

2011-07-24 Mindfulness And The Path

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So Can everyone hear me adequately?

So, this morning I'd like to talk about mindfulness as part of a path, path of practice. And, you know, mindfulness is often seen as a really beautiful capacity that we all have beautiful quality of mind. And what are the interesting questions is, by the way, we know what to say it's a question but one of the interesting perspectives on mindfulness, it's kind of like pure water, which it's beautiful to drink pure water. And then you go up to you know, you can't do it so easily anymore. In California, we've got two beautiful pristine mountain stream and it certainly tastes good. He feels fresh and pure and nice. And so mindfulness has this the simplicity of mindfulness and the clarity of it can feel quite pure and quite beautiful like water. And then the question is what like water? Can mindfulness take the shape of any container it goes into? Or is mindfulness itself a particular container, particular shape? Is mindfulness something that you apply into many areas of your life? Or is mindfulness something which is an area of life is an activity in and of itself, that shapes and moves and affects our life in some way? And perhaps it's both, but we see that mindfulness can be both the word you know applied in many areas of life, independent of Buddhism, and then it also is practice within Buddhism. So from the point of view of, you know, my trust being this Neutral tool, this neutral capacity that we have beautiful water. It depends, you know what kind of container you pour it into, or you practice it within. And so if you practice it within Buddhism, you get a different, you know, it's a particular container for it. And the container one of the ways of understanding the container that Buddhism has from mindfulness is mindfulness is practiced along a path. And the word path or Marga, maga and Pali it's a very important term for different reasons. But one reason is that it's one of the closest approximations we have in Pāli or Sanskrit to, or the best approximations to the English word religion. I don't know I don't know, may or may be said differently, that classically in Buddhist Asian languages, they don't have a word for religion. And so maybe Buddhism, not even a religion, because they don't have a word for it. And they had to kind of invent words when they weren't to translate English into Japanese or into different languages in Asia because they had no clear match. But the how Buddhism refers to itself often is not as a religion in those languages, they can't they don't have a word for that. But they have, but they refer to themselves as a mug guy as a path. And so when you involve in Buddhism, you're involved in a path. And having a path, it can be very meaningful in people's lives, and gives people meaning, or as a place that infuses there are and people infuse the path with the meaning they have for life. Everyone I think has some sense of what it means to be a human being for themselves. Maybe it's a very personal sense. Or maybe it's a more global sense of what it means to be human. What it means to be in the world what what it is to be involved with the world, how the world affects us, how we affect the world, our place in the world. Whether we think about these ideas or not, I think many people operate with some underlying assumptions, ideas about what their places and who they are and how they are and their efficacy and what the life is about for them. And so for Buddhists, a lot of those questions are answered

or can be answered through the idea of a path and maga. The sense of a path gives meaning to life gives an orientation and infuses gives us a sense of who we are, what our place, what kind of support and place we have within the wider world. And for some, it's extremely meaningful to have this sense of a path in a world that otherwise seems quite chaotic and, and maybe seems to have very little meaning for them. But then you find within Buddhism, that there are different ideas of a path of different notions of paths. And so among all the different notions of path Which do you follow? Which one is the right idea, the path and but I think

different people have come to Buddhism already with particular mindsets particular worldviews about the world, what the world is, and what it means to be human being. And so they gravitate to different ways in which the Buddhist path is presented. So for example, when I when I want to talk about today's three different views of the Buddhist path. So one one view of the path is that it's a gradual path is a developed developmental path. It's a path that you go from x to y is its path that takes you someplace that has a goal and a purpose. The other kind of major idea that a dolphin is taught about the path is it's not so much about getting somewhere, but it's mostly by getting away from somewhere. It's mostly about letting go And emptying oneself or letting go letting go letting go. And then a third idea is that there is no path at all. So this is the path even though there's a path, so important in Buddhism, so there's the no path path. And some people will walk in that path in very meaningful way. And, and with that comes the idea of how the path supports you. Or what what what kind of support you get. So people who feel like it's all up to themselves, that they have to make all the effort tend to like the gradual path or the letting go path. I'm the one who's going to do this. People who are especially people who have learned the development that people letting go, it's often about you letting go. But it's often comes with the idea that letting go is beneficial because what you let go into will support you that somehow the world is benign or supportive or good and if you just let go, then If you let go and relax in the water, the water will hold you up if you let go deeply enough, the what's beautiful and benign about life will support you and move through you.

