



Open Question Podcast Episode 304  
Sacred World: Where is “the world”?

What do you see when you think about “the world”?

You might picture a rain forest or desert. You might envision people pushing their way through a crowded subway terminal on their way to work. You might imagine a household or a war zone. You might think to yourself: “the world is a mess,” or feel touched by the beauty of this place and the beings who inhabit it.

Is “the world” even findable? Is it conscious or material? Does it exist within our individual mindstreams or outside of us? Is “the world” cruel, mundane or sacred? Is it singular or many? Where exactly is “*the world*”?

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*Welcome to Open Question: A Call to Inner Brilliance. I’m Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel, and this is OQ 304: Sacred World: Where is “the world”?*

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In 1972, the astronauts of Apollo 17 captured an image of a fully-illuminated earth taken from space—roughly 18,000 miles from our planet’s surface. This photograph that we came to affectionately call *The Blue Marble* has become the most reproduced photograph in history—the primary visual reference of the world...well, in the world!

The release of the blue marble image revealed to us that the ground we stand on and the atmosphere that protects us from the powerful forces of the outer universe are more fragile than we had ever realized. It was as if, through this gift of perspective, we fell in love with our home in a new way.

This photo that mainly features Earth from the Mediterranean Sea to the South Polar Ice Cap, doesn't show the entirety of the earth's surface. It's just an aspect taken from a particular distance, at a specific angle, in a moment in time.

We don't generally experience our life on earth from a distance. We're up close and personal. We are on the earth, in the world, of it...digging for seashells on a sandy beach; pressing seeds into the soil; or burying someone who has died. We are scrambling to get to work on time, fighting wars, and learning to survive.

It's as if the world introduces itself to us again and again—every moment—in the most intimate of ways.

As we stand upright with our feet on the ground, distances open between us and the places where the land meets the sky. As we walk the terrain we notice that the earth's surface lacks uniformity, permanence or singularity. Which direction should we head in? What will we find along the way? Will we ever find “*the*” world?

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When I was a student I stayed in a village in Southern Nepal. There I befriended a young woman my age, named Rupa Didi. We were curious about each other. As we delighted in identifying our human similarities, we also learned to see the world through each other's eyes.

Rupa Didi asked me, “Which village did you come from? How did you get here?” To help illustrate, I pulled a small tangerine from my bag. I used the tangerine to show her that my “village” was on the opposite side of the world from her village. Rupa Didi didn't understand. She didn't share my image of a round world.

And yet, my friend knew how to grow her own food and take care of her family. I marveled at her simplicity of being. She had the vital information she needed to navigate her world in a healthy, kind, and practical way.

Throughout history we've looked toward science to understand the world. We began with a flat world, then graduated to a round world in a universe with edges, to an expanding universe, to a multiverse, which contains infinite multiverses... all in a breathtakingly short time. Yet all this info we have about “the world” has been collected in a cosmological millisecond.

I often wonder about the cosmos of the ancients. How did they see “the world”? Could it be that our ancestors had a subtler perspective? One that we no longer see due to our speedy distractions? It's valuable to take some time to consider these

things. It's also much more entertaining and healthy than tucking our minds into our devices, to engage programmed worlds created by software companies.

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Where is "the world"?

Let's just imagine there were an external, singular geographical place we could call "the world." Who would verify the truth of it? We would still end up seeing life through our individual lenses: the lens of a philosopher, a farmer, a geologist, or a land developer.

One can only wonder what it must be like to see through the eyes of another species. What does "the world" look like for a spider weaving its web? A hibernating bear, or a seagull flying above an ocean? It's not a stretch to imagine the existence of limitless unobservable realms that we will never see.

Our physical bodies ground us on this planet, and yet we each experience a wide range of mental states that influence the way we see "the" world. The extreme notions of heaven and hell, or nirvana and samsara, are not entirely divorced from our ordinary experience.

Sometimes we encounter someone on the street who seems to be experiencing a world fraught with danger. We walk right past them, but they don't see us. They appear to be confronting an enemy. We might wonder if this person has a chemical imbalance or maybe they're a prophet. We don't know. We can see this person 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.

What we call "the world" is influenced by our thoughts and emotions, by conditions of being. Our world looks very different when we are consumed by rage than it does when we feel touched by sadness.

We often assume that people see "the world" as we do. But with so much creativity and conflict in the world, we must conclude that no one sees things in exactly the same way. We occupy unique realms, private environments, shaped by the personal stories we have about "the world."

Given this is the case, isn't it curious that we can communicate at all? Isn't it astounding that we can participate in life together with so much order and cohesion? And isn't it miraculous that, even inter-specially, we share common values about essential experiences such as loneliness and love, hunger and generosity, fear and

comfort? That our realities overlap indicates that we share a common experience beyond subjective awareness.

Mind and its world are not the same, nor are they separate. They are not one nor are they two. It would be impossible to locate where our mind ends and our world begins. So how would it be possible to establish a purely subjective or objective world? What we consider subject and object arise in dependence, uniting our inner and outer fields of experience.

So where does this all leave us in our query about the world?

