

# 2002-10-14: Progress in Practice

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## SPEAKERS

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So. So last Monday, I made mentioned in the talk to the idea of people making progress in meditation. And then promptly at nine o'clock when he's supposed to all go home. Someone asked what I meant by progress. So I said I would talk about it this week today, because it's a big topic. And I find myself today I was thinking about what I was going to say about this topic. I found myself having some trepidation about picking up the theme and the topic. And the more I thought about it, the more easier it became the more complex it became that whole issue of progress meditation, progress, spiritual progress and If I made it too easy, then people are going to feel some people are going to feel left out. And if I make it too difficult people can be felt feel left out. So I'm not sure where to begin and what to say about progress today. Maybe she just answered it last week. The

the danger of talking about spiritual progress is that I think the very idea of spiritual spiritual progress lends itself to people thinking that there's some thing, some spiritual system or spiritual reality, spiritual truth. Are some spiritual people who kind of know something you don't know? Or who it says something external to yourself, that you're going to measure yourself by something you're supposed to grow into attain, relax, realize become something. And

I'm more actually more comfortable for the most part with starting in the opposite direction, not starting with something external to yourself to measure where you make progress by, but rather to start with who you are. Now, today or this particular situation, and what is it that is your deepest intention? What is your deepest heartfelt wish? What is it that you want your life life or your spiritual life, your meditation life, your mindfulness practice to be about. And then I've preferred to kind of meet you there. And look at so called progress, if that's interesting for you, according to whatever internal criteria you have, about what your hopes and aspirations might be. And some of that exploration might be to clarify what your aspirations actually are. And sometimes a lot of spiritual practices is about actually clarifying that intention that we have, because some of the intentions we have are not so wise or they're only 80% wise or something. And we're kind of clarifying and purifying our intention, what we

can do. And I know that one of the, one of the one of the many reasons to do go on retreat is that our spiritual intention gets tested in the fire of a retreat. We are trying to follow through on your spiritual intention, moment by moment, all throughout the whole day. It's very different than doing it, you know, maybe, you know, 30 minutes each day or an hour each day, that's if you meditate every day or if your weekend Buddhists, you know, maybe meditate just, you know, Saturday morning and just do a little bit, you know, you just kind of it's very different and one of the ways is different is that you could have a very lofty or have an intention for yourself and your practice. And in doing and only follow through and following through trying to live up to that intention for a very short time will not reveal to you the fault lines in that the way you're engaged in that intention. So, for example, when I was a new meditator, I had all kinds of intentions about getting concentrator becoming calm, you know, getting more spiritual or something. And when I would sit and meditate every day At home by myself, mostly I was on minding. And I would pat myself on the back and say, you know, good, you know, you're, you're such a good spiritual person. And you're kind of making good progress here. And there was a lot of certain amount of conceit involved in what I was doing. But then when I went on retreat, I discovered that the ego, the self centered kind of attitudes involved with holding that intention, the way I was using it, as a way of building up my sense of self couldn't be sustained in the fire of trying to maintain the practice moment by moment and retreat. And it became very obvious to me the fault lines of the intention that I had. This makes sense to you, and I'm saying. So, a lot of what spiritual practice I think is about is clarifying our intention, purifying it, making it, figuring out what to do, first of all, figuring out what it might be, and then as we work with it in a mindful way that it gets it gets refined over time. till we get something very refined, very pure, and having a very pure, very personal intention that arises out of some deep purity of our heart, that is our own, I think is much more valuable than having some, you know, you know, to read all the books on Buddhism, right, you hear me give a talk about what progress is in Buddhism. And then you can all go home and huff and puff. And, you know, and try to attain that, or they will, you know, forget that, I mean, whatever. So, what is your intention for your practice? And what would progress look like for you find that much more interesting question. And I suspect we have a room full of maybe 80 people here today, and I suspect we have 80 different answers to that question. And, and is that more valuable than hearing what a Buddhist idea of progress might be to explore that interface So, what your intention is for your life, and what it meant what it would mean for you to follow through on that, to live up to that, to align yourself by it.