Classically in Buddhism, the developmental path is the one that's been was first and most strongly advocated. And this is the idea that it's possible to develop yourself, develop mental states, qualities of heart, and change yourself in some way over time. I like to think of it as being a continuation of the way all human beings do, grow and develop as children into adulthood. There's developmental changes that go on as people grow up, and there's no need for those developmental changes to end when we're 18 or 21. or whenever that cutoff time is and that you're an adult, but even into adulthood, there's still changes and development and growth that have evolution that happens in human being. And when it happens? Well, it's quite beautiful to see how someone grows into their 40s and 60s and 80s. And there's a kind of maturation there that happens it's kind of almost comes with the age, as own dignity and value in itself. And so Buddhism most of them participates in this part or taps into this part of human life, where our, our, our mind or our mental capacities or our character can change. And we try to be we get involved in that change. We don't just let it be by chance or by circumstances that we change and evolve. But in Buddhism, we enter into a path that's particular that develops particular qualities and capacities we have and it's so we develop our capacity for Mindfulness, because we all can be mindful to some degree, but we can develop our mindfulness become stronger and stronger. So it's not just there in the background, that becomes a strength, which is in the foreground. It's something like sometimes it feels to me like a, almost like a prayer presence, but like a really powerful strength that you carry with you. That gets highlighted. It stands out in stronger, more strongly than a lot of the smaller concerns we have about getting by in everyday life. I've been in situations often enough where I get caught up in the daily concerns of life or in the dramas and soap dramas in my life. And then, thinking I have to solve them. And sometimes it's like being in a maze. There's no way out just going around my maze of Gil's life. And then, and then the mindfulness gets strong, and it's like being lifted

out of the maze. The Maze is still there, but I'm not in it. And there's just various strong sense of clarity and openness and, and freedom that doesn't depend on the soap opera, but now pulled back and says, You carry that with you that sense of mindful freedom and freedom that's there, that calm, peace that comes with being strongly mindful. And so mindfulness somebody can develop and I think probably all of you who practice mindfulness have some sense that it can grow, maybe grows over time, you know, over days and years, but also sometimes can grow in one day of sitting or particular hour of sitting. To me still to this day, you know, I sit down to meditate. And generally I don't kind of just kind of sit down and plop into some strong state of mindfulness. There it is done. But rather, you know, I, you know, my mind wanders off, I come back, I try to be mindful, I show up, do my practice, and then at some point, after a while it clicks or I settle into the groove or I get hooked or, or something, something I get, I get pulled or get established into a stronger, more clear sense of mindfulness. And sometimes when it's strong, it's actually a little bit hard to leave it. Because it's kind of established in this beautiful space. The it's possible to develop greater concentration, and then very works very much the same way as mindfulness, you practice and practice concentration at some point gets stronger, the capacity gets better. It's possible to develop on self understanding, very important part of Buddhism is to begin understanding what goes on in the mind and the forces that operate in our mind the operating principles that operate the emotions and feelings that influence how we think and how we, how we react to the world. Our belief systems.