*[music]*

I wonder if, through our analysis, you were able to find “the world.” As for me, I have spent a lot of time looking, and have never found it. Analysis has shown me how nuanced and ungraspable the world actually is. The only conclusion I have reached is that life defies definition.

When I look for a definitive geographical object I can point to and exclaim “*Look, there’s ‘the world!’*” I find nothing singular or whole—only aspects, angles, parts and perspectives. And there is no point in speaking about a world entrapped in a material reality outside my ability to know it. I have looked but not found a static, reliable world impervious to interpretation, name, or definition. And I have never found an exclusively cruel, mundane or even sublime world that possesses such intrinsic characteristics.

What I *can* say is that “the world” vividly appears to my awareness and yet I cannot find it. It is merely apparent, an illusion. Illusions, by definition, refer to phenomena that don’t exist as they appear, like rainbows, dreams and echoes.

In the very same way, “the world” *does* appear to us, and yet, after even the most modest investigation, we are forced to conclude we cannot find it.

Curiously, we feel challenged when hearing that things are illusory. It’s as if the basis of our experience is being robbed from us. “How dare you!”

But let’s recall that when we did the analysis, “the world” itself didn’t fall apart. The only thing that fell apart was our unexamined assumptions. As we looked for the world, we didn’t deny appearances or pretend our experience was something it was not.

In fact, the process of investigation moved us out of the abstract ideas we had about the world, into a more direct and nuanced relationship with things.

That something is illusory doesn't take away its availability and function. Just because we can't locate "the world" doesn't prevent us from a lifetime of travel. And even though we can't find a definitive "state of the world," this doesn't limit our ability to listen to other people's experiences or have some of our own. And it doesn't mean we can't use an article such as "the" to refer to things with accuracy and specificity.

Even though we can't find the world, we still have to navigate this illusory world with great care and respect. Of course, if no one cared about happiness and freedom from suffering, then, I suppose, it wouldn't matter. But the fact is: it does matter, very much!

So it may be that we can't find the world, yet behold!!! The world of appearances and possibilities will not cease to arise.

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The topic of mere appearance naturally challenges our notion of real. Knowing what is real or true is very important to all of us. No one wants to be deceived. But what does it mean for something to be real? How would we establish it?

We might think real things are agreed-upon facts. Or assume that feelings are real, because they excite or disturb us. We might assign realness to things that are dense or solid to the touch. But what about subtler phenomena like air, bubbles or music? We often refer to people as "real" when they are up-front and honest, when they don't have a hidden agenda. We also ascribe realness to anything that performs a function, or to something that is pure, like real gold.

We may be interested in hearing how the Oxford English Dictionary defines real. One definition from an older edition says: *"designating whatever is regarded as having an existence in fact, and not merely in appearance."*

It also defines real as: *"Having an absolute, in contrast to a merely contingent, existence."*

Hmmm...if we rely upon these definitions of real, then we have no choice but to conclude that the world is *not* intrinsically real. Which just means, again, that it is illusory or merely apparent. And even the Oxford English Dictionary seems to agree with that!

*[music]*

Ordinarily, when we engage an inquiry we aim at reaching a conclusion, finding an answer or establishing a truth. And yet here, according to the methodology of *Open Questioning* or the Middle Way tradition, analysis has led us into looking and not finding. In exposing our unexamined assumptions we have cleared the way for insight to emerge.

We might think of analysis here, as a tender consideration of our reality, the result of which is powerfully felt. Things don't need to be real to function, appear, or hold meaning. This challenges our unexamined assumptions that things have to either be *something* or *nothing*.

As the great 14th century Tibetan Buddhist meditator and scholar Kunchen Longchenpa said: the world of appearances and possibilities "is nothing whatsoever, but arises as anything at all."

I think this is a powerful statement to bring to our investigation of the world. Give yourself the time to consider this.

Let me say it one more time: the world of appearances and possibilities "is nothing whatsoever, but arises as anything at all."

Please understand that what Longchenpa is saying is not intended to be a puzzle or to insinuate that life is destined to be shrouded in mystery or vagueness. This statement is meant to push us toward seeing things as they are: as merely apparent.

Mere appearance is not a mind state or a view to believe in. It refers to unobstructed, naked seeing. It is the outlook of Mother Prajnaparamita and Sacred World.

*[music]*

As lofty as this whole topic might sound at times, the illusory nature of things lies within the scope of our ability to know it. In fact, the truth of it is imminent, right in front of us. What it would be like to see "the world" as merely apparent?

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*How does one gesture toward mere appearance? What inspires artists, poets, and philosophers to communicate experiences that ultimately defy expression? What role does visual symbolic language play in the tradition of Prajnaparamita and Sacred World?*

*On the next OQ Live Conversation: Mere Appearance: Prajnaparamita Illustrated, I have the perfect guest to address such questions. Master artist and thangka painter extraordinaire, Cynthia Moku, will share her love of sacred imagery by inviting us into contemplations on some stunning Prajnaparamita imagery.*

*Please join us live on October 15 at 2pm MT.*

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

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