And I say this as I was thinking about, you know, this topic today and, and talking, thinking a little bit about saying what I just said, it was very much inspired by a feeling of great respect and almost reverence for everyone. That you know, my feeling is that it's, it's really, you know, it's awesome in all the all the connotations of the word to be human being. It's, it's not difficult to be human being it's not difficult to negotiate and find our way in human life with all demands and external demands and internal demands and needs, and you know, it's often not that And I think people who come to spiritual life and our follow through on a regular basis are doing it usually because something is not working so well and they realize it must be a better way must be another way. I can find some other way to live, that will make things go better, smoother or have deeper meaning for me or deeper sense of purpose

or something. And, and I feel it's just a lot of respect for you know, what, what, you know, people are up against in human life and society and work and family and, and

and that would be a very, I feel very, very shy to give kind of a today at least you've had a Buddhist talk that then you'd measure yourself against that. Perhaps what a Buddhist talk talking about Buddhist notions of the path and progress. My hoping if I did talk about that today is that You saw it as an encouragement for your practice, somehow help you to help as a mirror for yourself to see, you know, be inspired and encouraged to follow through on what your intention is. Because there is no spiritual life without living it. It's obvious, right? And, you know, if, if you don't, if you if you decide, you know, it's really great idea to have a spiritual life to meditate to be mindful and great sense of purpose, and you really love the idea of doing it. And you get around to it, you know, on the first day of the month, you know, for 30 minutes, and then you kind of put it off for the next month. And that's fine. I mean, I'm not gonna criticize that at all. But if you're not living that life, you're not the spiritual life not being lived, then. There's a spiritual life except by living, it's somehow following through on something which is our own intention. And so part of what progress means in spiritual life is that you begin to feeling that you can follow through on what your intention might be, and be able to follow through, follow through with it. Day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute. And it's, you know, one of the beautiful reasons to go on retreat is it's a place to try to follow through in a kind of consistent way throughout a day, that it's very hard to do in normal life, where there's so many distractions and activities that keep us you know, going, going going. But retreat is also one of those places where you can get a sense a feeling what it's like to follow through minute by minute, moment by moment, and get a sense of how maybe you can be done daily life, then, as a possibility. And then one of the one of the ideas of progress then is it actually you're able to put together more and more more moments throughout the day and then the week in a year of following through on your intention for yourself If your wish for yourself, whether it's be more mindful, or to be more compassionate, more present, more free, more loving, more connected to something that seems very profound and important for you. Sacred Realm of a sacred realm of life, which is maybe always present. So that's one idea progresses that you're following through on what your intention is what what's important for you. And so one of the things that I would like to explore we want to explore with people when I talk to people out there other practice is how well are you following through on what your intention is? Are there ways that we can support that and help that and move it along? So it's something you do much more often? Do you want to do it more often? Or do you Happy, happy, happy, just have it be something you do, you know, in the morning for a period of meditation, and then whatever benefits that come from that kind of carry over by as if by osmosis and into your rest of your life. You don't give it much thought anymore. So to make progress, minimum means you following through your effort, you're endeavoring is there. There is no spiritual life except by living it in the same way that, you know, in a sense, you go, you know, if you go to a restaurant, we don't eat the menu. You know, sooner or later you have to order the food or you look at a recipe to cook the food to make something to eat. How many spiritual books can you read? There's a phenomena in America. I think, I think this this this name arose out of the publishing industry, because there's a whole industry now publishing Buddhist books, right. And there's a term called the bedside Buddhists. These are people who don't feel no particular affiliation to being a

Buddhist don't call themselves a Buddhist or anything. But they buy books and they haven't you know, this is what they read. And I bet didn't before they go to sleep at night, the bedside Buddhists and of course, publishers are very interested in bedside Buddhists because they buy the books.