There's so much to know have knowledge that can be learned that in the process of self knowledge, we're less likely to be pushed around by these inner operating principles that we have, we're more able to choose and decide not they're not to go down that road. I've gone down that road so many times. When I start thinking those thoughts, I know that I just get more and more depressed. And, you know, because my mindfulness is strong enough, I can see that I'm thinking begin to think those thoughts. And so I won't, you know, I'm not going to take that route anymore. I just, you know, let go of those thoughts. So, self understanding mindfulness, concentration are all things that can be developed, they're useful to develop. It's possible to develop our capacity for loving kindness. And I think it's one of the remarkable things about for me my encounter in Buddhism, is that the capacity for love for compassion doesn't have to be just whatever happens to be, but it can be awakened it can be developed It can be tapped into, it can be called upon over time. So this is the classic way of Buddhism. One of the weaknesses of this approach is that it tends to put a lot of emphasis on you doing the work of developing. And why this can be a weakness is that sometimes we have a lot of ideas about me. And I have to be successful or I'm not up to it, or there's a lot of expectations and a lot of self identity issues that come into play. That can make it more difficult. But part of the development of self understanding is to see very clearly how we get caught up in self identity, how we get caught up in judgments and stuff that interfere with a smooth, relaxed, easy way of just kind of developing the path over time. So it's it becomes useful to develop it. It can also be a trap, because the idea that is that the goal of practice is some In the future, that this moment is terrible, you know, right now is inadequate. But if I huff and puff and practice long enough, then somehow into the future next month, next year, next decade, next lifetime, I'll get rewarded with some great, wonderful religious experience. And if you're if you put too much of our eggs in the future basket, then there's not enough attention and care to this life as we're living it right now. And, and sometimes even to kind of dismiss it, add it to this moment because this doesn't count. The beauty of it is that it does be what requires rely on us. It relies on capacities we have. We don't have to rely on some external power or pray or hope that somehow somehow our life can change for the better, that we have. agency and possibly responsibility for stepping forward in making a difference in our life. And for some people that's really encouraging. It's like good news, I don't have to be stuck in the way I am, I can do something about it. So, you know, let's, let's walk this path. The path of letting go is really good for people who are caught up in a lot of striving. And a lot of trying to fix things all the time or prove themselves or create a sense of strong sense of self identity. And

some teachers will emphasize a lot the value of just let go, let go let go. Perhaps because those teachers needed that as their as the primary medicine. Their background was they were such fix, fix it, people would control it people that they needed to really learn radically how to just let go in order to find some deep abiding peace. One of the nice things about letting go is that it does seem like for many people that there are resources within themselves or in the world that supports us. If we don't constantly interfere and interact with the world make things happen, that it's very important to be able to let go, and that letting go relax. And as we relax, our psychophysical functioning tends to work better. If you're already tense, and then you're told, work harder at being mindful and develop your mindfulness, you might actually get more tense and as you get more tense, all the stress hormones fill your body and is counterproductive. But as you relax deeply, so many so much of our psychophysical functioning works better. And sometimes people have the feeling that that there's this kind of up swelling of support, which is kind of impersonal. It's not something that they're creating, they're making do, but as they let go, they get upwelling of beautiful support that seems to, to boy their life or to support their life or a guide their life even

and This becomes very meaningful for some people because it gives them a sense that the world is a good place. It's a benign place or a beautiful place. There's support here for our lives. But then there are people who let go and let go, let go let go. And, and they tap into layers or reservoirs inside of them have trauma of wounds of pain that they've carried with them for a long time. And they don't get a sense of anything benign, good there. But there they get the senses, things are frightening or difficult or dangerous. And so something else perhaps is needed to support that. And sometimes it's explicitly tapping into looking for the forces of good love and peace that can be in the world. Or sometimes it's developing, building up confidence that can come from the path path of development by engaging your own agency and practice. Day in and day out. Maybe in all the small steps of practice, practice is mostly made up of a lot, a lot of small steps that build over time, that you slowly build up confidence in your ability that you don't have to get caught, you don't be stuck. You have confidence in the power of mindfulness, you have confidence that mindfulness or awareness or compassion or Love is a presence or is available and is maybe an important resource that we can take refuge in, as opposed to the way that the mind by default, maybe in an unhelpful way, takes refuge in its sadness or takes refuge in its fear or its anger, or you know, kind of gets stuck there. The path of no path is sometimes whole Buddhist schools tend to really emphasize this particular idea. Some schools of Zen tend to champion that there is no path. And the very idea there's a path is just illusion, just ideas you don't want to be. You don't experience your life through the filter of ideas. And the idea is to wake up now, just right here and right now there's no path to it. In fact, the very idea of a path in Zen goes against the freedom that that the non path is pointing to. Some people will point out that the idea of a non path is to see when you see the world through the non path approach is you're seeing the world seeing yourself through the eyes of someone who's awakened. A Buddha doesn't see a path because the Buddha has no need for a path. The Buddha has arrived. So there's no need for a path in a sense. And, and, and also, there's something about when you're free, when the mind is really free and clear. And you see how concepts ideas operate. You see that any idea or concept you have a path is just that it's a concept There's something when you see it as a concept, there's mean it doesn't mean the path doesn't exist. When you see how your mind operates and concepts, sometimes it's possible to see through the other side of the veil of concepts. And we realize that so much of our life is experienced through ideas through concepts. There's something very powerful to be seen, when we see through there cc broader or more open than seeing ideas and concepts all the time. And so often in life in Zen and some other schools, there's kind of a direct pointing to the world that's beyond concepts, or instead of concepts, because in that world that's beyond concepts, that's where that kind of non path is found or freedom is found in a much more immediate clear way right now.

