. We often fail to connect the dots between our innermost longing and the way we move through life. To bring our actions together with our true intentions requires discernment, or *prajna*, in Sanskrit.

Prajna is our inherent resource—but if we don't recognize, develop, and use it, it will remain dormant. The question we need to ask ourselves is: "How do we wake it up?"

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*Welcome to Open Question: A Call to inner Brilliance. I'm Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel. This is OQ 302: Sacred World: Awakening natural intelligence.*

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The teachings that recognize the innate presence of prajna in all beings empower us. As we drink in the profundity of their message, we find something we can *trust* in ourselves: an ability to discern, intuit, read patterns, and assess whether an action will bring benefit or harm.

As we trace the persistent linkage between cause and effect, we observe how prajna plays a significant role in way we move about our lives—even in ordinary ways.

We walk out the door in the morning on our way to work. As we step outside we feel the coldness of the air on our skin. We go back inside to put on a sweater—that's prajna in action.

We rely on prajna when:

- choosing which breakfast cereal to buy at the grocery store,
  - deciding where we want to send our children to school,
- or
- trusting our conscience to guide us in relating to others.

Even when handing important decisions over to someone else, such as trusting a doctor to heal our body or relying on a teacher for spiritual advice, this necessitates that we choose to receive their wisdom and skill. This requires prajna.

Can you identify any resource you possess more powerful and useful than your own innate intelligence?

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When we trust in prajna we awaken our confidence and sense of agency.

Of course, we can probably identify many areas of our lives where we don't have the vital information we need to make clear decisions.

I remember long ago, while living in Nepal, I learned that children who resided in outlying villages died of dysentery, despite the constant flow of messaging on the radio announcing the availability of government-subsidized electrolyte powder. Somehow this vital information didn't reach these remote communities, which resulted in the loss of young life.

At other times, we have information, but lack the wherewithal to execute wholesome choices despite our best intentions.

When overcome by strong emotions, for instance, we often lack the strength or training to work against habitual patterns and impulses. The ability to choose is something we have to develop.

When we engage an inquiry we emerge from the complacency of not-noticing. This may expose many areas of our lives where we abdicate our agency.

Perhaps we stay in an unhealthy relationship dynamic, because it's familiar, or we *want* to give away our agency and let someone else manage our life

All of these considerations provide fodder for our query into how we bring our actions together with our intentions for wellbeing.

I think it's important to point out that although we may assume our spiritual tradition dictates that we hand over agency to our spiritual teacher, we will never find a single passage in the Buddha's teachings that encourage us to abdicate our discerning intelligence to anyone.

When the tendency toward this misunderstanding has arisen for me, my teacher—who offers so much wisdom but rejects the responsibility of taking care of my mind—has always clearly re-directed me back to my own prajna.

Even the practice of faith and devotion evolve from nurturing prajna, and guide us in honoring, developing and using it. After all, our own innate intelligence is the source of unconditional wellbeing.

As the Buddha famously said: "You are the agent of your own awakening, there is no other agent than you."

I wonder if, like me, this statement stimulates a sense of freedom and responsibility in you.

[music]

In the context of Buddhist wisdom, we often translate prajna as “accurate discernment.” Accurate here doesn’t mean we’re “right” about what we perceive, feel or think. It doesn’t refer to being the one “in-the-know.” In fact, there’s no place for “rightness” in the realm of accurate discernment.

*Accurate* here refers to the clarity that informs our ability to bring our actions in line with our intentions. We have established that all beings long for wellbeing and freedom from suffering. So the question is: what serves that intention? Asking “what serves” aligns us with the immediacy of our life, and then we have to pay attention, and continually rise to the occasion.

Due to the presence of prajna, we can read patterns and respond to the world around us in powerful and creative ways. There’s a precision in it.

We observe that if given the conditions, an apple seed will always yield an apple tree. All farmers know this. Farmers therefore plant seeds, which serves to produce food. Through observing our life we can cultivate clarity around the connection between cause and effect.

Of course, there’s no linear certitude to this process. The complexity and nuance of life will continue to surprise us. Regardless of our trust in seed and fruit we can never determine what may happen next.

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Given the nature of countless contingencies, a seed may not sprout...or if it does, the tree it eventually produces will have its own story. We can only wonder:

- What kind of elemental happenings will this growing tree endure?
- How many birds will nest in its branches?
- How much fruit will it yield?
- O...will it even get that far?
- Will it instead get uprooted by a storm...or dug up by a tractor?

Furthermore, not even for an instant can we claim to know the completeness and scope of influence that a tiny seed may have on its surrounding environment, or who it may house or feed.

We will never be privy to the hidden and magical world of this tree, the organization of its vascular system that supports the formation of branches and the production of buds, leaves and flowers; or its relationship with the soil it digs its roots into: the story of microbes and small living organisms that nourish it.

Like this tree, everything intermingles with, and is made of, other elements. Through the space of our curiosity, we encounter a world of nuance, information, and mystery that continually bursts from the seams of our ideas.

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You may interpret the impossibility of arriving at ultimate definitions of reality as a limitation of the discerning mind. But history shows us that *rightness* has never captured truth.

