

2010-12-19 The Role of Buddhist Teachers

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SPEAKERS

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I thought I would talk a little bit today about the whole notion of Buddhist, Buddhist teachers and hope that it's interesting for some of you. In the, in our particular tradition of Buddhism, the Theravada tradition here in the west or the insight meditation movement, we call the teachers, teachers. And in other traditions, they have other English they have other terms. They, it seems to Zen center their people, they're called priests or sometimes they're called teachers. Sometimes, like a senior Dharma teacher is someone who's quite senior there without without being an Abbot. But they also have the word priest there. You know, the Tibetan traditions they have Lamas and gurus are especially Lamas and rinpoches that are used in but but even in Asia. The word teachers seems to be the preferred often the preferred common word for teachers in Buddhism, spiritual leaders, the clergy or whatever. And the word Acharya became in Thai ajaan the way that words morph into Thai Thai pronunciations of the Sanskrit or Pali and Acharya means teacher, the word guru, apparently an Indian also just means teacher, like a professor might be your guru. And so it has got a broader meaning than just a spiritual teacher. And in Japan, we have Sensei, which is sometimes used for also for Zen teachers. There's called senseis. And the teacher and the teacher were teachers distinct from words like priest or minister. Priest, historically, at least, Catholicism was someone who mediated between you and God. And that was a really ritual role was very important for that, that mediation. And Protestantism was a kind of part was a protest against that mediation process. And so people would have their own direct relationship with God unmediated. And so, then they stopped using the word priest and Protestantism and now they have the US minister or pastor or something. And but even the word minister, I think, at least in my mind has connotations of, of taking care of the pastoral needs of a congregation, ministering to people. Whereas the teacher has the idea that there's something to impart something to teach. And, and with a teacher, when you when you're taught something, you leave with it. If you've been ministered, it might be comforting and very meaningful in many ways, but you don't know the left with a set of tools or a set of understandings. They're portable that you can take with you wherever you go. Whereas with a teacher, the idea is that you are, you know, it's quite portable, you take it with you. I like to say that we think that in Buddhism, the job of a teacher is to talk yourself out of a job. And the, you know, to become unnecessary, at least. And there's so many people who said, there's probably unlikely but at least with individuals, that the idea you become unnecessary for that individual because they've internalized or developed the teachings and practices for themselves. And they become in some sense, independent, and expression with a very powerful expression, I think in in Buddhism, is the idea of someone becoming independent and the Dharma. So you see or an experience the Dharma in such a personal direct way that you become independent in it. And there's a I don't know how far back ago this test goes but there's a so called test that if someone's been around practicing for a long time that they can be given. And that is, the test would be if the Buddha came back and said, you know, walked in DMC one day and said, you know, hey, you know, I've thought about this for a while, and I was wrong.

