

# 2011-06-06 The Context of Mindfulness

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mindfulness, purpose, attention, context, suitable, people, domain, question, pigeon, understand, hawk, mindful, real, place, processes, mindfulness practice, buddhism, deliberately, realize, attentive

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So my announcement is that since I spoke here last Monday, the next day Tuesday is when the president of our center IMC. So Kim Allen is our president. She went to a title company and signed for the property in Scotts Valley that we bought. So we can have our own Retreat Center. Wednesday, we got the keys, and Ted and Barb wall moved in as temporary caretaker. So place and Thursday, there was about 14 of us who showed up at the property. Kind of it for the first time since we owned it. And I showed up relatively early with many people there yet. And I was so happy so delighted. I thought this is a better place than we did. I thought that was nice. That was I was kind of surprised by that. But that was a good place otherwise we wouldn't have pursued it but that was really in terms of a Good place to meditate a good place for a retreat. As it sounds really good place still quiet Beautiful, beautiful trees and ambience around it and it was made me think it was really happy thing to realize what we done and now we owned it. And I have a key even and, and then we had number of things to take care of there for the day. But then Kim, Kim MacLaughlin, who helped us find the place. She and her daughter in law came and made this beautiful lunch for us. And the 14 of us who were there in the dining room had all the tables lined up in a big bouquet and whatever big kind of thing. And we sat and had this wonderful our first meal at the place that was kind of special. So anyways, those of you who've been following this, I'm going to share that with you kind of a nice news.

This evening, I'd like to talk a little bit about the context. For a mindfulness practice. I have known people who have insisted on like, almost like their mantra. Context is everything. And so it's one thing to practice mindfulness on a retreat. It's one thing to practice mindfulness on a path of liberation. It's another thing to practice mindfulness as a thief or an assassin. You know, you probably need a lot of mindfulness to pursue those particular career options. But it you know, it has a very different context for what you're doing and the purpose of it then on retreat or the path of liberation or some other situation. The, in the teachings of the Buddha, when he talks about mindfulness practice, not just mindfulness itself a mindfulness practice. He defined it or described, it's oftentimes as three different qualities or three different things that come together. One of them is, in fact, mindfulness itself, recall the capacity to be mindful to be attentive. The second is to be ardent in the mindfulness. So, you know, mindful is not meant for the lazy. You know, you can't just sit, just wait, you know, patiently waiting for mindfulness to come along. There has to be some application of mindfulness, some willful kind of attention to being attentive. And so the Buddha, in his context, felt it was appropriate to be Arden to do it with some great enthusiasm. And the third is what's called clear comprehension. So these three aspects together, make up mindfulness practice so mindfulness ardency and clear comprehension. And comprehension has a lot to do with the context in which you're doing the practice, that you understand the context in which you're doing it. When I came back from, I spent eight months on a silent meditation retreat in Burma. And in that context, we were taught to do everything slowly, to be really mindful neutrally, savoring each moment and mindful to each little gesture. So picking up a glass of water, I wouldn't just go and kind of

pick it up and just bring it to my my lips while I'm talking and just kind of wave it around. I would be deliberate. And I would, if I was going to pick up the glass of water I would deliberately be aware that's my intention. And I'd be aware that what it felt like to move my hand stretched my hand out, and I just kind of slowly to really feel was there really be present for it. Then if I felt the glass, I felt that I would feel the coolness of the glass and the smoothness of the round surface. And then I would feel the intention to grasp the glass and, and then I would grasp it, and then I would slowly bring it up. And then as I brought it up, I would be there and just like in feel the first contact with my lips. And then I'd be aware of the intention to lift the glass up into my, tip the water into my, and then you know, goes on and on. So it takes a while to do all this, right. So you don't just do it casually drink of water, but you have to really present for it. And in that context of a kind of long silent meditation retreat was great. It was really conducive to greater mindfulness. It was conducive to greater concentration, and preserve this very beautiful and helpful stillness in the mind that allowed for this deepening and deepening of the meditation that could happen there. So that was great in that context. After I came back from Burma, and fact San Francisco, if Few days later, I went down Market Street to go to the bank of america to do some, you know, on an open bank account or do something. And I was walking in for off Market Street, to open the door to that Bank of America. And it was lifting my arm. stretchy, stretching it touching. And as I started to pull the door open, the slow, mindful way, I realized that this is not the context for this. I'm in the wrong place for this kind of mindfulness, not what to be done here. And some of you who have been on retreat, maybe have sometimes wondered about the lack of understanding the context of some of the other retreatants when there's a lot there's a bunch of you're trying to get through a door and one person is slow.

