

Episode 402: The Self: *Mind and Its World*

In the previous episode of Open Question, we walked with the Buddha through the early years of his life, when he was known as Prince Siddhartha. We followed him as he asked big questions about suffering and happiness, life and death, and the human condition.

Siddhartha tempered this fierce inquiry and experimentation with humility and deep longing. Once the Prince had exhausted all possible strategies for liberation, once he had arrived at the futility of striving for unconditional wellbeing in the sensual world, once he wore through all hope and fear, only then did a newfound confidence arise from within. Ironically, not until the prince abandoned all effort and expectation did he arrive at the edge of an unprecedented discovery.

It was at this time that the prince left his forest hermitage to sit beneath the sprawling branches of a sacred fig tree, his mind utterly engaged and wide-open, riveted by the potency of the moment.

This is where we left him in our last episode. Imagine him now, poised for the wisdom of the Middle Way.

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There are differing accounts of just how long Prince Siddhartha sat beneath that tree, but all agree that while he sat there, unmoved in meditation, the veils to seeing clearly fell away. The universe lay bare before him, utterly unimpeded.

And at this, the dawn of his enlightenment—the most pivotal moment in his story—Siddhartha became the *Buddha* or Awakened One. And what the Buddha awakened to was not a philosophy or intellectual view of reality, but rather a clear understanding of all that had availed itself to him.

This is how he described it:

*This being, that becomes;
From the arising of this, that arises;
This not being, that becomes not;
From the cessation of this, that ceases.*

And from that insight the entire Middle Way path unfolds.

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Welcome to Open question: A Call to Inner Brilliance. Our theme for this season is The Self: Walking the Middle Way Path. I'm Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel and this is OQ 402: Mind and Its World.

To share his experience of wisdom, The Buddha introduced the world to the nature of *Pratityasamutpada*, a Sanskrit word often translated as “dependent arising”. The Buddha employed a simple and effective example to illustrate dependent arising.

He described two bundles of reeds leaning up against each other, with each bundle standing by virtue of its dependency upon the other. One bundle stands because the other stands...one bundle falls because the other falls.

The Buddha’s example accurately describes the nature of conditioned reality, or how things of this world (and our unique awareness of it) are constantly pushing at and influencing each other. In other words, life as we experience it—both its unceasing proliferation and disappearance—occurs because, like those two bundles of reeds, *everything leans*.

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The phrase “everything leans” describes the dynamic nature of relationship. When we are dating someone consistently we might say “I am in a ‘*relationship*’.” This indicates that we see ourselves as being sometimes “in” relationship, and at other times “out” of relationship.

However, in observing dependent arising, we come to realize that whether we are dating or not, who we are is an ever-changing confluence of interrelated elements. Everything we experience expresses the inter-playfulness between our mind and the world it encounters. Everything is always in relationship, nothing other than relationship. In fact, we cannot identify any “thing” that exists untouched by relationship.

Systems theorist and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy has used the term “mutual causality” to define *pratityasamutpada*, describing it as “the movement of reciprocity at the heart of the universe.” Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh referred to *pratityasamutpada* as “inter-being”. He taught that everything—whether conscious or material—*inter-is*.

We move through our day tracking patterns, respecting (at least to some degree) the linkage between cause and effect. We recognize systems as interrelated networks of contingent parts. We know, for instance, that if our car battery runs out of juice, the engine won’t start. Then we wonder, “without a car, how will I make it to my appointment on time?” Well, *it all depends*. Maybe we could ride our bike or call a cab. In this way, we are always operating within the nature of conditionality.

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At first glance, dependent arising may seem too simple. But if we lean in a little deeper, we will recognize that dependent arising is not just about the obvious, superficial relationship between “things”. Dependent arising is ever-present and so thoroughly inter-penetrating that it leaves no possibility for genuine, autonomous “thing-ness”. Full appreciation of this requires subtle understanding. And we will gradually unpack it.

The Buddha himself cautioned us not to underestimate the significance of dependent arising, describing it as “a matter hard to perceive, namely this conditionality, this *pratityasamutpada*...against the stream of common thought, deep, subtle, difficult, delicate.”

For now, I just wanted to give you a heads up, because it's easy to assume that this topic is too obvious to be worth your introspection. Pratityasamutpada has profound implications. Please challenge yourself to overcome any assumption that you already understand it; If you can do that, you will find your way into deeper, hidden truths where pratityasamutpada will surprise you...and maybe even rock your world.

Dependent arising is not a merely an idea, but the observable principle of our moment-to-moment experience. To recognize pratityasamutpada as an experience is the primary orientation of the Middle Way path.