So what what would you What would you do? What would you do? What would your response be to that? And now, I shouldn't give you the answer. But the answer has to do with that doesn't matter what the Buddha says that you've understood something for yourself. That is so direct and so immediate, so verified for yourself, that you know that for yourself, but that's true. And so this idea that You know that you're supposed to become independent, the Dharma is kind of a goal in practice. So in our particular tradition, we've continued using the word teacher for people who are teaching, as opposed to other things. But certainly that's the role of teacher encompasses many other things. And so the things like being a pastor, being a minister, being a priest, kind of all there kind of on the, you know, on the edges of it. Sometimes Buddhist teachers do mediate between not God but between what's sacred and what's considered sacred, and they do rituals, for example. Sometimes they're they do minister or do pastoral counseling for people, and they come in to support them in times of crisis and do that kind of role or help run a cow help connect care take a community like a congregation, the way a minister would so you know, it's not a hard and fast these categories, but the emphasis is kind of being a teacher. What it also means is that there's a kind of a hierarchy involved. As there is anytime there's a teacher student relationship, teacher knows something the student doesn't know. And so with some student who wants to learn from a teacher approaches a teacher with a certain degree of respect, or a certain degree of willingness to learn, and it puts them a little bit on equal footing. The until the student has learned what the teacher has to teach, or until the student has surpassed the teacher, and then this teaching is teaching the teacher. And so that's true, you know, if you want to go learn a foreign language, you know, there's a kind of a hierarchy there in terms of learning that language if you want to learn how to use computer and, you know, you don't know much about it, and someone else knows a lot, then you know, at least for me, I would repair them. If temporarily I would, you know, treat them with great respect and appreciation and, and be in awe of their wonderful skill. But the, you know, there's a kind of hierarchy goes on. So there's a hierarchy. And that hierarchy is one that some people in Western culture do not feel comfortable with. And to some degree, I've also internalized that discomfort and, and prefer not to have so much of it. And my early years or teaching tried very much too many ways to try to lessen as much as I could. That sense of a hierarchy that was there. Some people, some people, very, very, very strong, egalitarian ethos, and refused to want to tap anybody as a teacher, because it implies that your relationship to his Buddhist teachers or spiritual teachers, because anti implies that someone knows more than you do. Someone has more access than you do to spirit spirituality, spiritual truth, spiritual something, practice. And that's that goes against the grain in some circles. I've seen it sometimes in Quaker circles, where I think quakerism is really beautiful and it's inspired by it quite a bit. But there I've seen there's a very strong culture, at least in a circles. I've seen very strong egalitarianism where no one there's no, you know, certain kind of Quakers and there's no ministers, there's no priests, it's all they're all. What do they call the congregation of? They're all priests. They're all ministers or something like what do they call it their anyway? Well, they're called friends also, but they're also everyone's not acknowledged. We have the laity or they have been abolished as a Quakers having abolished the clergy that abolished the laity meaning that everybody is clear. Equally so that's one way of seeing it. So I think that's beautiful. I'm inspired by that kind of idea. But, but still, it's part of that kind of cultural fabric that contributes to some people feeling uncomfortable with the hierarchy.

If anything here in the West, the tendency is to want to lessen the hierarchy, I think between student and teacher spiritual teachers. Sometimes in Asia, the it has a tendency to to heighten the hierarchy. And sometimes it becomes imbalanced in that direction too much, where the teacher is revered to no end, sometimes foolishly. The so where's the right balance of what the student teacher relationship is a very interesting one to consider. And that in order to consider that we need to consider a little bit. What does a teacher do? What's the role of a teacher in Buddhism, at least in Buddhist practice, And one of the one of the roles is to be a didactic teacher, who simply imparts certain knowledge that people should have, who want to practice or want to be interested in Buddhism. So, you know, it's the kind of

knowledge you can pick up from a book as well. But two conveys this body of knowledge, like the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the, you know, history of Buddhism, the life of the Buddha, and it's possible to impart that very matter of factly and even a very boring way. And, but to get the message across, this is the knowledge you should have. It also is an instructor who instructs in particular practices a person can do so in particular ways of behaving. So we can give instructions in meditation and we have a lot of people who are meditation instructors might not Buddhist teachers at all, but they teach the basic practices of mindfulness sprigs, for example. And they imparted without really, people don't really think of them so much as a spiritual teacher. But they have a particular body of, of practices that they understand well enough to instruct other people in those practices. We have a whole slew of people now here in America called Mindfulness Based mbsr Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, teachers, and, and some of them have had no retreat practice at all have not really done a lot. Some people have done very little meditation practice on their own. What they've done is they've gone and done a course, a week long course or something on in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, and they teach mindfulness without a lot of personal experience of it, but they're instructing or passing on to people how to do this. So that's part of a role of Buddhist teachers to be an instructor. In other part is They part of kind of like being an instructor plus, is as people engage in whatever practice they're doing. The teacher is a guide and a support and a mentor for the process people go through. And so there are challenges people encounter as they meditate or engage in practice. There are further steps to go as they go deeper. And, and so then you're a guide or a mentor for the different unfoldings that might happen. As meditation deepens there, you know, it's good to have to have access to someone who experiences and knows some of the deeper things that can go on meditation, so they can support and mentor you and help you through that. And one of the most common roles for a vipassanasana teacher like myself in terms of mentoring people, is to normalize people's experience. Occasionally people have unusual things. But, but mostly My job is to normalize okay? It's okay what's what's going on? And then encourage them to keep practicing. But you know, but no, no the territory well is important.

