

2009-04-19 Buddhism In The World

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SPEAKERS

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So, for those of you who were not here last week, last week's talk, I discussed a little bit. The role of stories, in religions making up religious traditions have different stories. And then I offered you a story I'd made up. And the story I made up was based on this dichotomy between wounded deer, who is surprisingly taken care of by a tiger. And sometimes our life can be more like has a problem and seems like the universe others something comes along and supports us and, and it's kind of like an act of grace and or act of surrender. And then other times, life requires us To be more like the tiger, rather than waiting for something passively accepting situation as it is in a lot of things to be. It requires us to act and be like a tiger who protects the deer supports the deer. So the story was what it was. And but what struck me after the talk last week was two of the questions afterwards. And the question answer period, and I wasn't quite prepared for the questions. And one of them because they kind of took the little Dharma talk I gave and wanted, seemingly wanting to ask questions are prompted asked questions about larger social issues in relationship to Buddhism. And one of the questions was about the Buddhist role. Buddhist clergy in Japan, their role in supporting Japanese war efforts There's no well documented documented books about the way in which Japanese Buddhist priests and monks are actively supported, very actively supported and justified the Japanese imperialism and the war efforts. So how could that been? And the second question had to do with the sex trade in countries like Thailand, Thailand, being a Buddhist country, and there's, you know, center of sex trade, and also a fair amount of child children involved in the sex trade as well. So how could that compute to how could a Buddhist country allow that or something? So, thinking about this week there on one hand, you know, we had the Japanese tiger, you know, they, you know, maybe the, you know, the active support of war. Just the fact that you're a tiger and active doesn't mean necessarily it's right. And then perhaps if you allow in Thailand maybe there's a kind of passivity and allowance of social justice to happen and save you there there's more of a meeting the deer and not just kind of not not trying to change or write something that's wrong. I don't know if that's a fair analysis. But I was struck by by the questions and so I spent actually a fair amount of time this week considering those questions and those concerns more and partly because I felt my responses last week were quite inadequate. And the so the question of more of the questions and is what is the relationship of Buddhism and Buddhist culture Buddha society, Buddhism as a religion, to the social ills of our, of our society, to the ills of our society, the larger issues in answering this, we have to kind of question that a bit, what we mean by what, by Buddhism?

Where do we start when we try to understand Buddhism, and there's different choices. And one choice is to start with Buddhism as a world religious system, and try to kind of get a sense of the overall theory or logic or teachings of the system. And once we understand the overall rationale of the system, then you know, apply at or justified or engage it in the situation situations in our life. And many people are trying to figure out a way to live their lives, and to figure out how to bring justice to this world or what's right or wrong. And so they naturally will look sometimes to philosophy, but more so they look to

religions as one source of solutions. There has to be solution to help. And so we studied these six different systems and there are some of you perhaps who've read, studied different religions and Maybe in the process of studying different religions trying to find which one you want to be aligned with or learn from. And, and that's one whole approach. So then you study, you know the doctrines of the Buddha, four noble truths, the Eightfold Path, the teachings of emptiness, the teaching of not self. The, the emphasis on ethics, the nature of awakening, the different kinds of awakening that exists stages of awakening, and the history of what the history of all this and how it all applies. And so, the whole you can study, you know, very abstractly for a long time, get a PhD in Buddhism. And then another approach is not to start with Buddhism as a system or even as a religion. Because maybe it's not a religion in the way that we think of in the West, or maybe it is maybe it is isn't isn't both. And so we have to kind of question if you hold it Only as a religious system is that we would other religious systems, maybe we miss something very central to what Buddhism is if there is a Buddhism even. And so one of the ideas, the other approach is not start with a religious system to understand its doctrines and tenants, but rather to start with something much more at close, close to ourselves something much more immediate than our experience. And so a number of things we might choose, but one of them might be awakening itself. So rather than trying to understand what Buddhism is, we begin with our own experience of awakening, if we have some experience like that, and then what follows. So if you if you understand the system and the logic of the system, then you can ask well what follows from this logic, how I should behave and engage in the world. And if what you start with is awakening, then you can you know what follows from that, but how we engage in the world, a sense of meaning and purpose who I am and we start with Awakening that we have to have some sense of what awakening is. And, and awakening is not much. You know, as you say, it's not much to start with perhaps you know what is awakening? It's the kind of a key word in Buddhism. So often associated with freedom, liberation, sometimes we use the word enlightenment. And, and the word enlightenment has its advantages because you can play with the word light. And if you think here, you know, if you could, if you could ever all of us come home or come into the immediate present here to pay attention to something that maybe you're not paying attention to right now, but it's here and very present, is the space that's between us space that's here in the room, there's a lot of space in the room, ceilings high. And so to become aware of the sense of space is between the individual sitting here and between the walls and the sense of space. sense of space, the spaciousness, a space that's here. We don't normally don't pay too much attention to it's maybe subconsciously aware of it, some of you feel crowded, because there's a lot of people here. So the space seems small, some of you might look up to the ceiling feels kind of feels a bit spacious. And it might affect your mood or something that, you know, maybe you weren't consciously thinking about until I brought it up. And now you become aware of this thing called space. Now in the space in order to be aware of that space here now, there has to be light. And because if there was dark, you wouldn't know how much space there was, you wouldn't know there was a ceiling. And so there's light that exists here. And, and now, the space and the light, light even more than the space is kind of light is light and visible. You know,