Or sometimes if you know at the meal, and you know, you're at it's a long line of people waiting to serve themselves and one person is taking my newt You know, slow, careful attention to picking up each salad, each lettuce leaf, putting on their plate and the next one, you know, they're having a good time. You'd be happy for them. But it's the wrong context. We have all these people lined up waiting, standing there. So context is, you know, important. So that this clear comprehension has a lot to do with understand the context in which we're doing something. That's our context of being mindful. So the first there's four aspects of clear comprehension, four things to clearly comprehend, when we're practicing mindfulness. And these four apply to mindfulness in any situation at all. Anytime you're paying attention, when you're going to deliberately bring your attention to bear to be, be more attentive to what's going on. Live deliberately, the beautiful thing and so the first thing is to have clear understanding of the purpose, your purpose. So what's the purpose of the mindfulness? What's the purpose of what you're doing now? And some people have only a vague sense of what their purpose is, both in the moment, but also in the context of their wider life, you know, what's the purpose of their life? Sometimes people will be dismissive when you ask what's the purpose of life. But I think it's a profound thing for the hard task to come out of person was the purpose it was the meaning. When I was 16, I think 16, 15 or 16. I lived in a boarding school and now high up in the mountains. And it was kind of an awesome mountain kind of environment, even though was a very strict boarding school. I didn't realize that until I went there that it was the it was reformed school. I wasn't sent that to be reformed as far as I know, but I ended up there. And so I was there, the sporting school and beautiful place. And I was walking down the road with an older friend who was older who's 17. And I was just in awe of this beautiful mountain escape mountain environment and great skies. And I said to him kind of spontaneously said, you know, what does all this mean here? And he looked at me and said, Don't be silly. And I could feel something in my heart close. It took years for that to open up to be willing to open that up again that said, so or wondering what this What's about here. So to have the question of what you know, what's the what's your purpose? some, you know, it's hard one to have. Sometimes it's a little painful even that's a question when you're grinding away at some job that doesn't seem to have a purpose. And there's doesn't seem to be any possibility of anything else going on. It's, you know, it's not easy to even find

work sometimes and let alone switch jobs or directions have a life. But what's the purpose of your life? Life. And one of the answers to that is it doesn't have to be about what you do. It might be about how you do it, how you live your life. And I think that's, you know, in Buddhism that's really the emphasis is the what is important but the How is you know, the primary thing we're focusing on how are you? Are you doing it with attention with care? Are you doing it with kindness? Are you doing it with compassion? Are you doing it in order to develop yourself and to help others at the same time? The how you do something? And so what's what's the purpose you have? Then? What's the purpose of being mindful? Are you being mindful in order to be a better thief? Are you being mindful so that no one can catch you at work while you spend your hours looking at computer and websites they shouldn't be looking at. And really attentive, you know, the slightest footstep down the hallway, you know, your alertness, all your concentration, the years of mindfulness and concentration. You know, folks Then not getting caught. Is that what is that what you're doing when you're using your attention for attention is something is very precious. It's one of the most valuable resources we have. And what you apply your attention to, in a sense comes back and feeds