Then there is a whole other level of being a teacher, which is, in some ways to in for people who are new to initiate them, not to a practice, not to a teaching, but to a way of being a way of life. And so that's a bit more nebulous how that is imparted. But you get it, sometimes you get a sense that a teacher represents a certain capacity that you that you have, that person has a certain inner stability, certain inner maturity, or a certain way of being in the world that maybe is with compassion or kindness, or has a certain peace or is no longer cut. Up in the kind of things that when Buddhism is called worldly concerns, so worldly concerns would be things like greed, or lust or hate. So maybe it's unfortunate to call those worldly concerns. But that's kind of the way that that division is often described, rather, the person who has other values that the person really represents. And it can be a surprise for someone who grows up in a culture that his or his family or society, it's governed so much by worldly concerns, to realize that there's a whole other way of living, that you don't have to go gung ho for a career in order to get as much money as you possibly can. Maybe there's a whole other approach to life which is not based on money, which is very valuable, important. And, and so, the teacher is also initiator if someone opens the door for someone to another way of life, you know, their way of being. And this will often in touch people's hearts touched people's into the depth of who they are. That's different than teaching them how to calm down a little bit by stress reduction or which is valuable, but it's, you know, it just just augments their life or supports their life, initiated into new way of life means a new way of life. And, you know, it's kind of like sometimes it's very dramatic before and after. The what what people's life is oriented around the values, since a purpose has changed dramatically. So, for some people, some teachers will initiate certain individuals into whole different way of life. And again, here also, it's a matter of degree. Sometimes it's small degrees, that that shift happens. And sometimes it's revolutionary for the person. And it's like day and night before and after, how they live their life and what they do. The

who's a great story. I like this story. It's a good story for me to read, is it not to be careful as a teacher? There was a English Buddhist teacher, I think he wasn't in the 1960s, late or maybe late 50s, early 60s. And he was kind of apparently somewhat, you know, back then there wasn't a lot of Buddhism in England, he was English. And so, he had read a lot studied a lot was part partly partly, I was part of the Buddhist society in a Buddhist society or club in England Association. And he started teaching and he would go around and be lectured on Buddhism, it was quite apparently went pretty well for him and he gave these lectures and teach the English about Buddhism and then, in the middle of one of his public lectures, he said something like, he heard himself say something like, you know, if you really understand this, you practice it. Apparently he just stopped stunned. And the next day he took a plane to Thailand. He became a monk. So the idea you know, sometimes, you know, so yes, he initiated himself. It took a while but and so sometimes, you know the how a person is what they're pointing to or what they kind of represent something very meaningful for other people. And that's what kind of what's transmitted or what's kind of moves them or supports them or inspires them to do something similar for themselves.

But so, but as people see the possibility of developing themselves, maturing themselves living a new way of life moving in a new direction in life, it can be very hard to do that. And so the old pool of worldly values of greed, hate and delusion or fear, of clinging to self, all the things we hold on to, can be quite strong. And also as can be the tremendous power of self delusion, that it's possible not to, it's very easy to not see many, many things that about ourselves, that keep us stuck in certain ways, ways of thinking things we believe about ourselves things we believe about the world, about the nature of life, the way that our relationship to our emotions, our relationship to other people, there's a lot of different things that go on that we don't see that we're blind to. And then make it difficult for that growth, that change to happen to develop well. And so part of the function of teachers is to also to be you know, to work closely, one on one with people people engage very closely with their inner process with their psychology with their attachment with their potential for growth. And that makes for a very can make for very rich relationship between the student and the teacher. The varies a lot from student to teacher and from different times in a person's life. But it also depends a lot on how much the student brings to the teacher and offers to the teacher asked the teacher to be involved in their life. But in this regard, teachers can probe they can point out, they can say, look, you know, you have a problem here. There's, you know, you're looking at this you need to look more carefully. You know, I've had the amazing privilege. It's a privilege, I guess, or permission, which very few people and in ordinary life have permission to say this and get away with it without someone being angry or upset. And but I haven't rather than people angry or upset with me when I've said it. People have been really grateful. So now you're curious what is it takes this. So I've told people that they were conceited.