So, in India, maybe especially in ancient India, Buddhism was a known that was not known as a religion, because religion is a Western word. And one of the interesting things you learn in religious studies is the difficulty that Asian languages had in translating the question word religion, because they didn't have any good, you know, match for it. And so they kind of invented words Japanese invented a word for it. And, and so we have all these assumptions of what a religion is, when we use the word but here we have a whole culture, it doesn't have the word in their culture originally. They had to invent you know, kind of With Buddhism wasn't called a religion It was one of the one of the one of the reference points for it markers was, it was called a path. America, it was a path that you follow. Religion for many people in the West implies in Islam and attendant to belief. A Marga implies more something that you follow some place that you walk. So when you follow through on place you go. So Buddhism was known as a path that you follow. And then there were a lot of different understandings of what the path might entail. But a path usually entails going from one place to another. It will involve some change. And I think spiritual practice in some way or other involves changing and you can look at progresses, how you're negotiating that change. It could be very simple. It can be you know, are you becoming a person who's less in conflict the world or yourself Becoming more loving, and you become more accepting? Or you no longer getting in the way of reality flowing through you? Are you becoming more concentrated? Or are you becoming freer? Are you becoming wiser? There are all these ways that you can look at someone making a change and transition as it go along a path. The other path also implies that it really isn't. As I've said before, it's a kind of endeavoring something you have to do. You have to enter into it. I love the idea of a path traditionally in Buddhism, on the path in the ancient world was someplace that you walked in when you go for refuge in Buddhism, the word for refuge, which is kind of what makes a person that Buddhist in a sense, is the Pali word for it literally means to walk. Boom, sorry, got charming, charming means to walk, and we usually translate to go for refuge. So in appropriately, we sometimes translated as take refuge, which seems a little bit hard to take it. But to go to walk means you walk some up with your whole body, you enter all of yourself into it. You give entering all of you what you have into the path. A path is something you bring all of yourself into. So another idea of progress a little bit related to where I talked earlier is, are you bring everything who all of who you are into it, are you holding some of who you are back? And the answer is, of course, you're holding something back. I think for most people, or everyone, that's why we have a spiritual path is because we're dealing with the facts. We're holding something back, we're holding on to something and it's very common. When people practice and they're really following through and their hearts deepest intention and wish is very common. People sooner or later to become afraid, at least in in Buddhist circles that I've been in Buddhist people, many people I've talked to fear is a very common phenomenon that arises. Because we're very obvious at some point, that there's a necessity to let go. of something we've held on to. For security for a sense of well being for way we orient ourselves to a life. In particular, some notion of self holding onto some notion of self. And sometimes can be terrifying. I've seen people have panic attacks on retreats, nothing's happening. except they're

up against this wall of attachment to self. And they don't have a clue how to live in the world. without holding on to some idea this is who I am as an as a orientation and the idea of letting go of that Which they realize they come to a place where they realize that this is what's asked him what was asked next is to let go of that. But let go of it is, you know, it's so unknown, so terrifying to step beyond that.

So to end the letter to end, so the whole process I feel, have more and more kind of stepping onto the path and discovering in the process of doing that, what we're holding back, how we're being reluctant or hesitant to put that part of ourselves into it. Not that you know, you know, not that being asked to look at that now. I'm being asked to include that or let go of that. No, no, you know, all that other stuff was good. I mean, I'm happy to look at my suffering and let go of my suffering. But, you know, you fill in the blank, you know, something, but to let you know, to bring everything involved so part of progress could be could be Looking at what you're what you're how you're holding yourself back from really plunging into or following through fully in what your heart's deepest intention and wishes. My first kind of one of my first inspirations to look at Buddhism. It was pretty much kind of intellectual in my interest initially, but still, the movement was that I was a freshman in college during the Vietnam war time. And I was the most extreme pacifist on the dorm floor. And we had lots of arguments about war and violence and non violence and I was always taking the most passive stance because that was my position. And, and I realized and having, you know, to deal with all this, that if I was going to follow through on my pacifist I deals, I would have to least in theory, be willing to put my life on the line to put my life but I would put myself in a situation where you couldn't pacifism. For me, it didn't mean you just kind of, you know, sat quietly in your room and did nothing. It meant that you'd be willing to kind of do nonviolent civil disobedience, which meant, you know, danger. And so I realized that I was afraid to die. And my fear that fear recognized would could get in the way of me following through on my pacifist ideals. And so my first one, my first interest in Buddhism then was, I felt like I had to deal with this fear. And I didn't know how do I deal with it, I didn't know. So I looked at kind of looking around. And somehow I got this idea that Buddhism was a spiritual practice that dealt with this kind of core kind of fear and help you resolve it and deal with it. So Buddhism is a path Or suggests a path. Life is a path. So it's not saying much Buddhism is a path. And then within the history of Buddhism, or within, there are different understandings of what the path is. And what I'd like to suggest today is three different models of the path in Buddhism. And I'd like to go through them each of them separately, but as I do so, you might want to keep in mind that I actually consider that all three work together. And even though historically, in Buddhism, sometimes they're kept separate. And there's been a tension between them in different you know, over the centuries in Buddhism. The I think whenever you have a tension that lasts for more than 1000 years in a religious system, probably the elements of tension are all required needed elements to each other their code, you can't, you're not going to do away with them, you better find some way to hold them all together. Rather than choosing one or the other. So the first path is called the path of cultivation. And the word is Bhavana Marga, the path of cultivation and it's a path of developing ourselves. It's kind of, you know, ancient version of self development program. And the idea is to take some part of yourself and develop it to to become stronger, more enhanced. So for example, developing a concentration. Concentration is a muscle that can become stronger and stronger The more you work on it. Mindfulness developing the mindfulness like a muscle