You might wonder: "How is this done?" Through inquiry, or analytical meditation. This term, "analytical meditation," may not appeal to you. You're not alone; it seems a turn-off for many of us. You may equate "analysis" with the cold, methodical dismantling of the world into numerical values or systems which rob us of inspiration and enthusiasm for life. It might *seem* as if analysis has the power to annihilate the natural vitality and meaning of life, to reduce it to dust.

Or...maybe you're expecting analysis will lead to an intellectual quagmire, making things more complicated and more challenging to understand. Like finding too many options on an internet search. You begin with one idea and end up with way too many ideas, too many maybes, too many worries—too much stuff!

But if you look up the etymology of the word *analysis*, it may surprise you to learn that it comes from the ancient Greek root *ana* which means "to break up", and *lysis* which means "to loosen" or "set free". So the purpose of analysis, in this sense, is to simplify and encourage direct communication between our mind and its world.

For instance, just now, we analyzed the term "analysis". I suspect it didn't rob your life of meaning or purpose. In fact, it probably enhanced your understanding and provoked a healthy sense of curiosity, yielding a finer appreciation of our topic. Analysis doesn't break apart life, but it *does* free us from our assumptions, and bring us into a more direct relationship with life.

Analysis can begin with anything that provokes a reaction. Anything that calls your attention—by startling, seducing or even agitating you. Anything that provokes you to pursue it. You might poke at it a little, in a gentle, affectionate way, to see what happens. That ignites a conversation and you realize: "oh, yeah...hmmm...ahhh...! There's more here than meets the eye."

It's crucial to approach the object of your inquiry with respect, which means you will have to put aside any assumptions that you already know what it is. Humility provides the environment for this kind of learning. When you ask an open question, you are beckoning to the world to avail itself to you.

The process of inquiry vitalizes and energizes your life...wakes it up! Or, on second thought, maybe it's *not* about waking up life. How could a world in which everything leans be asleep? Even in its quietest way, the natural vitality of life is always at work. Sometimes we just lose sight with that.

When we wander into a natural environment, like a desert, we might assume "*there's nothing here but sand!*" But just because we don't see it, don't appreciate it, doesn't mean life isn't happening.

Tenacious waxy little plants push themselves through hot sand; lizards, birds and tiny creatures get wind of our presence and silently surround us with caution and curiosity. Life avails itself, *if we're* awake to it.

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The conversation we're having here reminds me of a Middle Way inquiry I'd like to share. It's not meant as an intellectual query but rather an exercise in direct observation of your experience. I'll ask this question several times, and in between provide a bit more information to help open it up.

So if you're ready, here's the question: "Can you locate where your mind ends and where the world begins?"

Just allow yourself to ponder that for a moment.

Before I ask again, I want to clarify what I mean by "mind" here: *mind* refers to your ability to know and perceive. Mind is our awareness. We often associate the subjective experience of knowing with the Self.

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Let's ask ourselves this question again, now that we have more information: "Can you locate where your mind ends and where the world begins?"

Now I would like to describe what I mean by "world". "World" refers to the *objects* that we encounter with our awareness. We usually consider "the world" as whatever exists outside the parameters of our bodies: all the animate and inanimate material objects *out there* and the activity occurring between those things. That's "the world".

But what about all the inner, non-material objects? Like thoughts and emotions? These are also objects of our awareness, because "I" (the subjective perceiver) experience them. So let's ask ourselves the question one more time.

"Can you locate where your mind ends and where the world begins?"

I want to share how illuminating this simple contemplation has been for me. For many years now, I have tried to locate where my mind ends and where the world begins, and I haven't found it yet...but the inquiry has led to other important questions and perspectives, like:

Is the mind the same or separate from the world it perceives? In other words, are mind and the world one thing, or two? What do you think?

Have you ever experienced a moment of awareness not influenced by what it observed?

Can you see, hear, touch, taste or smell without an object of perception?

What would it be like if awareness were not influenced by its ever-changing world?

If awareness were separate from its world, could it even experience at all?

Hmmm, the relationship between mind and the world reminds me a lot of the Buddha's two bundles of reeds leaning up against each other. Mind and its world inter-are. They arise in dependence upon each other. Which means they are not the same, nor are they separate. They are not one, nor are they two. This is a classic Middle Way insight!

You might consider sitting with this for a while.

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I want to share another irony that has emerged from my inquiry. I find it surprising that the Self often functions as both a subject and an object. Think about it: the most intimate relationship we will ever have is the relationship we have with our Self! When we talk about having a "relationship" with our Self, it means there must be at least two of us.

Notice how we regularly scrutinize, delight in, laugh at, and feel embarrassed with our selves! Sometimes when recalling uncomfortable situations we say things like: "I felt like crawling out of my own skin!" Or in excitement: "I'm so proud of my Self." Or frustration: "I'm driving myself crazy!"