I'm not a physicist of light, but is it is it invisible or is it by nature of being you know, so It's invisible until it strikes something, right? And we hit something, then you kind of see the effect of light or I don't know how it works. But there's something about life you know, life doesn't pertain to doctrine. Space doesn't pertain to a doctrine. Life doesn't belong to self, you know, something you create make out of your own self. Light doesn't have greed, light doesn't have a space doesn't have hate. Space is very accommodating, who's willing to hold anything, and light is willing to move through that space and be there and reflect it so this is something that's here in this room and you can kind of be aware of it but maybe if I pointed out to you, but then the Buddhist turn the Buddhist exercise, is to turn that little bit and say, and point towards that awareness that's aware of the space and the light. There is no light or space, there is light in space. I suppose. But it's not an experience for you, unless you are aware of it.

Now what is the nature of the awareness that is somehow tuned into the space here in this room, or the light that's here, this nebulous kind of sense of light, that's very clear, very obvious, very present, but still something we can't quite put our finger on a touch. And what's the nature of that awareness? And what Buddhism sometimes will say is that, that awareness is very much has a lot of same qualities as space, the awareness in and of itself, we might add or bring along in the heels of that awareness, a lot of things we might bring along, or greed or hate or fear, we might bring a strong sense of self, self and other a lot of values, history, beliefs, a lot of things can come to add it to it, but those are added. And the nature of awareness itself is very, very simple in how it's experienced, and it has some of the same qualities of space that's accommodating holds everything. In and of itself. There's no greed, no hate and delusion, just as clarity that's there. So in that, so if awakening is seen to be somewhat close, as similar to the sense of clear, pristine awareness that maybe we maybe we can point to a little bit then if we start there, rather than we're starting with a religious system, what follows? And, and how do we know what follows, you know, if they don't follow if we're not justifying our behavior then on a, on a belief system, I believe certain things Therefore, I act certain way, then what do we, you know, we feel like we're not on any kind of solid ground and is awakening itself being in this kind of clear sense of awareness or opening or freedom enough to guide one's life enough to kind of have a sense of purpose and meaning in one's life? And how could you know if it does that, if it doesn't provide you with any doctrines. So it's kind of you know, maybe it's an becomes inactive trust or through experience, we realized that coming out of awakening becomes an effective, productive way of being in the world. One of the ways that we're the things that we're pointing to here, though is that what comes out of awareness is action. Not belief. If there is clear, empty space, something has to move to the space. Something has to we have to act in it. So how do we act and how we act and becomes very important in Buddhism, much more so than what you believe. Belief is part of it. But action becomes really central. So I don't know if this is boring. You just boring some of you

Well that I tried to figure out a way to make it more engaging and jury's out.

