

2008-02-03 Mindfulness of Eating

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SPEAKERS

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Thinking about what to talk about today. In my mind, I was reflecting that the talks I've been giving both Sunday and Monday here at IMC for January, were perhaps somewhat more philosophical or doctrinal, more by the teachings of fundamental teachings of Buddhism with the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. And they're meant to be practical, but they can maybe appear from not so practical, and that's form. And I thought, What can I talk about today to make amends about something that's very, really practical, kind of bring the mindfulness right down to the, you know, the day to day activities of our life. And I thought I would give a talk on mindfulness of eating. And I'm hoping to do it in such a way that some of the ideas of mindfulness will come through there and then you can take this is just an example. Eating just an example of how mindfulness thing can be applied in all kinds of areas of our life. And in doing it, you'll see as we talk about it, I want to make the point that there are two general ways of doing mindfulness practice are two general domains of mindfulness. And often we focus a lot here on the first domain. But as we get into the second half of the talk, I want to let you know where the second domain where becomes likely richer and broader than the first, some ways and it's quite common for us when we teach retreats like a spare rock. To give some instructions in mindfulness of eating. We give instructions and mindfulness of breathing, posture, walking, meditation, and eating is a big part of what we do. So we give instructions for mindfulness of eating and the spirit there is that we want to bring all our all our activities on the retreat into the into the fold of mindfulness into the field of mindfulness. And eating is an important part. Most people spend three times you know, three periods of time each day eating. And it's a wonderful place to practice mindfulness of eating, because these retreats are done in silence. So it's not it's not so common for people to have a silent period of time to eat. Some people will talk when they're eating either with others or on the phone or the television on or they're reading the newspaper or doing something rather than just being fully present for the food. And so it turns out retreats are a really beautiful place to cultivate a very different relationship to eating and food than most people have a chance to do in their normal life. For me, my introduction to the mindfulness of eating was practicing zen, where during the retreats, all the eating mostly eating is done in the meditation hall. So imagine we were all gonna have dinner here, lunch together here. And so it's a beautiful, it's beautifully done in zen, I believe it's beautifully done. Some people don't think so is their knees hurt, because you sit in meditation posture. And in the Zen tradition I practiced and we said set meditating facing the wall. And, and then we would turn around and face out into the middle of the hall in order to have our meal. And there'd be a meal board, like a strip of wood in front of you. That was called the meal board. It was treated like a your table, you would never put your foot on it or stand on it. And, and then you have these beauties is three bowls that are nestled inside of each other. They were wrapped up in a cloth with a nice little knot on top, kind of like the thing that you have at the end of your stick if you're an away from home. Like kind of and, and so then there's an in that silence of the meditation hall. You would chant a little bit. And then after the chant, you'd open up the bowls and lay them all out. And just you win the bowls just be really present for those of us lay them out. And then

there's a whole choreographed way of eating. It takes a while to learn how to choreograph feel that all the steps and forms. And some people are a little bit impressed by it that seems so formal and arbitrary and artificial.