So, in our investigation we run into a conundrum. Which one is the actual self? it's hard to say. The self is like shifting sands.

[sound of sand blowing]

The self is ambiguous at best. But we don't have to get confused about that. We can relax, see the irony, have a good laugh.

And luckily, although we have been looking for and not finding an autonomous or singular self, we still function pretty well without one. So no need to panic. Here we are learning things. And I suspect all this research will help us understand, in more depth, the nature of Self.

If everything inter-is, it follows that we can't separate our Self from the world we move about in. So we want to be in good standing with life as we encounter it. We influence the world and the world influences us...everything matters.

We may not like it sometimes, but we get a lot of feedback as we mingle with our world. We move in and out of various contexts all day long. In one context we're a star; in another, we feel invisible. Then something will suddenly shift, and the entire universe seems to affirm our very existence. Life gets easy...at least for a while. No need to get excited, of course. Things change.

The point is, we feel the tug of ME as we cherish and protect ourselves. And we simultaneously have opportunities to learn, be at ease and create grace with the world. It's a very basic conversation we have with our life—easy to identify. We all know it.

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I assume you've had the experience of walking into a room full of people and not knowing where to sit. The feeling of awkwardness offers helpful feedback as we search for belonging. There's much to be said about the psychology of "seating"—where we place ourselves or *are placed* in various contexts.

In contemporary culture, people often take a democratic round-table approach. We gather and arrange ourselves in a way that may appear equal. But as we engage in conversation, we still face the challenges of navigating human dynamics. Sometimes we have to "take our seat," which metaphorically means finding our voice, asserting ourselves.

Many traditional cultures have well-defined systems of decorum around seating that respect age, social stratification, and the functions individuals play in communities. You have to assess the situation quickly and carefully as you walk into a room. Do you sit on a chair, stand, or opt for the floor? Well, it all depends.

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One of the most respected teachers in the Old School of Tibetan Buddhism, Patrul Rinpoche—a wandering yogi who refused to put down roots—offered this advice around seating. He suggested that "the low seat is the highest seat." These words reflect both his longing to abandon any investment in the human conventions of high and low *and* his savvy around navigating human relationships. Patrul Rinpoche always had an edge. He understood how humility protects us from the discomforts and insecurities of ego.

Of course, we could choose to sit low to indicate to the world how virtuous we are. But this kind of display often exposes our awkwardness to those observing. Inwardly, if we're honest, we will feel the discomfort of our own self-deception. The point is not *where* we sit, but how we remain authentic and genuinely find our place, wherever we may be.

Occasionally, we may feel unworthy of an honorary seat. That happened to me once, when someone offered me a throne to teach the dharma. Seeing my awkwardness and dis-ease, my teacher teased me for making such a big deal of myself, and told me: "Please don't think this seat has been offered to you because you're special. It is to honor the dharma that you should graciously accept it." In other words, if the situation requires you to sit on a high seat—if it *serves*—then without making a fuss about yourself, simply take your seat.

What I'm getting at here is that in a world in which everything leans, we have no constant identity, however much we try to cling to one. Our place in the world finds meaning, function and definition in dependence upon various contexts.

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“Who am I?” This age-old question doesn’t really work in a world where everything leans. So let me suggest a helpful substitute: *“What serves?”* This guiding question—of what serves—recognizes context. It protects us from falling into the insecurities of feeling self-important or diminished, both extreme views we fall into in our desperate search to fit in.

When we ask *what serves*, we lean into the world with sensitivity and respect, engaging life with agency and confidence. As a living question, *what serves* provides us with a natural sense of belonging. And even if we sometimes feel like we don’t know where to sit, a very human experience, we can still step up to life with kindness and strength to meet it anyway.

Doesn’t it fascinate you that we can find our seat—a place of belonging—through asking a question? In fact, we could call the mind poised as an open question “The Middle Way” in that it provides protection from extreme views we have about our Self.

Asking the question *what serves* aligns us with the nature of pratyasamutpada. It connects us to the liberating insight the Buddha discovered beneath the tree by making it a living practice.

We will return to the moment of the Buddha’s awakening again in the next episode of Open Question.

Please join us live on May 20th at 2pm Mountain Time for our next OQ Live Conversation with Dungse Jampal Norbu: *“How can I serve?”*

In this live conversation, Dungse-la and I will discuss the unique methodologies of working with the Self in the context of *Lojong* or mind training teachings. These teachings turn our focus away from self-centeredness and towards caring for others. I’ll ask Dungse-la how this method specifically supports a healthy sense of Self.

For more info visit middlewayinitiative.org

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