it gets stronger and stronger. Developing or loving kindness, developing our compassion, developing our patients, developing our capacity to be very accepting of life as it is or ourselves to develop a passages that we have in some way. And

I think it's really one of the most beautiful things that you one of the beautiful things being human beings have is the capacity is these potentials inside of ourselves, that we can develop and strengthen and make them shine different people will focus on different potentials, they have different people have different strengths that they have. And there's there's a few months, a few Monday's ago where I talked about the Buddha talking about different people who had different, you know, excelled in certain aspects of perhaps spiritual life. And I gave that talk to the idea that each of us is different from each other. And each of us has a potential perhaps, that we could follow through on and what is that? And what is, you know, and what is it defined really our own. And now to assume that, you know, you're not to adopt anybody else's idea who you should be. and myself, I'm the kind of person who loves very much loves to be engaged. Just doo doo doo So, the idea of developing a potential is just a lovely idea. To me, the idea of just the idea of being involved in that is fun. Whether it's successful or not, that's kind of a secondary to do just kind of, Okay, let's do this. So that sometimes the idea of getting concentrated, it's really can be lovely. I just love the idea of kind of being in there and, and trying to develop my concentration and develop a self understanding, understanding my mind well enough. So that to really let the constant concentrated state arise as easily as possible. This is a lovely thing to do. And sometimes I've been in complete failure at it. You know, it's sometimes it's very hard to get concentrated. And I've suffered a lot. Also, but but trying to get concentrated, but it's a lovely thing to do. And it's not so you know, it's not a necessarily Buddhist thing to cultivate and develop these kinds of potentials, athletes, musicians, all kinds of people in society in different professions. vocations will develop certain kinds of skills that they have. And those skills get better and stronger, the more we do them and act on them. So traditionally, Buddhism was known as a path of cultivation, you're cultivating yourself and so that you have this very strong, strong inner strength that supports the possibility of doing that letting go work, that's also a very important part of the practice. There's a Japanese form of psychotherapy called Morita therapy. That was very much inspired by Buddhism arose out of Japanese Buddhist kind of things. And it's a very, I think it's a fairly different understanding of therapy than often here in the West. And there the understanding of therapy in this particular school is you Don't try to deal with your complexes in neurosis is directly. Which try to do is to develop your capacity to act in the world follow through and how you want to live in your life in such a way that those your neurosis is don't get in the way, your fears don't get in the way. So this is called constructive living in English, where you try to develop a strength, the inner strength, the inner resolve the inner whatever, so that you can act in a way. So you're at your activity, the focus is so much an activity, your how you act, you're not being inhibited and how you act. You can do whatever you feel like you need to do in your life, say what you need to do or do the actions you need to do. And you don't need to go look at that you know where your deep, darkest problems are. If you act in a way that's successful in life, that's enough. So I don't know if this works so well in America, where we're so kind of inwardly focused on our faults, but I do know that as we develop this potential within us the strengths within us, it changes the inner ecology of how we look at our faults, our problems, our fears, and they tend to look

less and less threatening or less and less inhibiting or less than less problematic. When we have this great big, shiny string that coexists with it, a mind which which has, for example, is very deeply concentrated. It has great kind of strength of concentration will feel much more will feel as if like, like like, like you're bigger, you're growing up, then the particular problems that you have. It's not to belittle the problems that we have, but it's to it changes you know, it's like say that say that you have a