What I found is once you get the hang of it, it's quite beautiful. It's like a dance. Kind of like an art, like the tea ceremony. And my my fantasy, my understanding was it with my sense of it was it was the most efficient way of eating most elegantly efficient way of eating with a minimum amount of extra movements. Just you know, whatever you needed, do the minimum amount of movements in order to put out your plates. Serve yourself, eat, clean your bowls, because you have to clean everything. The bowls that clean to in meditation all day, come serve your water and you have a whole system of cleaning it and then you'd wrap it all up and end Do often a lot of often there was a lot of waiting, waiting for the food to be served waiting for everybody to be everyone's be served. You know, sometimes we were 4050 people there, so you have to wait for everyone to be served before you could start. And so there's a lot of waiting and you're waiting foods in front of you and looking at it. And, and there were servers that came in and it was bowing to the servers and, and it was quite beautiful to do. And the so I learned a lot about the beauty of mindfulness of eating in that kind of form that setting. Whenever I was also the Zen Center, the abbot there that time was fond of especially for people who are priests, people who are you know, more engaged in the practice and maybe others to suggest that they go study tea ceremony, Japanese tea ceremony, and some of you might have done it or seen it. And there's something I've been a few times since you ceremony. And it has some of the same qualities of eating and meditation in this Zen meditation hall, eating mutational of this kind of care and presence to what you're doing. But the added dimension of the tea ceremony of watching it is that part of it as a guest, you're watching the person serving tea and offering your tea. And it's done with great care. With great mindfulness and attention to all the little details, and you get a sense the person is doing it, that they're fully present for lifting up the Keeble. It isn't like the lifting up one hand to hear, you know, kind of like talking about something else. That the most centrally important thing at the moment for that person is lifting up the table with two heads as if it's a precious thing, and leaning forward. And the most important thing in next moment is to really offer it to you. You feel a presence in here at attention like all their attention is offering it to you or in making the tea. All their attention goes into pouring the water into the cup before The ground tea in picking it up and putting it in and just care that's given in. And I found that I wouldn't say mesmerizing, but quite captivating for my attention to watch and be present for someone who offers their care and attention so carefully. It's kind of like washed watching Parents and master athlete, or gymnast It's so beautiful and elegant to watch. But it was something different than athlete for me, because it was a quality of the stylet attentions fullness of attention. And it wasn't just watching it. I believe that there's some kind of there's a kind of a resonance that goes on inside of us. Sometimes nowadays, they talk about mirror neurons. But this resonance that goes on, we're in watching this person being so fully intent and concentrated and so little ego so little attachment, something extra going on. It kind of resonates with something inside of me. That also then felt very peaceful and settled and still like You know, the world outside the Tea Room falls away. And there's something really beautiful about the sense of being a piece of presence of attention of clarity, of distracted of falling away of distract distractions and just being fully there for this thing. And in tea ceremony, you're guided into that by this master meditator who's kind of doing this tea ceremony, one step at a time and kind of going along and entering into it. So whether it's in a meditation hall or retreat or tea ceremony, or if your own home, make your own dining table, the there's an opportunity in eating, of not just eating and nourishing yourself and bring pleasure to yourself, but actually to use eating as a time to cultivate a deeper attention and deeper presence and deeper concentration. That brings hopefully a very deep sense of well being. So that you feel really connected and present and concentrated. And so

one of the things we're doing in mindfulness practice is learning how to bring mindfulness to all our life, not only to understand our life, but to also start cultivating kind of an inner movement, inner presence and inner concentration, inner well being, that becomes more valuable perhaps, than what we do. The tea is nice, it was nice to have a tea. You know, I like having a tea was nice. Actually, sometimes I didn't sometimes I do like the green tea. But, but any case, it was nice, but that was like, excuse for having a very wonderful presence and, and peace and well being that came. And it could have been done some other way. A friend of mine who was a woman is a woman in Japan, there's a very serious end student in Japan, been there for maybe 30 years now. And she studied With a very famous Zen master, who was mostly trained, you know, trained at his monastery, which was an all male monastery. But he opened the doors to the monastery for her to come in every day. And she would go there and train with the monks and have interviews with him. But she wasn't allowed to live there because it was an all male monastery, relatively small. And he was concerned that she wasn't getting the full training that the monks were getting because she wasn't living there. And he wanted to provide her with something comparable for her training. And what he did was he said, when you're not here, go over, I think was visa is the name of the town to Beeson in Japan, and study pottery, and the practice of pottery of throwing a wheel throwing play in a wheel and that kind of engagement, the way it's done, he saw as being comparable to the kind of training that a monk gets in a monastery. Again, it was kind of the presence, the engagement, and it takes a long time to learn how to be fully present to in a way to know Turn clay in, we'll make a bowl. And again, it has to do with the presence we offer is important and much more than with the activity. Many of us eat good part of the day. The interesting to add up how many minutes or hours we spend somehow connected with food, whether it's shopping, or cooking, eating and cleaning up to a fair amount of our time. And it's been said that next to breathing, it's one of the primary things that people are involved in, everyday somehow consuming. I find it very interesting that the mouth and somehow is associated with some of the most important things that people spend their time doing. Breathing, bad mouth, in the nose. And we use the breath as a foundation for mindfulness practice or spirituality. Talking You know, big, big area of mindfulness. Turns out that mindfulness or talking is one of the most difficult places to practice mindfulness. But also, we're in the most important. And then also the eating, and drinking comes through the mouth. And it's also been said that mindfulness of eating is the second most difficult place to practice mindfulness. Maybe it's not true for everyone, but it's can be quite difficult to do it. So the practical aspects of mindfulness of eating are pretty simple. If you really want to do it well and carefully use it as a meditation practice, like on retreats, specially but even at home. It's really helpful that you eat without eating it without speaking. So, be silent. And if you've never done it in your life, it's strongly recommended that you take one meal, try it out, see what it's like to eat, without talking, but without any other distractions where the purpose Here's to really offer your attention fully to what you're doing to the food and to the eating process. So, don't speak, don't be distracted, do one thing fully. Some people find it hard actually, to eat in a careful, mindful way. I'm a fast eater faster than people would expect being all my years of practice, but it used to be faster. So you have to kind of see where I came from.

