



### **Open Question 305: Sacred World: Life is Rich**

Once, an old friend picked me up from the airport. As we hit the highway in her vintage, noisy Volvo, I asked her how she'd been. I heard her reply, "Life's a bitch." I took pause. My friend typically approached life with so much verve and positivity...but then I thought, "Well, in a way she's right." So I said, "Yeah, life *can* be a bitch sometimes." My friend burst out laughing: "No, no, no!" she responded. "I didn't say that! I said: '*LIFE IS RICH!*'"

*Welcome to Open question: A Call to Inner Brilliance. I'm Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel and this is OQ 305: Sacred World: Life is Rich.*

Our life—our world—can be rich...and it can also be a bitch. We walk the terrain of multiple—maybe infinite—grounds. We move in and out of these overlapping spaces. They are not geographical territories, but rather various ways we encounter our human condition as our mind and its world engage in the playful exchange we call "experience."

In this episode, I would like to invite you to walk the terrain of four grounds with me: the haunted ground; the playground; the training ground; and the sacred ground.

#### ***The haunted ground***

During my younger days, when I was waitressing my way through college, I would occasionally visit a working class bar around the corner from my house. I didn't go there to drink, but rather to hang out with bus drivers, construction workers, and beauticians—hard-working people who wore uniforms and dusty work boots.

I loved the laughter and banter in that place, and the conversations that always found their way to the gritty realities of 'life': achy joints, marital conflicts, the cost of living.

This place had a vibe that worked for me. I couldn't put words to it then, but I understand it now. Hearing others talk about their life in this way shifted my mind from: "*I am suffering*" to

“*there is suffering.*” It thrust my puny sense of self out into the vast realm of the human condition. For me, “there is suffering” has always been one of the Buddha’s most poignant and liberating statements.

Decades later, I would pick up a book by a Tibetan Buddhist Master, Patrul Rinpoche, a wandering yogi who refused to put down roots. He said something that brought me right back to that working-class bar. He said: “If you have a horse, you’ll have a horse worth of problems. If you have a bag of tea, you’ll have a bag of tea worth of problems.” The folks there would have loved this statement and known exactly what it meant.

One of the many things the Buddhist tradition does so beautifully is to frame the human predicament. Through my contemplations, I have come to respect both the difficulties and creative potential of predicaments. We often think of predicaments as problems. But maybe we don’t have to resent them so much. Predicaments force us out of trope narratives into realms of unforeseen possibilities. We can’t just pick a side when it comes to predicaments. They’re way too nuanced and have their own way of working themselves out.

One of the most spectacular predicaments that Buddhist wisdom brings to the fore—the big daddy of conundrums—is the expectation we bring to our everyday lives: we strive for unconditional wellbeing in a world that is unreliable and dynamic. How’s that for a predicament?

We can’t blame ourselves for having preferences. It’s just that they don’t always align with reality. How can one help but feel a tenderness and respect for the nuanced predicament of being human?

In the Buddhist tradition, we call the discrepancy between our preferences and the realities of conditioned existence *samsara*. Samsara, a Sanskrit word, means going around in circles. It refers to the world we generate through our preferences, hopes and fears. Placing our hope in conditioned existence mis-aligns us with the nature of things, and sets us up for disappointment, stress, and profound suffering. Samsara is a haunted ground, because living in hope and fear keeps us truly vulnerable.

I want to say something about vulnerability here, because I notice that in contemporary culture we are actively encouraged to cultivate vulnerability. In this context, vulnerability seems to refer to the openness we experience when we break through harsh, unhelpful defense mechanisms we use to shield ourselves from harm.

But more accurately, vulnerability is defined as, “exposure to emotional or physical harm.” When we look realistically at our human condition, we are ALL already vulnerable. We are vulnerable to old age, sickness and death, loss, and trauma. Human beings endure unconscionable suffering. Everyone has a story. I always feel astounded by what people go through and how resilient they can be.

Yet, even in the face of all the evidence—all that life that keeps pushing against our preferences—we continue to rely on the untrustworthy nature of conditioned reality with great expectations. It's analogous to leaning against another person and expecting them to hold us up. Even if this person were determined to sustain this awkward posture, the limits of their own physicality, their need to move, to live, would prevent them from serving as a reliable support for this arrangement...and we would inevitably fall.