And why is it that some people have seemingly much easier access to a sense that there's of vitality in a presence and a lightness in the vividness and a set kind of meaningfulness in just being alive just the way it is right now. That somehow letting go, somehow not seeing the world through our concepts, that there's something here. When we see a world through our concepts or associations that are through the filter of our past experiences in life that we bring with us, our memories, our judgments, it often creates kind of a veil that prevents us to feel kind of vividness and a lightness that can be here at this very moment. Some people have that sense. When they do particular things, they go hiking in nature, or they go dancing, or they're singing or lovemaking or something that where they feel that justice alive, this lightness and that doesn't need anything. It just you're fully there in this moment itself. So the path of no path is kind of pointing to that aliveness in presence, where there's freedom here and But you do a tremendous disservice to someone, if you tell them, there is no path. There's nothing to develop nothing to do nothing to let go of just wake up here. And then they're just left waking up here in the midst of all their suffering. So they suffer even better. And the notepad kind of will sometimes be heard by people to imply that there is no there's no hope. You know, there's nothing you can do. Because, and sometimes it's very explicit in certain schools of spirituality that have no path approach. They'll even say there is no will, there is no choice. There's nothing you can do. And there is no self that even can do anything. And which that can be very confusing to people who Just suffering to no end. Some people who, for example, are struggling with addiction, which a tremendous number of people in our society have people started to struggle with depression 40 million people in the United States, which is a big percentage of the population have serious anxiety. And so, you know, what is it's helpful for people who are struggling psychologically emotionally in their lives? Is it better to be told, just like go to better be told there is no path just wake up? Is it better be told that there is a gradual path of development that you can engage in slowly over time? I think the answer to that is it depends on the person. I don't want to say one is better than the other. And in fact, I think these three approaches can be quite mutual supportive of each other, that we develop ourselves and become stronger in Our minds and hearts. So we can like go better. We love to like go better. So we can just see the vividness and the lightness of freedom right now. We practice freedom right now. So that we can develop ourselves better. We we practice letting go so we can develop ourselves better. These things are mutual. In fact, they're probably all three operating to some degree all the time, rather than being opposed to themselves. They're different paths. The analogy I like to use for it is that of hiking on a mountain trail. Some people will hike on the mountain trail from A to B in order to get from A to B. and getting to B is the most important thing. And so they race they go really fast and they hardly notice how beautiful the VISTAs and the trees are in natural setting. Other people are not interested in getting to be. They just like walking down the trail. And walking the trail is nice. And they take their time they look around and just, they don't care where they get to. They just happy to be on the trail. When I practice, then I practice more. That's a second point of view. That's what I was taught was we're not practicing to get anywhere. Walking the trail is the is the point. And I loved walking the trail. When I was doing Zen practice. I loved engaging the practice. There was something very meaningful about practicing being present and showing up for this moment. And no matter how poorly I did it, just the fact that I was engaged was meaningful and satisfying for me.