You know, say you have really weak weakness in your lower back. And you could maybe work on that particular weakness itself and they could go away or do something. Or you can strengthen your whole torso, your muscles, your abdomen, your thigh muscles and all kinds of places. And as they get stronger and stronger and stronger, the fact that you have a weakness in your lower back gets becomes insignificant depending compared to all the strength you have. Making Sense is this interesting. You still got something I was worried I was boring you another boring you too much am I going on and on here? You know, it's a risky thing, you know, to be a Dharma teacher and have these monologues. You know, usually the usual kind of society you don't go on and on and talk No without giving people a chance to talk back. I'm still getting used to this sometimes. So, the path of cultivation, the or there's someone going to the person who asked the question

so. So, the second kind of path can make we call the path of letting go. And you find some people emphasize that the Buddhist path is all about letting go, letting go letting go letting go. And sometimes a meditation hall is called in this school is called the garbage dump. Because, you know, it's, you know, it's you think of as a great spiritual place, but it's really the place you'd come to dump all the stuff you got till the attachments and everything and you leave it here hopefully. And then in the middle of nights we have these gnomes that come by and shovel it out so we can come fresh next time we come to sit. And then you should let go, let go and the more thoroughly you can let go, the better you're letting go. And the more progress you make and the happier you become. You let go of you know, all your attachments, all your fears, all your sense of self, everything more more and more more self self effacing is that the word is basement is on my mind these days are why my wife who started to become a face. I didn't know I didn't know until a few weeks ago what this was.

So letting go. And it's really it's a powerful thing to let go and it's a beautiful practice to practice. Let go You know, one of the things to do in particular contexts, you might experiment with just practicing letting go, maybe maybe on retreat, it's a safe place, just let go of everything that you're holding on to any idea you have, let go of any idea of how things should be. Or choose some hour of your day, one hour of your week, can this hour and make sure it's a safe place, don't do it on the freeway. And you know, within reason, right? And just practice that you can let go as an experiment, have any idea of how things should be, how you should be how anybody else should be how anything should be, just let go and let go just like oh, but ever you can. It's very powerful. There's one friend of mine who struggled a lot in his practice, because he had this idea of he was following the path of cultivation. And the path of cultivation can be a demon for some people, because they're trying so hard. They're trying to live up to something and try and succeed. One friend of mine different friend of mine, when we were

in Burma together, the Burmese teacher, we had got really angry with her because she wasn't making enough progress in meditation. And he told her at some point, don't come back again for an interview until you can show me progress. And, you know, that's a recipe of getting more tied up in knots and making more or less progress. And it actually was a disaster what happened with her in the end, and but it's different friend of mine was you know, just following the path of cultivation thinking he had to do something and he was always trying to do something and then he heard about maybe he just had to let go, you know, is another one more doing, you know, he was practicing letting go and just tied himself in knots with letting trying to let go, you know. And so finally, he was told, every time you notice you're gonna, you're gonna try to practice something. To stop. Let go of that, just like have any idea. Even if you're going to let go and do his he had to he had to keep showing up on the at the at the retreat he was at he had to, you know, go to every sittings and do all the schedule, he had to be there and sit in a posture. But once he was there, he wasn't allowed to practice he was given a very strict order. So you're not allowed to do any kind of Buddhist practice without any kind of practice at all, you notice any intention, any movement to practice any at all you stop and, and that was so powerful for him because it it threatened and challenged soon as the deepest seated beliefs about who he was and what he had to do to get you know, to fix himself or be successful or to be something. So letting go is very powerful practice letting go letting go letting go. A third kind of model of the Buddhist path is can be called the path of no path. And that is that there's no path to be followed at all. And it's a little bit odd to be of no path because it's the minimum is a path of getting to the no path. Before, you know before, I didn't realize that, you know, I didn't realize there was no path, but now I realize it. So you've, you know, you've made that transition at least. But the path of no path is very powerful. And it carries a tremendous amount of authority. In some schools of Buddhism held up as being the highest in China and China. That Chon path is considered to be the cream, the top the top of the hierarchy of Buddhist practices. In in, he supposed to do all the other practices. First, they provide the foundation for doing the child practice, but the child practice is a path of no path in the end. So you do follow this path until you're ready for that.