the purpose in which you're doing it. So if your purpose is to be secretive or to hide or to lie or to steal or do something, the attention you can almost think of the attention you put into that as being like food that supports and strengthens that particular purpose that you're doing or that tendency inside. If the purpose you have for the your attention goes into being kind, being less attached, being less afraid, being less greedy or hateful, for your attention goes into a trap trying to compassionately understand and be present for someone else. Then That attention is like food that feeds those tendencies. And the question is, what do you want to feed, your attention is going to feed something because unless you're kind of like in a coma or something, maybe asleep, you're always paying attention. And so Buddhism teaches Actually, it's you have, it's a very high consequence, for where your attention goes. And if you don't take some responsibility for it, and just let you take the easy way, the easy way, just kind of continue with something that's maybe unwholesome unskillful because it's easy. It might be easy and pleasant in the moment, but you're actually reinforcing and feeding tendencies which are not helpful. So the issue of purpose what what why why are you doing what you're doing is a great question. Why are you doing what you're doing? Why are you doing what you're doing in a big scale in your life and the small scale, even such small scale as Why are you going to say what you're about to say. As some of you know, I like to point out that if you if you don't want to meditate, but you want to kind of go as deep into your mind deep into understand yourself and how you operate, then only go with through your daily life, questioning very carefully, why you're going to say what you say before you say it. And you'll find out all kinds of interesting things about yourself. I'm pretty sure of it. And, and it's probably not completely flattering, all of it. For some of you and so what why why we're doing what we're doing is a very interesting question. Because there's often a why operating kind of implicitly or even unconsciously, subconsciously, we're operating on a why. And many times we're not even conscious of it, to stop and ask, you know, why am I doing this? What's going on? And then and then to look at my at your life and say, you know, can I? What What is the purpose I would like to have? And what would be the purpose you have if you were courageous? Whatever the purpose if you had it if you weren't afraid, the purpose you'd have for your life if you felt that you weren't in limitations to what, to your capacity to do it. What happened? What would the purpose of your life be? If you felt if you didn't feel limited by feelings of inadequacy or unworthiness or incompetent inability, many people limit themselves and don't think boldly enough, or in Buddhist terms, normally enough, because Buddhism is a kind of the idea of becoming a noble wonder, to experience the noble liberation of the Buddha's so for the context of what the Buddha was teaching about mindfulness practice purpose of mindfulness is two things. Though sometimes he says it three ways. It's to benefit you with the highest benefit. It's a benefit oneself with the highest benefit, to benefit others. And the third thing is to benefit both self and others. And so the question is what is most beneficial is a really important one in Buddhism. And what is most beneficial to

you? What brings you the most happiness? How do you know what benefit is? What is beneficial? A bigger bank account? more clothes, more status, more praise from your friends. What is it that's most beneficial? What is it that's, you know, really beneficial. And for Buddhism, what's most beneficial is found in your own heart and your heart, for heart to be settled on itself for heart to be at peace in itself for her to dwell peacefully settling itself, and not be fragmented not to be spinning out not to be contracted, not to be numbed. But the heart to feel environmentally but beautifully at peace. Without any sense of conflict, inner conflict is one of the most beautiful and beneficial things you can do. So for the Buddha, the context of

mindfulness practice, was moving in that direction, trying to understand how to do that, to be mindful and attentive for that purpose. So that's the first these these things, the context for mindfulness practice is a sense of purpose. And so it's well worth reflecting on what the purpose is you have for the second context, or this this Call the CLEAR comprehension is the suitability. Understanding a suitability of what you're doing the suitability of purpose, so is what you're trying to do, suitable given the context of the situation. So, it might be that you know that in some situations in life, it's a suitable thing to do to focus on your own breathing and close your eyes and let go of any kind of external attention to the external world. And just keep coming back to your breath settle. And that's appropriate some contexts. If you go, you know, to a wedding party, or a funeral, or many places in life, it was not it's not suitable for you to close your eyes and start getting close to in the breath. It's been 40 minutes while they're doing the wedding. You know what happened and we open your eyes and what happened and they married. You know, it's not suited and that kind of situation is not the purpose of that's not suited. So is the practice is suitable. The practice you're doing is the right time and place for it. I've tried to meditate when my kids are really small. I would try to meditate early in the morning. Sometimes you can try to get up early. And lo and behold, those kids got up early. You know, two or you know, two year old gets out of bed, you know, a three year old, you know, and, and, and, you know, if I try to keep meditating, generally it didn't work. Sometimes I had this brilliant idea that I would meditate with them and put them on my lap little kid, I had this cold I would have this big blanket I put over me like wrapped them my blanket and said, this would be nice, and they'd sit there they go, this must be a really good conditioning for kids, you know, formative experience to be in their dad's lap and wrapped up is all cozy and you know, this is not being a great dad. You know, and how long would it last? Yeah. You know, and then so I had to you know, said it wasn't suitable was wasn't the right time and place to do my meditation given that was that was going on. But then there's also the suitability of what practices are you going to do? There's a whole range of how you can practice mindfulness, even your meditation. And you have the right practice for yourself and for the time and place that you're in. So, for example, there are some people, for example, you know, it said that there are four universal, three, universal meditations that are kind of suited, suitable on all times. Mindfulness on breath, mindfulness of loving kindness and mindfulness of depth. good all the time. That's what they say in the text. But I don't know if I believe that because I've met people for whom breath meditation doesn't work. The first person that I worked with as a teacher around this, it took me a little while in the retreat to understand because I kept kind of trying to help him to be with his breath, stay with his breath, and slowly in the course of it really came out that now I forget what it was it was either almost drowned or someone tried to choke him when he was a little kid. And that was a sense from a traumatic experience that that was still somehow lodged in his throat. So for that particular retreat, we weren't going to go much further, by having him focusing on his breath, it wasn't suitable. So there's a wonderful practice that's equally valid and significant is breath meditation, which is listening meditation, opening the mind and choiceless awareness of sound around and that worked for him great and that was able to kind of settle him in a place that kind of in a sense kind of bypass that the tension he had in his throat. And so then he was able to kind of relax in deeper way and that helped actually relax what was going on in his throat