So, because I'm going to change directions, this is kind of a juncture. You have to bear with me today. And hopefully the pieces will come come together by the end of the talk. So it's next week thinking about these questions about war and social injustice and the relationship of Buddhism to it. My thinking kind of coalesced around exploration of what Buddhism has to say about human rights. And it's been pointed out by a number of people that human rights isn't language in this discourse of human rights comes out of a Western context to the rows kind of in the 1700 1600s, I think very much in the West, and a lot of kind of Western cultural assumptions about what it means to be a human being and what it means to be in society built into it. But it became a very strong and trend in western thought the idea of human rights started off court was called natural rights, then became human rights. And it's enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence and, and then in the 1940s, it was enshrined in United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. So it became something more global, not just part of Western culture, but still it came out of that. And sometimes it's been pointed And maybe the notion of human rights, which seems for many people in Western cultures seems so obvious that should be there. Maybe it's not so obvious in other cultures, and perhaps the very notion of human rights is, does a kind of harm to some perfectly good understandings of human nature and understanding what it means to be human that other cultures have. And so maybe it's even form of imperialism to kind of bring it out to people elsewhere. And then, a lot a lot of miser representative Buddhism, he seems to have shied away from using the notions of human rights and his discussion of, but rather what he uses the idea of human responsibilities. So he talks about human rights some but the prefers Similarly to talk about human responsibilities to human rights. So what's that about? And how can we look at this

human rights, the idea of we have rights can lead itself to the idea that we're entitled. And so, you know, we should be provided we have a right to certain things and so then it's, we're, we should be provided with that then we have a right to an education. So someone we're entitled to that so much to provide me with education, thank you. Or right, we have a right to healthcare or a right to, you know, to vote or right all kinds of rights that people have. And, and once you use the word entitlement, then it starts becoming a little bit awkward because then people start insisting that other people should treat them in certain way, well, they're being somewhat passive. You know, and so I just, I just live my life and people should provide me with all the things that I'm entitled to. Thank you. And I don't know if that's a useful way of living a life. So, but you have rights

has two sides to it. It has a side of, if someone has a right, then someone else has a duty to provide that, right. So, if an example that's been given some times is that if, if I borrow a lot of money from one of you, it's a loan. Then we sign a contract, that you know that I'm gonna pay you back. Then you have a right to get paid back for me, according to the conditions of the loan. That's your right And I'm obligated by responsibility to provide that. If I don't pay back the loan, then it's the role of our government to it's the duty and sense of government to ensure that I fulfill my obligation. So we kind of expect there's a right, as a bar, as a lender, you have a right to get paid back. And you're entitled in our society, to get support and help from the government to be in agreement. That's what they're part of the function of the government to do is to help make that happen. But there's two sides, there's a sense of the right to get paid back and my obligation, my responsibility to pay it back. And also the sense of the role of someone other institution like government to pay it back as well. But it helped help make it happen. So the argument then, is that the idea of rights goes hand in hand, like two sides of a hand fighting back side of the hand with the sense of an obligation or a duty of responsible possibility. And which is that whereas the where should the emphasis being on the emphasis be on the right in terms of an entitlement or the issue, the emphasis be on the responsibility and an argument of made that in Buddhism, the emphasis is more on emphasizes more on the responsibility we have, rather than what rights we have. And again, if maybe you can't separate them the two sides of a hand, but the results are can be a little bit different. If the emphasis is on responsibility, then the emphasis is and the tendency is to not look for entitlement, but rather and what's asked what's being asked of me, what's we've been required to me in this situation. So if if there's a a Right to Education, then we wait for someone to provide it to us. If it's our responsibility to provide education, then we look for how can we help them support other people to be educated to be better educated. And so has a little different feeling of what's going on there. And so, the tendency in Buddhism has been not to look for inalienable rights, but rather to look for how is it best for us? How should we act in the world in a responsible way. Now, when you hit with people, here they are, oh, now I'm going to respect I'm held responsible. A lot of people are going to flee, are going to flee Buddhism because they don't want a religion that tells them what to do. At least a lot of people I've noticed a lot of people coming to Buddhism in the West are, are kind of trying to free themselves of religion. Have these strong tenants and beliefs that thou shalt do it this way. And so Buddhism says, you know, they think they think that Buddhism says, you know, trust yourself, follow your own experience, find the truth for yourself. And, and then the here that Buddhism teaches, you should be interesting to your responsibilities. Then the question, what responsibilities Do I have, and this now seems like I'm adding all these things to on top of myself, and I feel so bad about myself already. And now, and now, you're telling me to do even more things that I'm not even doing now. And so now there's even more reason to feel bad.