And so fast that in a Zen monastery where it's notorious that they have to eat fast there, because they can come with seconds but you have like, yeah, they serve you first. And then they have like five minutes or something before it to finish that before they come a seconds. And if you don't fit, you know, if you're not ready for seconds, you don't get any. So whatever. So some people really found some people are naturally slow eaters and found very difficult this whole fast eating Zen. For me, I had to slow down For this, I was eating a diet fast. But in order to help me slow down and be really present, one of the things that I did was I started eating with my left hand. I'm right handed. And so we had chopsticks and we had spoons. And that, that encouraged me to be really be present. Therefore, be mindful, much more careful what I did and be there a nice way. I also found that helpful, especially when I started doing Vipassana retreats to put my fork or spoon down between bites, because

otherwise I'd find that your take a bite, take a bite, pick up some food and fork put it in my mouth, and then start chewing and then get another bomb chewing take another forkful and have the fork of food hovering in front of my mouth. Waiting for the chance to go in there. And so I would put the fork down the spoon down and then I'd really savor fee the present for the chewing the tasting the swallowing. Really take it in and then I wouldn't think Pick up the fork as soon as I finish swallowing as if it was the most important thing to do as quickly as possible, I would just linger a little bit, and just feel what I felt like, feel the hunger that remained, feel the desire for more food, feel the impulse that was there, feel what's going on for me, and what has shifted with that bite. And then once I've done that checking in, then I'll take the next bite, bite, do the same thing with that. And in the process of doing that, I learned a lot about myself. And this is one of the reasons why mindfulness of eating is helpful. It's helpful not only for the presence we bring, which hopefully, you're doing really well and well trade and eating, that it can be like a tea ceremony has that kind of value. But you're also part of the values we learn about ourselves. And there's a lot of desire and different kinds of desire urges and neurosis that can go into eating for some people, for some people. So one of the things for example, is that it's not an fairly common people eat eat for other reasons besides being hungry, people eat because they're lonely, they eat for pleasure. They eat, for distraction, many things. And so to pay careful attention to what's going on inside of us as we eat, allows us to see these impulses. And then there's hopefully give us a chance to be free in relationship to them to not give in to them compulsively or automatically or unconsciously, but they can Oh, look at that. I'm quite for quite happy, not hungry. But I still had this tremendous desire for pleasure. Just it's it's a, it's a, it's a drive for pleasure. So what's the drive for pleasure about and some people will not want to question it because it's so such good thing pleasure. But to stop and look and question, what is this drive for pleasure about what's what's mood, what's driving it? Where's it arising out of? What are the emotions that are connected to it is it out of Loneliness is greed is that out of status is that out of showing off? Is it there's a lot of different things and can go into eating? Is there deep loneliness I part of my kind of drive to eat fast. And for a while when I was in my early 20s, I used to overeat a lot. And when I looked at it, you know, I found out that I had this kind of, I don't know where I got it from. But this, this kind of very subtle belief that I didn't even see in the surface of my mind took a lot of attention to see it. For me, this attitude of scarcity, that I better eat as much as I could now because I didn't know when I would ever eat again, or have again, you know, next time there wouldn't be no food. And so I would stuffed myself, and then I feel terrible. And so I got to see that, that kind of very subtle idea or attitude that was there in the background. So I also found out That, because I eat so quickly, that I seldom enjoy the food.