Part of the reason it has a fair amount of authority is that it seems to be the perspective of life and how to live a life that people have once they get enlightened. Once they're enlightened, make some sense. Once you're fully enlightened, there's no path to follow anymore. There's no path you're living life with no path. But then the teaching has been that you can actually what you you can try to live that way you can try to practice that way. You can somehow realize that or ease your way into it, pretend the tantric ways to pretend is to is to assume this is the case, and then trying to live into it as if it's the case, as if you're already a Buddha, be a Buddha. In and being a Buddha and acting like your Buddha you become a Buddha is a is one one variation of this no path path. The no path path is very powerful when we realize the tremendous role that conventions have in our life and how it's possible to listen to Intuit a sense of being alive outside of negotiating life through conventions. So the example that I give, I usually hold up flowers. I mean, some of you've heard this before, but I don't have any flowers here, but I'll hold up some objects. So if I hold up this nice envelope here, you know, you're supposed to hold up a flower. This is being attended to flower but usually hold up a flower, it's much more beautiful. Or, you know, you know, very suggestive a flower suggested with a heart opening or the path opening.



But sometimes a flower is just a flower and, and that's what it anyway some holding up this envelope so you want to know what's the big deal? You know, just envelope right? But the big deal is that right now it's just the envelope in and of itself. But something different happens when I hold up this object next to it. And now whole new thing has happened. Now this is becomes a small object, and this is a large object. This wasn't a small object before. Now it is. So something new is being created by comparing it with another object. And then I'm capable of tremendous magic. And it doesn't even require a sleight of hand you can watch the trick. And when I put this down, and then I hold this up and put this next to the envelope. And now this is the big object. What was small is now big, big and small does not exist in the object itself. It exists in the comparison our minds makes. In comparison to other things, it belongs to the conventional world of comparisons. And why this is significant is that our minds most of its time is living in that world of conventions of comparative thinking. Most of the problematic most of this problematic senses of self that we have, that causes suffering and problems for us, is a form of comparative thinking. We are comparing or measuring yourself, with other selves with ourselves in the past or selves in the future with wishful thinking, the ideals there's a world of difference between seeing the envelope as itself in Buddhism is called the suchness of the envelope. Compared to seeing it as a small object. We see it as a small object, we no longer seeing it in and of itself, as it is itself. So the path of no path is a path a path of learning how to step outside of our conventions, and learning how to see things directly in their suchness, sometimes called the dustiness, such as the things in and of themselves. And in the suchness of the internet themselves, there's a sense of completeness or fulfillment or all all the ways in which we make problems out of stuff tends not to exist there so much when we just see it in and of itself as it is. So in between, right now, just focus we're gonna encourage you to focus on is just yourself. You have some way of accessing yourself in your suchness. independent of future and past independent of all the shoulds who you should be

All independent of all ideas of what you aren't what you don't live up to, just as you are. So, the path of no path is to rest, redefine that place of such nice interest there. The path of cultivation involves measurable progress involves that conventional world of comparisons you can use that is for your advantage or you can use it for your disadvantage. Please be very careful if you're using following the path of cultivation that you use it in the right way. But as we develop our inner strength or inner clarity or capacity to insight and seeing deeply that itself will help us to let go more thoroughly. be easier. Let go And the more we can let go, the more you'll realize that the suchness of the moment the magic, the wonderful awesomeness of the present moment when we can, when we have no before and after, and no measurement to seeing justice a bit itself. So three notion notions of the path. Progress maybe looks a little different than each of them. And I hope that whatever path you're following whatever your intention is in your life, for your spiritual life or your meditative life, that you're able to follow through on it deeply and well, or at least as as deeply and as thoroughly as your hearts as your as your heart's deepest wish. I hope you have some way of listening to hearts deepest wish, and then getting out of the way, Claire The obstacles from the path so you can really follow that path through your forest. And I hope that it makes you more loving. I hope it makes you much more appreciative of the people around you. And I hope it makes you much more conflict free without any conflicts with yourself and

the world around you. So you can become happier, freer and more helpful to your neighbors. So that was what that talk was what it was. That's not the please live in the suchness of this talk. So I don't have to go home wondering whether it was a bad talk or a good talk. Because it is what it is. And, and I wish you all well, and sorry to talk the whole time. So that was sort of nice to hear heard from you a little bit your comments about this kind of topic. Probably we should end and may you all be well