And the language of rights, you know, or the idea of innate perfection or goodness feels better. I'd rather have a religion that tells me how good I am. That doesn't require anything of me. than to have a religion that doesn't that requires things of me. I need to do something

So we find in a lot of Western Buddhism, a fair amount of emphasis on innate goodness, innate Buddha nature, kind of teaching that helps us to feel good about who we are. As opposed to teaching that emphasizes action, we should act how we always should do. So, but even so the notion of responsibility, and the notion of rights might not be concepts that belong to Buddhism. We're trying to take Buddhist Western concepts that are very important in western discussion of human life and trying to find how can we make it work for Buddhism? How does it what is Buddhism have to say about it? And I'd like to offer a separate word, a different word. That I think I think maybe is more integral Closer to the Buddhist approach, then both ad of rights and responsibilities and that is the notion of reciprocity or mutuality, that what it means to be a human being Buddhist point of view, is to be involved in reciprocal relationships is to be involved in mutual relationships. And so when we look at ourselves as being in relationship, then what what are the relationships call for or do they require. And so, for example, if you're in a committed relationship, a marriage or partnership there's often a good counsel given and I sometimes say this when I do have done wedding ceremonies, commitment ceremonies, I'll say something like you know, a partnership like this not a done deal. You don't just go through ritual and it's you know, it's done. You know, and you just kind of retire. But rather, it's something that you need to ongoingly recreate and reaffirm and you know, it requires ongoing, it's a relationship that requires kind of recreating all the time. And so once you have a committed relationship, that commitment comes with reciprocity with the mutuality, that we're responsible for, from having agreed to go into that mutual relationship. And so we can ask, what is that relationship a call for us? And so, different things, perhaps different relationships call for different things, but it calls for honesty, perhaps, it calls for contact, conversation, you know, some mutual support. And so, you know, maybe we can understand understand that in relationship to a committed relationship. But then, in Buddhism, there's a list of other kinds of relationships that are reciprocal. And it's only in the reciprocal reciprocity that the relationship exists. It doesn't exist in the abstract. It exists because we choose to act a certain way. One of them is the relationship between a student and a teacher. There is no relationship to the student teacher unless one person comes as a student and the other person comes to the teacher. There's the whole thing gets created by the actions of two people. Sometimes people people come to me and say, you know, will you be my teacher? And I've said, sometimes in the past, I've said, well, it's a student than next a teacher. You know, I'm just going about my life bump, bump, bumping along, you know, trying to do the best I can. And, and then if someone comes along and relates to me, as a teacher asks me a question, and I think I have an answer. I'll say something in response, and then I'm a teacher. You know, I'm teaching and so the situation makes me a teacher. There's a reciprocity Now if I go around with the idea that I am a teacher, without the active, reciprocal mutual relationship that makes it relevant, then I would think I'm diluted, you know, because you know that I'm carrying myself as a teacher around the world. I'm the teacher, look at me. And, and then I go around, you know, insisting everyone it's, you know, Karen, that particular construct, you know, I'm a teacher and you better see me this way. And, and I've, you know, tried you, when I first wasn't married to my wife, she would come home sometime would be talking with her sometimes. She would look at me say, Gil, you're using that voice again. And what you meant was that the teacher voice, it was completely you know, the essence of reciprocity what that relationship is with my wife. That's not the place to be a teacher.

So I was carrying this delusion, right, I had this like, you know, carrying this idea. And I, you know, out of out of its normal context of reciprocity. So that was my delusion. So there's a certain result prosody that comes with that. And so what does that relationship call forwarders require? And different cultures requires different things, perhaps or calls for different are held different ways. And so different things are called for. And other reciprocal relationship that exists for people is that of between parents and children, and even adult children. And so that doesn't exist in the abstract kind of set thing, but also it's a relationship. And so what does that relationship call for we're going to action what kind of behavior is called for it in order for that reciprocal relation to be there? I would suggest that sometimes it becomes