And I learned by eating slowly, how much pleasure there isn't food. So some people linger with a pleasure and are attached to it. But some people don't avail themselves of the pleasure ever. And so I learned by staying and being present, even something really simple, had much more flavor in it than I imagined. And then eating meditation once for kids, I talked to the kids involved the meditations, I taught the kids it was one they liked the most. And I was a little bit surprised by that. But they were kind of surprised by the all the different flavors and textures and that came out taste that came out as they ate parsley. You know, what I did with the kids was I covered over the various bowls of different kinds of food, and then had them close their eyes and then I put it in their mouth and they would have to tell But it wasn't really be present tasted carefully. But the choice of things was, you know, I think I had mango and strawberry and chocolate. So they liked it. But you know, there's a lot there a lot of pleasure there. But there's a kind of pleasure or satisfaction that I find eating, which is when I'm really carefully paying attention to follow and track the energy or the alertness in my body. I find that when I when I'm hungry, even though it might be uncomfortable in some way, there's also an energy energetic alertness, try to charge it up a little bit. And then if I'm very careful to notice what's happening inside of me as I eat, they'll come a point where that shifts and that sense of kind of alert desire is no longer there. And I feel satisfied. But if I had to eat anymore, even one bite more, I could feel the shift to My energy is starting

to drain, trying to kind of my energy actually kind of kind of being kind of moved towards more retired or drained or, or kind of heavy in a way that's not uplifting. And if I don't pay attention, I'm quite capable of eating beyond that point. And then afterwards saying, Oh, I feel so I feel so, you know, tired. And if you go to a meditation retreat, and you end up meditating afterwards, you know, nodding off, you know, falling can't stay awake, sometimes because of overeating. And so I learned to watch the tipping point in my appetite. And I learned that it's really it's there's a tremendous satisfaction delight in not going beyond the tipping point to feeling started feeling heavy. In order to identify that point, and really enjoy it. It's very nice feeling. And I'm encouraged to stay there. Because there's a lot of food in my environment. I can say, Well, if I get hungry and Two hours or three hours, I can snack. So just kind of wait, I'd rather keep this feeling, then kind of overdo it here. So probably you can fill in this further for yourself. All the different things you can imagine learning about yourself and your relationship to desire, pleasure, loneliness, a lot of different things discomfort, distraction, that come into play while you eat. And in fact, one of the very powerful places to practice is if you choose to do mindfulness of eating, say, to eat in silence for one day, or a couple of days or one meal a week, you know, a week or some some kind of way. Pay very careful attention to all the protests, or all the strong voices inside to say, well not now or this is kind of this is kind of silly. This is kind of simplistic. There's more important things to do. Because those voices and those arguments are very important to look at and engage in in a responsible way. way because for a number of reasons because sometimes our minds or our lives are driven by those kinds of arguments that are often unconscious, but didn't come into the foreground into consciousness by listening to them and engaging with them and not giving into them and also because if you have strong arguments in your mind for why being fully present in a piece here and now is not a worthy endeavor you better look at that carefully. What is it that what is it what why wouldn't be fully present and peaceful here and now not be a valuable thing to do with a person's life. You know, t t t teacher spends a lifetime cultivating that presence in tea. And you can actually take very expensive t classes where they'll teach you how to do that. Or you could just not talk during a meal at home and train us Use us eating at home as a training for that.

So that's one whole area domain of mindfulness has to do with the domain of what happens when you bring full presence to here. And now, as you do something, to sensations, the experiences, the thoughts, the feelings, everything has to do with here now. And we really focus a lot on that on retreats. There's a whole other area domain of mindfulness. One hand mindfulness means can mean something like nonreactive presence to what's happening now clear attention to what's happening here and now. But mindfulness also means a kind of wider attention or care, to what's what's happening in our life, contemplation of our life, a wider consideration of what's going on. That's wider than simply what's happening here and now. So if I take this glass of water, I could practice careful mindfulness. I can pick it up the glass with two hands, I can appreciate the glass. I could feel the coolness of the glass against my hands. I could feel my thirst, dryness in my mouth. And then I could feel the desire feel the intention to check out the intention and say well my three for water or my trying to sometimes settle that thirst. See that it's the settling of the thirst and pick up the glass and touch my lips. Even before the water goes there, I can feel the sensations of the glass against my lips and then I can take a sip and feel that you feel what happens to me. That's one hallway. In other ways I can pick up the glass of water like a look at the glass and I can think Hetch Hetchy you know Hetch Hetchy is the reservoir that we get our water from. And then I can start considering all those pipes. And the pumps and engineers and snowfall in the Sierras that melts and goes into head touchy. And then there's global warming. And the global warming comes right back to how I use my car. And in that glass of water as I consider the Association of things that are connected to it, they bring it to me, it gets to be the whole world at some point. And part of mindfulness is also the gift to give it the appropriate time and place, some careful consideration to the world, that this event the situation these things we use, are connected to. And not only and I think in a wise spiritual life or any kind of wise life, is also feel some responsibility to that connection. Not just