That caught someone's attention that they're conceded. And, and I get away with it. I think I think I think the context of my saying that is really clear that I'm trying to support them. I've accepted them, I'm supporting them by you know, I'm their champion. I'm not trying to trying to be mean to them or, you know, hit him over the head with some statement. I'm trying to say something is meant to be helpful to point something out, to help them move through it to move into something new. And that's a strong thing to say to someone and I have to say it very carefully at the right time, there Right Place, I just go down the street here, Liberty City, appointed people and so. So sometimes teachers can be very direct and very, very powerful and challenging things. Some teachers will do that, without hardly any permission at all. They're just and some teachers will wait a long time until it's really clear that a relationship of trust is built up. A context for it is clear that the student is kind of asking for that level of, of, you know, direct contact, because without that clear kind of permission or contract for that kind of way of the relationships being maybe it's not appropriate and so teachers pull backs off. I know some Buddhist teachers who don't prefer not to be involved that closely with students. They prefer to sit kind

of be kind of removed and apart and not get so intimately involved with the details of people's psychology in life. But then there's different preferences that people have in this regard Oh, so you know as the as teachers kind of point out challenges that that we have to look out and deal with. Some teachers can do this in a way that their real pain is in the ass. And I loved it. I don't know if it's I don't know if it's true but I've heard a number of times that in Judaism, some corners of Judaism they say that if a rabbi has if something like if half the congregation is on angry with the rabbi, the rabbi is not doing her bit her job. Is that something right? Because that's something here that you for something like that the Jews hear sounds right. And, you know, I haven't aspired for that around here. But you know, maybe that's my short, maybe that's my shortcoming. Maybe we'd be much more dynamic and valuable Buddha center if most of you are angry with me. But the problem is, is that you wouldn't come back. See, I could be an effective teacher who had you angry with me if you came back to really work it out, work through it, but since you probably just go we just go someplace else. And I can't, you know, I can't be getting you angry too often doesn't work the in Zen habit teaching that there, there are two styles of being a teacher just of any styles, but two interesting ones. One is called the granting way. And the other is the withholding way. And the granting way is when someone is just supportive and very accepting and, and, and points out how wonderful you are and you know, he or appear here you go, take this, receive this teaching do this, you know, just just grant supports, you know, kind, the withholding way. She says no, no, in all kinds of ways. No, you can't have it. You can't do that. Don't do that you shouldn't do that you're just you're conceited, you know, drop it. You know, and sometimes the withholding away can be very stern, very strict. And some, some Buddhist teachers, I think of it associate most with zen, but I've seen it in other places as well as well, where the teachers are quite stern. And they don't have a lot of students. Because you have to really want to study with them. And you have to kind of kind of work through that and see the value of someone who's stern and have the withholding. Why because you're up against yourself. And when I practiced in Burma, I had two teachers there, who Pandita and who lock it up. And they represented those two ways. Pandita was more than withholding way. He was very strict, very stern. He raised his eyebrow and you know, you'd cower. He was like this like Like a bulldog kind of guy and toughen strong and easily dismiss you from the interview, okay, it's enough now go.

And, and they were locked in, I was just so kind. He was like, you know, like, people would often refer to him as motherly or grandmotherly, because of His love and His kindness, you could do no wrong with him. Everything was accepted and wonderful, and you would just do great, you felt like you had this supportive person. And for me, I practice with both, and both had their role for me. And were very important. The fine detail really challenged me and challenged me to, to kind of go further and deeper and make certain kind of effort. Iacuna has helped me to relax and to soften and do and, and, and that combination of the strictness and the softness worked really well for me. So then there's a whole other thing that goes on that role for teachers. And that is that teachers are. And I've heard this expression from Christian clergy. They are screens for projection. And that's usually not blank screens but but screens for projection, meaning that people have all kinds of ideas about who that person is, that are nothing to do with the person but are projected up on the person. And so, you know, so if you think if a person thinks that a teacher is an embodiment of full, perfect enlightenment, and we projected full enlightenment to the person, then if the person farts, then that's interpreted as being a divine