We may have relationships like this in our lives; but they don't express a healthy kind of interdependence. For that, we will have to stand on our own two feet.

I find it curious that, despite our ability to clearly observe the unreliable nature of samsara, many people take issue with it and argue against it as a privileged perspective. They promote instead what they see as an obligation to right the wrongs of the world—to bring it to a static state of peaceful equilibrium.

But when has anyone ever been able to fix the world? Can we force fairness upon it? Who would decide how to enforce it? These are legitimate questions.

I suppose if one were to use the un-resolvable nature of samsara as an excuse for complacency, we could criticize it. But here we are just taking note of the undeniable state of affairs. We don't have to take conditioned reality as a personal insult. We don't have to see the unreliability of samsara as a negative or jaded way of looking at the world. It's not an excuse to turn away from others' pain. We will still have to respond to this unfixable world with care if we want to lead a meaningful life.

So for now, let's just take the time to marvel at the human predicament. To look life squarely in the face, to make a realistic assessment of our situation: the pain of it, the mystery, and the possibility too. Because we need to know what we're dealing with, right? Because if we don't, we will never learn to live in the heart of our conundrum, which is the only place from which spiritual maturity, healthy human connection, and agency can flourish.

### ***The playground***

We might interpret giving up hope in samsara as a geographical issue: "Okay, I'm done looking outward at this mess...I'm going to turn inward toward my mind." Many people view this as the spiritual alternative. But in truth, we can't separate mind from the world it perceives. We don't live in a vacuum, and there's no way around it. The question we truly need to ask ourselves is: how do we navigate our world in a graceful, realistic and compassionate way? How do we put ourselves in good standing—in healthy interdependence—with our world?

When we give up holding the world responsible for our wellbeing—when we allow ourselves to experience profound disappointment in samsara—we set ourselves in accurate relationship with our life. This is where we begin to discover the potential of the playground.

“Play” here doesn’t imply that the playground is always fun and we can do whatever we want. Remember being young? Playgrounds can be rough places. But they are necessary places to learn about human dynamics, survival, and building character.

The nature of the playground—the terrain of our lives—has its own rules. Nothing is random. We live downstream from limitless causes and conditions, and these causes and conditions shape the direction our lives take and the way we see the world.

The rules are simple: apple seeds always produce apple trees, never banana trees. We learn to read patterns, connect dots, recognizing the rules inherent to the nature of interdependence. We observe that if the conditions are conducive, seeds produce trees that bear fruit. So we plant crops that feed large populations of people. Of course, nothing is completely certain in the playground, which leaves ample room for making choices, and surprises.

As life plays out, we may feel astounded at how much agency we have in all this patterning. It’s not that life just happens *to* us. Our very “being” contributes to the greater landscape. If we pay attention we may notice that everything we do matters. This encourages us to refine our activities even further within the boundaries of circumstance.

We may think that the laws of interdependence limit our ability to shape our lives. But without the rules of the playground, our world would be sheer mayhem. Apple seeds could produce anything, so we would have no ability to bring our lives in order.

But thanks to the order of the playground, we can use the rules of interdependence as creative constructs to harness the nature of conditioned existence and bring about specific results. There’s plenty of room for experimentation, mistakes and innovation as we continue to learn what we can and can’t do.

For instance, we don’t have the causes and conditions to fly, because we don’t have wings. But through human ingenuity we have engineered airplanes, helicopters, spaceships, and hang gliders.

Although death is certain...we are alive now! What will we do with this moment?

Although we can’t fix the world, as citizens of the great nature of infinite contingencies everything we do matters. As Buddhist scholar, deep ecologist, and system theorist Joanna Macy once said: “...interdependence sets the limits and provides the scope for our conscious participation in reality.”

Interdependence is the nature—the medium—of the playground. And through understanding its limits and potential we develop savvy, street smarts, to successfully move through life.