to say, Well, I deserve this water The water is given to me and you know, I can do whatever I want with it. But to feel that what I do with my life has an impact on the world and others and that how I fly My toilets has an impact. Do we even know where our poop goes? Are we responsible for it? They're out of sight out of mind? Where does our water come from? Where does our food come from? And so part of mindfulness of eating is to take, take the food that we eat, as a window as a doorway, into exploring our interconnectedness with this wide world that we were in. And how far do we willing to take that exploration? And how much responsibility will we take or how much how much lessons do we take from that is an open question and something I hope everyone will consider and explore. Some people only explore their where their food comes from, to the degree that they want to make sure the food comes from the clean source. There's no mercury in their fish or no pesticide in their, in their, you know, in the milk that they drink or something. The and some people want to feel that their life the way they live their life. is a life that contributes to the world that somehow how we live on the world, we tread lightly, we don't cause as little damage as possible. And more than that we'd like to our presence, our, our lifetime also contribute to the world. It wouldn't be nice if we elect the world in a better place than we found it in our little corner. And so how do we participate in the world? How are we how are we participants in this local world? national world, international world, cosmic world, how do we participate? How are we citizens? And so food is one of those ways we feel that those chains of connections that ripple out from us, and it's quite, I think, lovely, many ways that it doesn't take a lot of consideration to realize that there's this web that spreads out from us through our food and what we consume out into you know, so much of the world and so many different people, just to consider which I do sometimes, who are the people who handle the food that I'm eating No. And

sometimes when I if I drop a raisin on the floor, then oh, Chet, you know, who is it that pick that grape off the tree of the vine? Or maybe it's machine but and who are who operated the machine, you know? Or who is it the milk that cow, you know that cow. You know, whose field was it grazing in or you know, who was the person who trucked it. You know, I used to be a dairy farmer. So I know some of the things that's involved with, you know, delivering the milk and the milk trucks come and you know, I'd used to go to work go along sometimes to the, to the dairy where the milk was delivered and got to see what was there and the people who are there and the cartons the milk was put in and you know, it's just beautiful. It was also the whole world. And this is maybe silly to say I won't even slept underneath the loading dock of dairy, cement, asphalt or anything going dark. It was it was raining so much hitchhiking around, just happened to come. I was dropped off from this big dairy factory whenever the loading dock was the driest place. So you know, what is it we touch with our food? What is we've touched with where we consume? And how do we take responsibility for that? How do we participate in this world? Because we feel that connection. And I think that sometimes the way that mindfulness mindfulness only taught in its first domain, paying attention to here now in the details, your sensations and what's happening here, that it could in a sense, contribute to a consumer society. Or it could it could contribute to kind of crippling myopia. myopia can be enforced certain kind of myopia that many people in our society have. Many people in our society don't consider the impact that their life has. They don't consider where things come from, and what they've how and why and what they buy. How they buy things and what they buy as impact spreading it spreads out from them into the world around. It makes a difference. You know, for example, if you buy local food by far away, and how does it make a difference? Do we want to support local as opposed to far away. And so part of mindfulness, this part is consideration of the impact and the relationships. And so as we eat mindfully in Buddhism, we have these two sides. We have the side of the practice here and now. And we have the side of our relationship to the world. And in different times, we might focus on these two different aspects. Sometimes we focus on here and now and use that as a training and find tremendous peace to kind of still beautiful clean piece that you find perhaps in a tea room during tea ceremony. You can find in your own kitchen. And perhaps you also can find it. And other times we focus more on the relationship we have to the world around us that we

have through the food that we eat. It's a rich world. And I could go on to talk more about it. But we have five minutes left. And maybe this is a time if some of you have some questions or comments.