a problem in families when one of them Other members of the family assumes that they have a right to being treated a certain way, independent of being reciprocal. And mean sometimes we go along with that to me, my mother for years would go along with that, because I would come home to her as an adult visitor. And I'd be very happy just to do nothing. And get fed and have my clothes cleaned and all these things. And, you know, I thought all I had to do was just do nothing. And it kind of deserved it. And that's the way to work. But in Buddhism, the idea is that a parent teacher, a parent, student, parent, child, situation is a reciprocal relationship that has mutual actions or responsibilities from both sides, mutual forms of support and respect in different things. And other reciprocal relationship that's emphasized in Buddhism. Between a member This goes back now to the ancient times, between a ruler and citizens of a country, that there's a reciprocal relationship there, maybe not, as we say, between the government and, and its people. And its reciprocal, that the recipients, there's responsibilities in both directions. And, and without some sense of the citizens having responsibility to society or the government to the rulers, then you can't expect the government and in return to have responsibility for its citizens. And there's a big discussion, of course, the controversies around these kinds of issues, but to be simplistic, since it's just, we paid our taxes a few days ago. We have in a sense responsibility to pay our taxes and support the government. And then from that support to the government. We get support in return in a variety of ways. And so again, we're looking at reciprocal. So do those things exist in some kind of inherent way? Do they exist before the creation of the relationship? No. But if you want to be in that relationship, any of those kinds of relationships, then they call for certain kind of actions on our part. So reciprocity, what is what's called for and the mutuality of our relationships. And so, Buddhism tends to put the emphasis on understanding and mutuality, understanding the interconnected aspects of how we relate to others to the world around us. And then once we understand that interrelatedness the mutuality, what actions is calling us to maintain that in a healthy way in appropriate way. And, and again, so the emphasis is what it was calling for us. tendency in Buddhism for better or for worse, better and worse. Is to point the finger back to you to the person to say what is your role? What's your responsibility? How do you what do you contribute to this? As opposed to what do you receive? We receive a lot and there are ways in which we can expect to be, you know, if people want to be in relationship to us, we can expect certain things in return, you know, contract, contract in a sense for that, but the emphasis over and over again is what is my role? What do I contribute? How do I step up to the plate? What do I give here? So, to give you a very simple, I think, practical understanding of this or example of this. There are times when I felt that someone has not been treating me properly. And then I can get, you know, they're not treating me with enough kindness in that person. capitalize on time that person is

and and then I'm going to wait until the person treats me kindly, you know, person better, you know, get on with it. I'm just waiting here. And other approach is to, well, the person is not treating me kindly, but you know what? So what I'll do is I'll be I'll treat that person kindly. That person is not being generous. So I'll be generous to that person. That person is not being, you know, something I want, rather than waiting for that to be provided. Turn it around 180 degrees. And what how can I act on this, move forward and offer it instead? Sometimes it seems to have kind of this magic quality to turn around that way. So rather than waiting for someone to love you, rather than waiting for your partner to love you. Love your partner and see what happens. So take responsibility for the relationship, do what we can offer we can. It does a number of things, it can help with a relationship. It's shift chips, the emphasis, and can kind of support the other person or help the other person change perhaps. But also, it's an exercise of our own freedom. Rather than being a victim, rather than being stuck in a certain way, we're acting on our freedom to act. And the emphasis in Buddhism, again, is on action and the freedom to act. Freedom in Buddhism, the awakening of freedom of awakening has a lot to do with being free to act and to act freely, and to feel that in our ability to act freely. We find ourselves so we find our freedom. So where do we begin, we begin with Buddhism is an abstract field of concepts and ideas.

Where do we begin by the mindfulness in presence that puts us here in the present moment fully and completely. And then over here completely here now, then we find ourselves we find ourselves in relationship to others, we find ourselves in relationship to the present moment. And then what, what is being asked of us or what is what's our opportunities here right now, to respond, to act, to do something, in mutuality of a relationship, also points to opportunities. And this is, you know, the possibility of awakening points the opportunity of peace or freedom, of compassion, of clarity, of not being in conflict. So, the reference point in Buddhism was, as I said, this way It's been pointed out that the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights is a series of declarative statements without any justification, maybe it doesn't need any. But from a Buddhist point of view, there needs to be a. If we're going to act in the world, there needs to be a sense of the consequences of that action and taking responsibility for the consequences. So that to be a Buddhist is also to be concerned with the vision of what's possible. And so the vision of what's possible, ultimately in Buddhism, is a profound experience of liberation, or freedom of awakening. From that point of view, of awakening or freedom, then in informs the choices we make and how we act. We take responsibility, how we engage in that reciprocal world. So it's not just a matter of what's, what is the relationship involved with the world, but also what's possible in that relationship? Is it possible to support and help other people support and help myself to experience the highest good, the highest benefit, the highest experience of peace of well being a freedom of benefit as possible for human being. The hope is that when we start with awakening, experience of awakening, a clarity, immediacy, where there is incense, no, even kind of self consciousness in that clarity, like there's no self consciousness in the space that's here.