When I think of the playground, I think of Kalu Pote. Kalu Pote, as he was called, lived in Boudhanath, Nepal, where we were friends for many years. He had a lot of street cred, and was

the leader of a mischievous band of young ruffians that roamed the streets. I won't translate the nickname his cohorts gave him, out of respect, but it referred to the fact that he was older than his size would indicate. No one had ever taken him in and nourished him.

Kalu Pote was always dusty with wild eyes. And in spirit, little he was *not*. He possessed street smarts like nobody's business.

For years I positioned myself as one of Kalu Pote's steady sponsors—and not out of pity, mind you—but more out of affection and awe. I studied his innovative strategies for survival. He coerced English-speaking tourists into making him signs that he wore around his neck: "I have TB, help"; "I have hepatitis, give money"; "I'm dying...please donate."

Kalu Pote never seemed to go hungry, on account of his tendency or need to engage in misdemeanors like stealing eggs from food stalls or a bit of cash from a beggar's bowl. He had the determination to survive.

I'm not trying to romanticize Kalu Pote's life or condone his deceit. His situation was severe. But I want to highlight his tenacity and accomplishments. It struck me that I never saw him lament. Kalu Pote didn't hold the world responsible for his wellbeing. This resilient, savvy little hero saw the world as his playground and rose to his challenge with grace.

When we see life as a playground, rather than a haunted ground, we begin to take up the task of our own wellbeing, creating healthy interdependence with our world. And we begin to get our mojo back, although we probably didn't even realize we lost it somewhere along the way.

### ***The training ground***

When I read the writings of the great lineage masters, I see them as practitioners who have successfully navigated being human. We could call this way of traversing life, in which we bring our longing for wellbeing together with our activities, a *sadhana*.

Sadhana is a Sanskrit word that refers to any discipline leading to a goal, particularly one driven by spiritual aspiration. In the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition, *sadhanas* refer to practice liturgies that employ specific methodologies that connect the practitioner to Sacred World. We won't get into that here, but it certainly connects to everything we have been talking about.

Here let's use the term *sadhana* in a more general sense. We could say that the way Kalu Pote, for instance, navigated his life was a *sadhana* of survival.

When we speak of *sadhana* in a spiritual context, we move from Kalu Pote's playground—which is a bit more wild west—to the terrain of the training ground, which expresses elegance and love. In the training ground we commit to flourishing as a human beings, and supporting others to flourish too. This becomes our *sadhana*.

If we bring the idea of sadhana into the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, we might frame our activities as the practice of the six paramitas. We have explored the sixth paramita—the wisdom aspect of Prajnaparamita—extensively this year in the Open Question podcast. But we have yet to mention the other five: generosity, discipline, patience, vigor, and concentration.

Within the sadhana of the paramitas, all the activities we engage in create grace—healthy interdependence. Following the structure of our sadhana, we value and utilized everything, regardless of our preferences. The great adept Kunchyen Longchenpa captured the spirit of the approach when he said: “on the Island of gold there is no ordinary rock.” Meaning, when we value everything, life is rich.

Unlike the haunted ground, and sometimes the playground, where life *can* be a bitch, the training ground is always rich because we are using everything—even the most unwanted circumstances—to mature.

Prajnaparamita, the sixth paramita, is not about *creating* grace. You might say that She is grace herself. Prajnaparamita is the experience of unconditional confidence, and the mind’s natural responsiveness, which expresses itself as the Open Question: “What serves?” Training in Her expresses our ability to bear the open-dimensionality of all things, which, in the training ground, may begin conceptually and later arise as a genuine experience.

The training ground provides us with a spectacular predicament of its own, which is captured in the bodhisattva vow: “beings are limitless. I vow to free them all.” This commitment doesn’t necessarily make sense in the framework of ordinary logic. In fact, it may make you wonder, “If beings are limitless, their suffering must be limitless, so how could I free them all?”

But when you bear witness to the suffering in the world, how can you not respond? And as you reach out, you may recognize that this aspiration is asking you to do something remarkable that is within your reach. It invites you to step outside the limits of ordinary logic into an unexpected possibility, which we could frame like this: “*Beings are limitless, their suffering is limitless, so I will have to expand my love limitlessly, in order to serve them all.*” This is how a predicament becomes a living practice.