and made breathing a lot easier. So, you know, so there has to be some sense of, you know, not be blind or not be kind of, you know, committed to one way one way only, but to realize there is many different ways of practicing, and what suited what's what's suitable in this time in place. So when I sit and meditate, one of the things I will periodically check in about this, where should my attention go now? What's a suitable place that you must use to play My attention to go when I meditate? Is it still with my breathing? Or is there some emotions going on through feelings and needs some attention. And so I'll do mindfulness of emotion. Or perhaps I'm aware of what's going on, I realized what's needed the most is to bring my attention down into my body and really do mindfulness of the body to find out how to find something. Notice what's happening in the body where the contraction is, or where the tension is, where the what's energized or activated and bring your attention there. Sometimes what's suited suitable appropriate is to go look at what's going on cognitively, to look at my what I'm telling myself the stories I'm telling myself to believe something operating. And so there's some fluidity that different times different things I bring my mindfulness to. They're all equally valid for cultivating mindfulness, but at different times, different ones are highlighted and need my attention. So to ask this question, what is a suitable place? suitable thing to pay attention to right now is a very, you know, very relevant question. Socially and The world I've sometimes I remember, this was an interesting story, I thought when I was in the Zen monastery in Japan. I went into the kitchen when he evening I think, and I was talking to the one of the cooks, and the cooks was busy chopping some vegetables. And even at the chopping table a nice asked the question, and so he put down his knife, you know, like over, put it down, said stood up straight and looked at me and answered my question. Very nice. So then he picked up his knives are chopping in so I asked him another question. And he put down his knife and answered me and, and then he started chopping again. So I asked another question. He put down his knife. And then he said to me, You know, when I'm practicing here, the way I practice here in the Zen monastery, I really try to just do one thing at a time. I mean, they're gonna be chopping the vegetables, I'm gonna be talking to you. But if I talk to you, I can't do my work. He was very kind about it very Matter of fact very kind. And I realized that I was interrupting him. And I had noticed the effect I had. I was slowly pick up the cues. So sometimes mindfulness is not to be mindful of your questions, your concerns, but rather be mindful of what's happening, the context around you, the people around you. Sometimes we don't pay attention to ourselves, maybe it's important to actually give more attention to what's happening to the people around us understand them what's happening, and take that in so we can know better, how to be appropriate and what's needed in any situation. So the question of what is suitable now it's a great one, and that's a little bit of a corrective or not corrective, perhaps, but as a as a support to understand. The first one which is clear comprehension of purpose is the purpose you have a particular purpose. Is it a purpose? present for who you are for the situation. And then if not, is there some other way of doing it? There's no other no other approach. The third context is are clear form of clear comprehension things to be clearly be aware of, is the appropriate domain. This is a kind of strange topic, the domain. And perhaps the one way to get to what the Buddha meant by domain is to tell a story that he told kind of a fable about a something like a pigeon that was caught by a crow or something or Hawk, maybe Hawk was caught by a hawk and the hawk was going to eat the poor pigeon. delicious lunch. So the pigeon was out and about somewhere in a meadow or something, and the hawk came down and grabbed it. And so Then the pigeon looked up at the Hawk and said, Well you only caught me because I had left my domain my proper domain you know my usual place right well in that place where usually live and reside in and if I've been back in my usual domain, you wouldn't have caught me. And the hawk being maybe a little bit too overconfident said Oh, sure, I could catch you anywhere. So the hawk put put the pigeon down. And the pitch went back into the kind of, I guess it was kind of a killed field was all these clods