Then That sense of freedom or peace that that provides becomes a reference point for what's possible to move towards or move with. And so the choices we make is somehow informed by that. So and we're in from Buddhist point of view, were the custodians of that possibility for others or the supporters of the possibility for others. So when Buddhists live by the precepts, the five precepts for example, they can partly be seen as upholding our responsibility or our the mutuality, reciprocity, of how we can offer an act as a way of be supportive of the relationships that we're in. So the relationships we're in and so the people we encounter, get supported in the best possible way for their own betterment better future so precepts becoming a sense of responsibility. Not because there's an obligation to live by the precepts. Not because there's an obligation to be an engaged Buddhist, not because there's an obligation to act for the betterment of others. And that you fight very hard to find Buddhism, any offensive, obligate, you're obligated. But if you're going to be involved in the mutual mutual world, if you can be engaged in the world relationship, then we have a responsibility for what those relationships calling us to do. So how does that relate to war and the sex industry? I think when we when we focus on such large social issues like that, you know, we focus on personal issues the world that we encounter In our own immediacy, period life, awakening can take you a long way. Know how to act and live effectively and efficiently for others. But when we look at the larger social issues like that, do we need to have more than just our own awakening? Do we do we need to have a bigger, wider understanding of what's going on in society, and also have different world, different religious systems understandings and so that there can be a relationship between the more complex social dynamics of our life or our times and our awakening? And so for some people, then the bridge between awakening and the larger world is the religious system that we're involved in. And so Buddhism has, I think, a very beautiful religious system of beliefs and doctrines that can help support that bridge and

So the hope that is that there's not a black and white separation between awakening and the religious worldview or system, Buddhism, and you find some teachers and want to make a very strong separation between the two. I think there's also their mutuality and mutual support between those two. And my hope is that as Buddhism takes root in this country here that it becomes a participant with other religious systems here in this country in this culture becomes a participant in the larger public discourse

about what it is to know. You know how, as a society, we care best for our society. So that Buddhism isn't just simply a meditation tradition where people sit and look at their breath, their breathing, and try to experience their own sense of well being. But Buddhism is inter inter inter, intimately connected to addressing the larger social issues of our times. And it can talk about and articulate and clear ways from the point of view of its particular understanding of human nature or human life. This reciprocal thing that I've talked about today, and that its contribution to all this maybe is, among other things, is twofold. One is the strong introspective aspect of Buddhism. So the Buddhism has this very strong introspection, we really understand what's going on inside of ourselves. The intentionality the motivation for how we act. It can be very hard to understand the, the, the motivations, the deep drives in the human psyche. They get us to act in the way that we actually act. So meditation and introspection of Buddhism helps us to look deep deep into that, and clarifying purify it. And the second contribution is the, the experience of profound peace, liberation, well being happiness that comes when the heart has been liberated, freed from some of the unhealthy motivations that can be in there. And that experience of liberation, then that sense of that sense of well being, then becomes a guidepost guide, a guide, a guide for helping us understand make decisions about how we act, the choices and decisions we make, because without having some guidelines that you're going to use some other guidepost guidepost. Some other guidelines for making decisions. There might be other really good ones. But too many people in our society don't reflect about the guidelines are the are the reference points they use for making their decisions. And when we don't reflect on it, then two things happen to you, it becomes our own selfish concerns. Or we all too easily subconsciously adopt or take on what our society tells us should be our values and decisions. And so then becomes, for example, becomes about consumption, shopping, you know, or something else but and so, rather than Letting it letting it simmer unconsciously taking up the values of maybe some of the unhealthy values of our wider society or taking up your selfish concerns, awakening is considered to be a much more healthy and appropriate reference point for knowing how to make our decisions and guide our life. Okay, so I probably spend this week also reflecting about how inadequate my responses have been to those two questions last week. So

we'll see what happens next week. So if this was trying for you, I apologize. And so in so enjoy you Your Sunday. Thank you