

Open Question Podcast, Episode 204, May 2021

Elizabeth Mattis Namgyell *These Dark Times*

In “ These Dark Times”, Elizabeth explores the process of finding courage in the face of adversity. “It is only through looking life squarely in the face,” she says, “that we find liberation.” She reminds us that this world we try so desperately to secure, doesn’t ultimately lend itself to trustworthiness, and that, our relentless attempt to secure this world, defines samsara. Elizabeth suggests that there is another way of being in life that is empowered and courageous. However that approach, ironically, relies upon our ability to accept the frailty and poignancy of being human.

Nowadays, at the end of most phone conversations, at the bottom of almost every email, and in the parting words we have with friends and even strangers, someone will punctuate the conversation by saying: "Stay safe."

Of course, we all value safety, and aim to protect ourselves and others. Wanting someone to feel safe expresses a natural feature of human goodness and care. But this meme, “stay safe,” carries with it an assumption that we should be living in fear—running from danger. These words “stay safe” seem innocuous, but they subtly influence the way we perceive the world. They don’t ignite the spirit of resilience, innovation, and strength. I think we can do better.

We can find courage in the face of adversity...even in these dark times.

Welcome to Open Question: A Call to Inner Brilliance. I'm Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel, and this is OQ 204: *These Dark Times*.

My mother-in-law, Tsewang Paldun, who escaped Tibet during the cultural revolution, once shared some advice: “You should make your heart big enuf” she said, “to hold a horse race inside.” In recalling her native homeland—horses galloping across the wide-open plains of Eastern Tibet—Tsewang Paldun created a stunning metaphor for big-heartedness. In the modern world, big-heartedness usually references someone who exudes warmth and generosity. In Tibetan culture, big-heartedness describes an expanded capacity for life—an ability to embrace even the hardest truths.

In the Buddha’s Mahayana tradition we use a Sanskrit term to describe this feature of human potential: bodhicitta. Bodhicitta means: the mind and heart poised to awaken. Intrinsic to this process lies the commitment to never turn away from truth—to bear witness. It takes courage and big-heartedness to accommodate life as it is: to let it touch us, change us, and guide our love.

The beloved bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara—meaning “One who never turns his gaze from the suffering of the world”—serves as an example. In his story, Avalokitesvara is challenged in his attempt to broaden his capacity for suffering. At first he’s able to empty the world of pain. But he soon finds that more suffering fills the space in its wake. Avalokitesvara recognizes the never-ending nature of his task, and falls into despair. Unable to consummate his unbearable longing to sooth the suffering of living beings, his body shatters into pieces. But immediately his physical form re-constitutes itself with new attributes: 1,000 arms, and, on each hand, an eye. A broken heart, he learns, has no limits and his capacity to bear witness becomes equal to space, along with his increased capacity to serve.

Avalokitesvara illustrates the driving aspiration behind the practice of bodhicitta: “If beings are limitless, their suffering is limitless,” he reflects. “So I will have to be limitless to serve the needs of beings.” The guiding principle of bodhisattvahood requires a fierce commitment to training in courage. This was Avalokitesvara’s path.

My teacher, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche (“DKR”), frames this clearly when he so often reminds us: “The path of the bodhisattva is not about being peaceful, it’s about being awake.” In other words, genuine spirituality is not about living around suffering.

To live in fear means to live in contraction. Contraction is not necessarily bad in and of itself. The heart contracts to pump blood. We use materials that harden and compress, such as cement, to build sturdy foundations. All conscious creatures withdraw when afraid or threatened. A tortoise instinctually retreats into its shell for a reason. Contraction has a shielding and protective purpose in nature, but it’s not healthy as a sustained way of being. It moves us in the opposite direction of feeling connected to the world. It creates small-heartedness, isolation, and paralysis.

DKR said in his book *It’s Up to You* that “Feeling concern or fear is a natural part of being human. But when it prevents us from accepting our life, fear is crippling. We find ourselves saying ‘No’ to the world; no to our karma; no, no, no to everything—which is a very painful way to live.”

A poignant truth lies at the pinnacle of Buddhist wisdom, and life: “We can’t live freely in the world unless we accept the realities of its nature.” Life is uncertain because things arise through a dynamic play of infinite causes and conditions. Our mind and its world are always changing, complex and unpredictable. Aging, sickness, death, and loss are the only “sure thing.” This world we try so desperately to secure, doesn’t ultimately lend itself to trustworthiness.