And, and the person can do no wrong, you know, everything that's wrong and the person is somehow reinterpreted as being Oh, that must be crazy wisdom. That's a wonderful excuse for a lot of interesting behavior. Or the there might be projection that, you know, sometimes called transference for example, that your looked looked upon as a parental figure, that this is a person who's going to be my savior be might be the person is going to going to, you know, I can relate to the way I went to a father a mother. And so, if there was a you know, if whatever that relationship was, it might be problematic relationship,

it might have been a beneficial relationship, but then sometimes expectation that that relationship will continue with a spiritual teacher. And so that plays itself out. Sometimes its projections that power struggles. Whereas, you know, the feeling that people feel like I've had that with me here at IMC where many years ago were people someone was really in a power position with me struggling to felt very felt, you know, really want to take the power the authority way to himself from me. And it was really appropriate if someone walked off the streets. But, but I find it really strange suddenly find myself in this, you know, power struggle with someone. And I think that the here you know, certain projection of the, this girl has the power and it's not appropriate and I'm going to take it away, warning for myself. And then there's projections of being bad. This person is really terrible. And sometimes it swings quite dramatically the more idealistic the projection is for the teacher, the more the person fulfills our ideal image of a Savior, divine person or spiritual A person or a good person or one wonderfully wise person, and then a far too many times, and then it swings to the other side. And then this becomes the person becomes the worst person, terrible person and industry made a lot of anger that goes on and the projection swing can swing back and forth quite intensely. And, and it might have nothing to do with the teacher, the teacher maybe hasn't changed much.

But this this swing goes within the person in saying a lot today about Western religions, I hope it's being respectful enough. I have a lot of respect for these. When I've taught when I've been in kind of interfaith dialogue with especially Christians, one of the things stands out to me not being a Christian, not really growing up as a Christian not knowing much about Christianity kind of from the inside. What stands out to me is how strongly Christians are about being in relationship to God with something, it's a lot about our relationship to something that's really other for the most part, something divine, whatever God is something transcendent something. And that's relationship is really Paramount, you know. And, and so and it's. And so when they, when they ask when Christian, sometimes they've asked me about Buddhism, they're trying to understand it in terms of that relationship to the divine or transcended or something that's beyond self. And when they find out that Buddhism is, you know, you can you can make an argument or making a presentation of Buddhism that offers that little bit that there's some relationship to something which is sacred. But Buddhism has a lot to do with focusing on developing oneself. It's very, in certain sense individualistic, and in that we're looking at developing our own heart or mind over Overcoming the clinging the grasping the greed, hate and delusion in our own mind, so that our own mind is liberated and awake from these forces. And so from certain Christian ears hearing this, it seems like Buddhism is very selfish and self absorbed. And because somehow being self sacrificing is important in certain schools of Christianity, and then having this relationship we give or surrender ourselves or give ourselves over, or subservient relationship or a lot of different ways that appears in Christianity is a really important part of Christianity. So, is this more or less Okay, what I said kind of the people who have been trained in theology in seminaries is this, okay? Okay. Am I okay? Okay, we're asking that. The clergy and the monastics here, Christian monastics and clergy in the room. Over here says yes. Yeah. No, Gil and I are friends and I'm working on translating his book for him. But the Spanish but I'm trained in theology. But I think the difference is so much isn't so much that Christians would see Buddhists as being selfish in that, in that point more that Christians would say Buddhists aren't seeing that you probably can't overcome certain things on your own. It's kind of the difference that you made helped overcome certain things great, but the effort to look inside is maybe useful, but it's not enough. Great. So thank you. I think that's a great thing to think to have said now in this talk about teachers, because part of the function of teachers is to help us because of that limitation that most people have. It's very hard for an individual to see themselves really accurately and clearly. And so, sometimes teachers have this important role. However, whatever the point, that one of the point I was trying to say is that sometimes that relationship to a teacher so so, to some degree in the West, it tends to be very relational focused in certain certain kind of way. It's kind of interesting, it's very verse has a very strong emphasis on relationship and a strong emphasis on being an individual. And

those two things live in tension with themselves. But when some when some people want to relate to a Buddhist teacher, they're looking some way to, to fulfill or complete some relationship that need that they have. Whether it's a psychological need coming from family, or whatever, personal development or whether it's a religious need coming from a religious idea that religion is about fulfilling a relationship, you're looking to fulfill a completed relationship. And, and, and some Buddhist teachers, some Buddhist traditions, especially like Tibetan Buddhism, I think of certain Zen traditions, their relationship with the teacher is very important part of the whole process. In Theravada, teaching, the relationship with the teacher is not as important. It's not so central. In fact, for the Tibetan Buddhism, they sometimes say there are four refuges. There's three refuges that we have Buddha Dharma Sangha. And sometimes in Tibetan Buddhism, they say that the fourth refuge is the guru, meaning your teacher in Theravada Buddhism, if they mentioned, mentioned, a fourth refuge is not the guru, but rather it's yourself to do a kind of very different kind of approach. So whereas the relationship can be important in Theravada, Buddhism and segmentation it doesn't, it doesn't held up institutionally or, or theologically kind of as being so important.