The ability to bear the poignancy and depth of this aspiration that can never be consummated is Prajnaparamita. The fierce unquestioning commitment to respond to suffering, to “free them all,” plays out in the skillful activities of the five paramitas. Wisdom joins all six paramitas together in union to fulfill the totality of the sadhana. This all happens in the training ground.

### ***The sacred ground***

Sacred ground is the world of mere appearance as seen through the eyes of Prajnaparamita. It is the unfolding recognition of the bodhisattvas and the constant abode of the Buddhas.

Sacred World reveals itself when our minds are poised for insight into the way things actually are, free of our assumptions, confusions, hopes and fears, and projections; it is our empty yet vividly apparent, unfindable yet highly functional world.

Because this ground is the nature we move about in, it makes sense that we are bound to encounter it here and there, if even just by default. Most people have experienced the sacred ground or at least have an intuitive sense of its presence in their lives. After all, even our longing for wellbeing indicates the possibility of experiencing it.

The sacredness of life has always been celebrated, in poetry, philosophy, and through ritual. And although our encounter with it may lie beyond the scope of language, it is not outside the realm of human capacities. Perhaps you have had moments when you have emerged from your habitual reality to glimpse the magnificence of the world around you. In that moment, you may have sensed a familiarity with the sacred ground, as if it had been there all along... spontaneously present and perfectly human.

Many years ago, I went on pilgrimage with my teacher to India to make offerings. This became a tradition in our community for many years. During this particular trip, I remember my teacher circumambulating the sacred stupa where the Buddha attained enlightenment, in Bodh Gaya. My teacher carried a bag of precious and semi-precious gems in the crook of his left arm. He had collected these jewels throughout the year from students who wanted to make a connection to the various places of pilgrimage we visited. This bag of jewels contained personal belongings: a deceased grandmothers wedding ring, loose pearls from a necklace, polished stones, some marbles offered by children, and things of deep sentimental value.

My teacher circled the stupa, reciting prayers for the benefit of all beings, with a deep sense of devotion. As he did this he threw handfuls of the jewels into the air offering everything in a graceful and passionate gesture of generosity. My teacher must have already possessed such a profound sense of richness to make such an offering, which seemed to me a most extraordinary yet natural expression of his humanness.

Many people gathered round to watch. This kind of thing doesn't often happen in the conventional world and so some spectators took offense; others watched in curiosity or amusement; while others busied themselves collecting the riches that scattered across the grounds.

As for me, I felt the space filled with riches and was overcome by a sense of indescribable abundance...and that the ground of being lacked nothing.

In this episode we have considered some of the ways we encounter life as human beings. I wanted to encourage you, and myself, to appreciate the infinite grounds of human experience and to not resent the challenge they offer.

For instance, we often feel as practitioners we should only be hanging out in the training ground, doing our practice, failing to recognize the value of the haunted ground which we desperately feel compelled to avoid.

But how could spiritual maturation ever work that way? If we don't accept the un-resolvability of samsara, we will drag our hopes and fears into our spiritual practice, which will make it just another enterprise defined by those same hopes and fears.

If we don't recognize that life can be a bitch, we will never learn to live in the heart of the human predicament— which is deeply connected to poisoning the mind for insight into the sacred ground. If we don't rise to the playground, we won't have the savvy tenacity and verve we need to navigate our sadhana.

But if we approach our life with the spirit of curiosity and longing, like the great masters of the past, we can successfully navigate our humanness. And life will be rich...and of course a bitch at times too.

---

Please join us live on December 10th at 2pm Mountain Time for the final Open Question live conversation for this year: Haunted Ground? Sacred World? with Anam Thubten Rinpoche.

In this live event, Rinpoche and I will engage in conversation about the great female Tibetan scholar and practitioner Machig Labdron. Machig Labdron developed the Chod or "cutting through" practice based on her love and devotion for Prajnaparamita. These teachings beautifully address the connection between Sacred World and the Haunted Dominion of our minds. Rinpoche and I share a great love of these teachings, so expect a lively event!

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

---

*Open Question is produced by Michael Velasco*

*With original music by Chime Mattis*