clods of dirt clods of the motor dirt and the hawk went up in the air and as the hawk you know, came gliding down to grab that you know, sliding down his hawks to to grab that pigeon from the pigeon

ducked behind one of those big clots and the hawk crashed right in and died. So this story is told that these tables told you they did that if you leave your proper domain, you're in trouble. You could get in trouble. There's danger there. And you just stay in your domain, stay in your realm in your place. And it doesn't mean stay in your home and lock the doors. The proper domain for the Buddha is what's what he called the four foundations of mindfulness. To stay present for your bodily experience. Stay up, stay with your breath, stay with your body experience, be aware of what's going on, be embodied as you go through the world. Be aware of your feelings as you go through the world. Be aware of the state of your mind, the quality of your mind. Because if your mind if you're not aware of your state of your mind, you might act on that state in ways that are harmful for you. So for example, if you're angry, be aware of that so you can be mindful, attentive, you don't act on your anger. I have a couple of times in the last period. I had the occasion to tell someone You know, I'm stopped, we'll have the hang out together, we'll do something, whatever. But you should realize that I'm kind of grumpy or grouchy. They're just letting you know. And I thought was partly was telling myself that so I can be more cognizant of what I was doing and more careful as I went through so I wouldn't kind of snarl or something. So to know what your state of mind is, is very helpful. And the last of these four is called dhammas. To be aware of some of the patterning, some of the sort of inner process is going on inside of us, while we're living our lives, the mental processes going on. So here, mindfulness, the right domain, is to always have some presence in your own psychophysical processing to know what's going on. And if you can be here, this suggestion is if you're if you're present Enough, enough with what's going on here, then you can be safe. The hawks not going to get And then you can go if you have that kind of presence, you can go anywhere, and you bring your domain with you. So, here this, the clear comprehension about the domain means to know what where your work, you need to pay attention to what you need to track as you go about. Now I've known people who have not taken responsibility for their behavior. There's been maybe some major interpersonal conflict, anger and difficulty. And because and they somehow specialize at blaming other people. They never turn around and look at themselves. And it's very difficult to engage in process of mediation or conversation or discussion with someone who's just always points to figure it out elsewhere and doesn't look here. I've told a story recently of many years ago of ups delivery man brought this kids play structure had an order was a gift summon distant relevant census relevant relative centers and I was sick little bit and it was raining but outdoor play space structure and sandbox built in 10 minute you can build in 10 minutes. So he said so I thought Oh great. So I start trying to put this plastic thing big thing together and I don't know after about 3045 minutes or so I finally got it together and you know, I was sick to begin with. And so I felt so much worse once I finished and it was before I felt drained. What have I done? So I did the obvious thing, right? I blame the UPS man. Why did he bring you knows today and luckily as soon as I saw that thought go through my mind. I laughed I saw how ridiculous it was. So but the point being that if you keep your attention for focused on who you blame. You're missing, paying attention to where it's really useful to pay attention to the place where you can help the situation. It isn't that you're supposed to ignore the world around you. But the right domain for someone practicing mindfulness, right domain for someone following a path to liberation, the right domain for someone who wants to live in the world with compassion is to be connected to oneself well enough that you can track

what's going on what goes on in your body track what goes on your feelings, track what goes on in your mind, and track some of the internal processes going on. So there's a clear comprehension of purpose, clear comprehension of suitability, with suitable, clear comprehension of domain. The last is clear comprehension of what's real. Now, that's interesting. How do you know what's real? And that's a great philosophical quandary. Right? You can you can take philosophy classes, and they'll discuss what's real And I don't have a good answer for what's real. But what Buddhism teaches is that what life is what our experience of life is, is not a thing, but processes. And so when we're trying to understand what's real in Buddhism, we're not trying to stand with, like a ton of physics, we're trying to understand, you know, the