But even so, students come to a teacher looking to be in a relationship in many different kinds of ways. And part of the role of the teacher is to sometimes participate in that, but sometimes not, and let the students struggle and bounce off that and realize that they're looking for things that shouldn't be, you know, looking for a parent parental role in the teacher, they're looking for all kinds of things in the teacher that, you know, and the teacher, you know, maybe doesn't react to it. It doesn't do it. And so then they bounces back and the teacher becomes a mirror. And the very frustrations that you have with the teacher, or maybe the kind of very things we need to wait, we need to learn because we realized that the teacher is not going to give me that. So I need to look at what it what it is I'm looking for and trying to get. When I when I was a new students and students, one of the reasons I went to live at the San Francisco Zen Center was that the senior teachers there who I would I spend time with them. I would play these social games, I would talk and act in ways to try to get an effect from them, have them see me a certain way. And generally the way I talked and behaved worked with my friends to get a certain effect, but with them, it didn't work. You know, they were just they were just kind of a little bit I would say something and it was met with kind of silence or non participation or something and the result of that was that I saw myself more Clearly, and I thought this is great. I want to be around these people, so that I can see myself and not act like there's not behaved this way, because it doesn't feel good to behave this way. So these are some of the functions that a Buddhist teacher has. And so if someone who's a student, somebody in training has a range of different needs or desires or wishes and in regard to the practice, that so that when they come to spend time whether teachers learn from a teacher, what they bring with them is their particular purpose of practice whether trying to do, they bring their own psychology and background, they bring their own hang ups and attachments and problems. They bring a bring to some degree, their own cultural background ideas of what it means to be a student when it means to be a teacher, and all those things come into the mix. Together with the personality of the future together with the interests of the teacher, together with the capacities of the teacher, the understanding of a teacher. And so there's many, many factors that come into play, when two people meet as a Buddha as a teacher and a student. And so So, who is a teacher? And who is the student? What is the teacher and what is a student? I like to tell people, that it's the student, it's a student that makes the teacher that there is no teacher before there's a student, like I'm just, you know, Gil kind of bumbling around Redwood City. You know, concerned about getting an oil change in my car and whatever it needs to happen until someone you know, bumps into me and says, you know, says something that, you know, relate to To me as a teacher, and I respond then, but I don't go around thinking of myself as a teacher, until you know, there's occasion for it. So a student makes the teacher so how does a student come? What does the student come with? Where do they bring? And, and so what I find is that the student teach with the nature of who I am as a teacher is important to find by who

comes to me and what their needs and situation is. And so my role as a teacher is constantly morphing and changing. And, and so in a sense, there are there's a, they're each each student and teacher creates a difference. student and teacher creates a different relationship. There is no set relationship, there has to be. There's many different relationships that there can be. And in fact, not only is a different relationship for every student and teacher, there is probably a different relationship every time the student teacher meets. There's a different kind of way the relationship that goes on It also means that it's very difficult to compare, you know, or dangerous to compare different student teacher stories with your own. Because there are different needs. I've had students who I felt have gone really far and really deeply in practice, who've kind of been my students in a sense, but I've had very little to do with them personally, but it's really clear they've taken the teaching their practice and you know, offered some support.

And but there's not much you know, personal contact going on. And other times where I feel there's tremendous amount of personal contact and, and closeness going on and is one right and whatnot, right? It just different different chemistry, different situations, different things that come into play, that that go on. So now it's 10:45

To the last thing I'll say maybe because of the time we tend to use the word student. In our tradition, sometimes we use the word practitioner. And we tend not to use the word disciple. And but it might be interesting to look a little bit at the word disciple. And what does that imply that's different than student different than than practitioner? And what does that say? What is it about it? What does that suggest or imply in terms of a relationship between the student and teacher? So I hope this was interesting. And, and to kind of explain a little bit how it works in our kind of scene. I'm sure there's lots of questions and I'm sure I could go on and on. Lots more to say. But it's time to stop. So hopefully it's been adequate enough.