We can directly understand this by simply asking ourselves: when is my mind in most accurate relationship with its world? When it is open and engaged? Or when I cling to a belief?

Open inquiry like this can illuminate our understanding in ways that studying volumes of philosophical texts could never do. There is nothing like the insight and confidence that comes from utilizing our own intelligence and seeing things for ourselves.

[music]

In this podcast, we have opened up the topic of prajna, identifying our natural intelligence as an innate feature of our own mind. We have also observed how it functions in our ordinary lives and how we can develop and use it to *serve* our intentions for wellbeing.

We have explored the quality of knowing and challenged our assumptions that *rightness* can capture truth.

At the same time, we have honored two qualities of mind that describe our capacity for accurate discernment.

The first is the mind's natural ability to read patterns and connect dots in order to bring actions together with our intentions for wellbeing.

The second describes the mind's capacity to bear the complexity and mystery of life, without shutting down around rightness.

As we develop these two characteristics of prajna, we find that they support and strengthen each other. We find that our ability to successfully navigate life increases when informed by the mind's ability to bear the fathomless nature of its universe.

This is not just an intellectual insight, but a way of being in life that begets a unique kind of understanding.

This understanding has a name in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition: *Prajnaparamita*. Prajnaparamita is a Sanskrit term, often translated as *transcendent wisdom*.

- As an insight, Prajnaparamita describes the mind poised for insight into the nature of things.
- As a path, Prajnaparamita refers to the gradual waking up of our innate intelligence, through the two aspects of accurate discernment.
- As a result, Prajnaparamita describes mind at ease with its world—the unfolding wisdom of the bodhisattvas and the constant wisdom of the Buddhas.

[music]

The term Prajnaparamita also refers to a body of Buddhist scripture that reveals the vital information necessary to support the recognition, development and use of prajna.

Sakyamuni Buddha first introduced Prajnaparamita—*Transcendent Wisdom*—at Vulture Peak Mountain, near Rajghir, in India, some 2,500 years ago, to a great

gathering of monks and nuns, lay people, and a community of Bodhisattvas, as described in the renowned *Heart Sutra*.

The tradition explains that early Buddhists did not value the Transcendent Wisdom sutras, so these teachings were lost to our world for some 400 years.

There are many accounts as to the origins of these texts. The mystical interpretation explains that during this time, water serpents, called *Nagas*, who recognized the value of the books but rarely read them, hid them within the depths of the ocean. The Indian scholar Nagarjuna ventured into this watery realm to retrieve them and return them to the human world in the second century.

The various Chinese translations of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras reveal that the earliest versions of the sutras underwent considerable change yielding new versions, which appeared over time. The vast commentarial tradition began with Nagarjuna himself, and opened an environment of lively discussion, debate and commentary that spread throughout the world.

The most widely known Prajnaparamita texts consist of: the Prajnaparamita in 100,000 verses; 25,000 verses; and the “8,000” which is considered to be one of the oldest and most important texts in the history of early Indian Mahayana Buddhism, as well as the primary scriptural source for one of the largest bodies of religious and philosophical literature in history.

The *Heart Sutra* is the most condensed and widely-recited version of Prajnaparamita wisdom—which includes the Prajnaparamita mantra—the sound of her:

*Om gate gate, para gate, para samgate, bodhi sva-ah*

*gone gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond...*

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(I should mention here that *Prajnaparamita* is referred to in the feminine...but that will be a topic for a future podcast.)

In condensing Prajnaparamita down to her very essence, we find the single seed syllable 'Ah'. Isn't it curious that we use the term awe A-W-E to express amazement and a sense of mystery? It is our response to encountering something of great beauty, like the glimmer of the sun shining on the snow after a fall, or the sound we make when we learn something new.

And, isn't it curious that the sound *ahhh* is the sound of letting go that we often make when we lay down after a long day of work?

The Tibetans say that *ah* is present in all the letters of the alphabet. After all, without vowels, consonants won't work. *Ah* expresses the yielding nature of space, and the empty or open-dimensional nature of all things. It is due to space that things can arise, express themselves and disperse.

This sense of awe describes the mind poised for insight. Like an open question, prajnaparamita commands the strength of mind that can bear not shutting down around its object by making it a "thing."

But make no mistake, there is nothing passive about her. Prajnaparamita is the experience of unconditional confidence, it is mind's natural responsiveness, which expresses itself as the question "What serves?"

It is important to understand that Prajnaparamita does not reside outside the realm of human experience. And perhaps if we take the time to consider her, we may recognize that we already know her in some way. And why wouldn't we? She is the unimpeded expression of our own innate intelligence.

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Perhaps through this podcast you can see the value of opening ancient words. In the contemporary world we have a tendency to dismiss words we identify as religious jargon, never considering that their meaning might be relevant to us now. These words have a primordial significance for realizing our human potential. How can we allow them to stay locked up in our limiting concepts?



In our next Open Question live conversation, scholar, practitioner and Sanskrit translator Greg Seton will join us and guide us in opening up the term *Prajnaparamita*.

Please join us live on June 18<sup>th</sup>.

For more info visit [middlewayinitiative.org](http://middlewayinitiative.org)

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*Open Question is produced by Michael Velasco  
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