Our relentless attempt to secure this world defines samsara. Samsara is a Sanskrit word that refers to the continuous cycle of hopes and fears we experience, as we attempt to keep our world safe. We could push against this idea...but we don’t have to take it as a personal insult. Admitting that we cannot completely trust life, is not a negative or jaded way of looking at the world. And, it’s not a way of getting out of our responsibility to be decent and kind. It’s simply a fact of life...and ironically, in looking life squarely in the face, we find the key to liberation from fear.

Many years ago, I came down with a mysterious illness. An angry rash spread across my face, neck and arms. I lost 1/3 of my hair and much of my vitality. I couldn't explain why this was happening, I worried about my health and my appearance...and couldn't shake the feeling of impending doom. In a desperate state, I turned to my teacher for consolation. I remember him sitting outside on a bench reading a text. He didn't bother to look up at me, but responded dispassionately, saying: "Well, you have to die of something, don't you?" His refusal to coddle me was completely unexpected, and disrupted the way I was framing my situation. In retrospect I can see the depth of his care: he was speaking to my strength and wellbeing, not my desperation. This liberated my mind from fear, and released a strong vibrant sense of wellness. There is nothing more emboldening than accepting things as they are.

The foundation for all Buddhist wisdom relies on profound disappointment. You can find it in every text:

- Queries into the nature of suffering and impermanence
- Teachings that point out the futility of attempting to establish safety in a dynamic world
- Methods that expose our fearful tendency to live around life, rather than embrace it

We're taught to spend a lot of time contemplating impermanence and identifying our tendencies before we formally enter the Buddhist path. But if we're not careful, we might bring these old strategies into our spiritual practice, instead of using the practice to free us from them! For instance, we might interpret the instructions "Rely upon a spiritual friend" as "Hold the spiritual friend responsible for your wellbeing." We might put the teacher on a pedestal, so that we don't have to change or do any work. We often justify that by calling it "respect," but in all honesty, we're actually holding the teacher hostage through our expectations. And what's worse, in putting responsibility on the teacher, we're abdicating our own agency. Hmmm...isn't that the very definition of samsara?

In meditation, we expect that—at the very least—our thoughts and emotions should be pleasant. Our greatest fantasy is to have a continuous stream of profound and illuminating insights. But how does that approach align with the big-heartedness of Avalokitesvara? Does it help us accommodate life, or does it just reflect our habit of, yet again, looking for comfort and safety? We may think we can keep all unwanted experiences at bay, but wait, isn't that the very definition of samsara?

When we join a spiritual community, we drag in with us the expectations we've always held over others "out there" in samsara. In addition, we load on the assumption that everyone in the community should embody the divine qualities we read about in the texts. There's not a lot of room for the inconsistencies and foibles that come with being human. And this plagues our sense of spiritual accomplishment and identity. I don't know...that all sounds a lot like samsara to me.

Spiritual practice aside, this entire approach doesn't provide a realistic or pragmatic way of

moving through ordinary life. It's like leaning up against someone and expecting them not to move. Could it be that the reason people are untrustworthy is simply because we have expectations of them?

It goes without saying that circumstances arise, in which we must protect ourselves from others. People are motivated by all sorts of causes and conditions—many of which they can't even see. This is precisely why it would behoove us not to place so much expectation on them. It's just not savvy.

As Trungpa Rinpoche says in *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*: “There's a very dangerous tendency to lean on one another as we tread the path. If a group of people leans one upon the other, then if one should happen to fall down, everyone falls down. So we do not lean on anyone else. We just walk with each other, side by side, shoulder to shoulder, working with each other, going with each other.”

Spiritual maturity requires we stand on our own two feet, so that we can establish confidence, resilience, and healthy partnership with the world we live in. To take up this task is the responsibility of a practitioner. Yes, fear will probably still arise...but as my teacher has said: “Fear can be your greatest ally, because facing fear means facing your life, and facing your life means living your life.” I don't want to live in fear. I want to live in courage, truth, and love. I want to continue to expand to include life. And I don't want to turn away from pain.

I want to create a new meme: because when my mind is at its best, “I don't feel unsafe, I feel alive and aware of the frailty and poignancy of being human.”

So, if you happen to see me walking down the street and you want to say hello, which I would love, let's have a conversation...and at the end of that conversation when it's time to part, let's not tell each other to “stay safe.” Let's remind each other to make our hearts big enough to hold a horse race inside. Let's encourage each other to: “stay truthful,” “stay resilient,” and “stay courageous.”