true nature of reality. But rather, we're trying to understand the nature of the true nature of the processes with which we experience reality with which we relate to reality. And so that is what that is what's real enough? Because the purpose of Buddhism is to know just enough about what's real, to help you become free of suffering. It's not that because it's not like you're just a scientist, it's really supposed to understand what's really real. We're only only need to know enough to understand how to be free and for that purpose We have to understand that our psychophysical way of experiencing ourselves and the world around us, is a series of processes that come together that arise and pass that there's no that that how we experience ourselves, how we experience the world. That way of experiencing it is some Is it is it is a series of processes that are conditioned, fabricated, constructed, that arise, spend it there because conditions come together to make them happen. And then those conditions aren't there, they pass away. If we can really see this in a careful way, then we see that what's real is that we cannot attribute permanent abiding self to any of those, that that process and so is it isn't we say we don't isn't that we say that there's really is no self Buddha never said that. What he said we see what we see is real is that is we can't find a self in those things. And when the full range of what we experience is seen as being impermanent, and not a no self is found in it, that allows the mind or the heart If you prefer to do something remarkable. And that allows the heart to open up and let go, of what it's clear holding on to. Because deep in this kind of subconscious heart in mind, most people are always holding on to something. And it's very hard to kind of have the stillness and the focus and the concentration, to touch this deeper, subconscious place. We're clinging off into self. And so that part of the function of seeing what's real in Buddhism is to see the impermanent nature of the public processes and to see the nuts, selfness of these processes so that the heart can finally relax. And that's what the heart most most wants to do anyway, the heart wants to relax. It's a lot of work to keep holding and being closed and tight and then frayed. And so, to find somehow let the heart open, relax, settle and feel deeply at home in itself. So deeply at home at remarkably enough and beautifully enough, the heart disappears when you think of that, So context so as we do, it can seem like a lot of things to keep in mind. It can seem like oh, no, now this Buddhism sounds very intellectual and analytical. It can before I've understood mindfulness has been non Elad and on analytical just kind of being present with things as they are. But there is no such things. As naive, simple presenter things as they are, will always have some kind of context that the mind, life brings to the situation. And it's a natural thing to take into account. What is your purpose? Why you're doing what you're doing? Is it suitable, what's suitable given a situation you're in.

And maybe it's not natural to be connected to the proper domain, maybe that's the Buddha's contribution to all this is stay connected to yourself, always stay connected, even when you're talking to other people and helping other people to have some connection here. And then, and then know what's real. So that you're not sidetracked by what is not real. And many people pursue what is not real, because they think that's where their happiness is going to be. And they're part of the function of mindfulness. Just to help us make that slowly, be able to tease apart or separate out what is real and what is not. And because they're real will support us. They're not real well. So that is.

So then the last thing I'll say,

one of the things I learned, or was trained in when I did my Zen training before I did Vipassana practice was the value of doing things deliberately. So you know, in zen, you wouldn't be so slow and picking up the glass and drinking it like you would on a Vipassana retreat. But you would do it deliberately and you'd give yourself completely over to drinking that cup of glass, that glass. In fact, in zen, if you want to give yourself completely over drinking a glass of water, you wouldn't even pick it up with one hand, you pick it up with both hands. So you're completely there for your work completely. They're present for it, bringing, you bring the two hands and drink. There's a deliberateness to it. And, and so to bring an

element of deliberate deliberateness to what you do in your life to deliberate to be deliberate about the purpose to be deliberate about what you're doing right now, not casual and kind of not kind of like easygoing, whatever is fine. But to actually enter it, deliberately is part of Zen training. And what happened you might think, well, deliberate, sounds willful, it sounds like a lot of self involved. But what happens when you do things deliberately, fully? The self consciousness disappears. And, and it's becomes you know, in zen, they talked about just becoming one with that activity, because you're so fooling deliberately there. And there's a way a beautiful way in which the self can disappear. self consciousness disappears when you give yourself deliberately to one task. When you're multitasking, it's hard to do that. Computer phone. I've tried a few times to look at immediate mail. I'm talking on the phone and I'm very shocked and open embarrassed. That doesn't work. What do you say? For me, it doesn't. But I tried to emphasize some of some of you might have tried to. Yeah. And so this idea of clear, you know, this for context for clear comprehensions is in the, in the Buddhist teachings is one way to help us live a deliberate life and as we live more deliberately, hopefully, all the things that bring you stress will fall away. Okay. So, thank you very much.