Let me go to a capacitor monastery or here, we offer food to the monks as owner if you have any sense of the difference that in it's more of a you offer

more hierarchical like Oh, so in in the Theravada tradition when there are monastics monks or nuns, monks and nuns generally only eat if food is offered to them. If no one offers the food and then you don't eat, and so they come here to IMC. They Most common way in which they will eat is that sometimes they have the city with a bowl or stand with a bowl and people put food in their bowl. And in, in Zen they don't have it that way. And then monasteries, just the monks who feed them serve themselves, but you're still being served. So serve being served as a big part of in Zen monasteries, and it's beautiful to be a server, I feel like I need to sneeze. So my posting, and so so. So you're being you're being being served servings a beautiful thing, it's beautiful to be served, because you have a little different relationship to your food if it's being served to you. And, and so even if so what I learned also in the in the Zen monastery was that when we ate informally, like occasionally we'd eat in the dining room and we have to, you know, kind of A regular kind of dining room kind of set up with food was that we had a custom there, that people wouldn't serve themselves there either. But we'd be mindful of each other. And notice if someone was finished or look like they needed something, and then you'd offer to serve them to kind of serve each other. And so that's a whole mindfulness thing itself and very valuable thing. A part of that that part of being a receiver. In the Zen monastery, we were taught there was, you're never allowed to say no. And the spirit behind that was it was being offered. People's goodwill was offering you something. And it was kind of a kind of a disrespectful thing to say no. If someone was offering you something, and there was probably a training to always say yes. And you could get around a little bit because you could, you could, you could go like this to hold your fingers together really close together. So that it was just, you know, show you what just a little bit and some people are really adamant. You know, some people have Just like I had a wheat allergy when I was in the monastery, so it was really important that I not have wheat. And so I would make it really clear that a little I wanted a little and, and some of the servers understood and, you know, accommodate someone didn't quite understand and plop it in anyway. And then I had this What am I do now? And, but it was always received and, and it impacted me in my own training was I learned to appreciate much more when people make an offering or offer something. And I'm much more willing to kind of entertain the idea well, how can I say yes to this? How can I receive this rather than somehow put a stop to it? And, and because I feel the beauty of the offering. Whereas before, there's no training, I was much more inclined just to, you know, be me myself in mind. Well, I don't want that. Thanks. It's kind of blown away because I didn't want it. But now I feel the generosity. So I don't know if that answered your question.

More, why don't we do the offering, it's just interesting within that offering is done very ceremoniously, but in ours doesn't seem to be,

Oh, I'd be passionate retreats, or the parsley retreats, we don't serve as we could. But we generally don't, because the personal retreats are designed to be as simple as possible to have as little social interaction as possible. Because in the form in the form of work, practicing in a particularly positive form or practicing and in that setting, it's not a full training. It's just a particular way, where you're trying to develop a lot of concentration, a lot of stillness, a lot of presence, where you're not being ruffled or distracted by social interactions, or a lot of activity. So it's designed to minimize the amount of activity, extra activity and social interaction as you can. And when you serve, there's a social interaction happens when you serve, and it's not always beautiful. So when the Zen monastery for example, where

I was being served The server's would come along, and they bow to you and you bow to them before they would serve you, they're holding the pot, they bow, they put the pot down, they bow, they would, you know, serve the food to you, they bow they pick up the thought that bow. And then when in doubt, bow, a lot of bowing. And so be sitting there sitting, meditating, you know, and the person would come along with the food, and they'd bow. And that person didn't bow deep enough. I think that person's dismissive of me, that person doesn't really like me. That didn't was that that was disrespectful. You know, all this stuff, you know, would go on. And so, it's bad enough vipassana retreats, where the person next to you, you know, is behind you in line, you know, that person is crowding me, you know, or I'm not going fast enough for they still there's thoughts right? And all that stuff is important for practice. But for better or worse, the way that RV park entries have been designed, is we've tried to minimize the amount just for the purposes of keeping things simple. So, but here, we can do it here. You know, we have potlucks here we could serve. It could be nice. So it's time so if some of you have questions still you're welcome to come up and ask them up here. And I hope that you enjoy your eating. And if not, you know don't get oppressed by this talk. are inspired, and you will find that eating is a doorway into your freedom and deep sense of peace. Thank you.