And I learned a lot in how much I didn't appreciate the present moment how much I tried to avoid it and how much I tried to look elsewhere for the for what was you know for satisfaction, and I learned to relax Go and find a deep abiding satisfaction in being present here. I learned a lot through zen, about the path of no path, the value of not needing to get anywhere, the value, the meaningfulness, of a life of just being fully present to this life, and dependent on how present actually was just a very practice of doing that was meaningful. When I came to be passionate practice, I learned how meaningful it is to develop concentration, develop mindfulness, develop love and compassion, that these things can be practiced and developed. And, and I started to see the tremendous beauty that can come when, when

the mind is really developed. It said in Buddhism in classic Buddhism, that a trained mind is a happy mind. And then nice. A trained mind is a happy mind an untrained Mind. I don't know if an untrained mind is necessarily unhappy. But an untrained mind is too easily just a victim of circumstances. And so you kind of tossed around and see because, you know, you have no rudder.

And so the person is more like you classically is more like this, you walk the path from A to B, to get to be in Zen. You get you know, there is no B. And there, there was no way. There was just this step that you're taking. And then you look around or you feel insensitive, you're there for that this moment. As people practice any of these paths, whether it's path of growth and development the path of just letting go a lot, or the path of no path. At some point, they all merge nicely. So that's been my experience. You and the or the, or the desert, the differences just disappear. The idea that you're the agent, the one who's kind of practicing and developing, and has to fall away when you walk on the path of development, because the very idea that I'm the one who's practicing, I'm the one who's developing something gets in the way of walking the path gets in the way of further growth. That the idea that there's someplace to get has to fall away, because even the idea that concept that there's some place to get, at some point gets in the way of the fullness and the mindfulness concentration here in this moment, which path of development leads to the path of Letting go. You know, at some point you have to even let go of letting go. Because the work of letting go just you know, that's extra too. And then if you're not, you're letting go of letting go. Then you just are here, as things as they are. And then and then well then you can ask yourself, Is this the path of no path? Or am I still on the path? which path Am I Where am I? But if you're really well stabilized, and mindfulness is strong, and you're really here, you see that having those kinds of questions and thoughts just adds complications to the mind is mixed just makes the mind busy. And it's and you're much better off letting go of those thoughts and those concepts even the path even the concept there's no path gets in the way or freedom at some point. And then if you practice the path of no path is my my experience that human minds human hearts are not static. That if you if you're fully present to this moment here, you're still going to grow, you're still going to develop things still are going to shape and unfold and to move in certain kind of way. And so you're still involved in changing yourself and growth and development even if you don't want to. That's the natural way in which the whole thing unfolds. So do we walk the path to get to be do we walk the path just to walk the path and enjoy it? I think that either way. As you walk the path sooner or later if you've walked trail long enough, both concepts both ideas gonna fall away and just fully right there. And the idea being fully here for this moment, pristine moment, with no need not needing anything else. With not any concepts of future of past without wanting something we Trying to avoid something

and to give time to feel perhaps the stillness, or the silence or the peace that's available here, right now. There's a kind of timelessness that's here. It doesn't matter. If you have a lot more time to live, it doesn't matter if this is the last day of your life, that this moment, this minute is this moment regardless. And this is the moment to be awake. This is the moment to be here. And to feel and to be free and to be present and to share that with someone else to feel it. compete with it is a really a beautiful, profound thing. To feel that an experience for oneself is a beautiful and profound thing. And to have that as a reference point as you go about your life, that here now, if you stop over here now if you pay greater attention, that there is something very meaningful. There's something meaningful about experiencing peace, the peace of no longer living in concepts that piece of no longer living in conflict, the peace of no longer needing anything to happen to peace that allows things to unfold as they should, at times. So mindfulness is an important component of all three paths. Susan's talk is called Mindfulness in the path. So we practice mindfulness. So we can develop mindfulness and the other qualities of that. We practice mindfulness, we can know what to let go of. We practice mindfulness so that we can be fully present here in this moment as it is. Mindfulness is a tool. Mindfulness is this resource, this water that can be poured into the container of either of the three paths, ways of understanding the path. And, and from

my point of view, I don't think it matters so much which of the three paths you understand, I don't see a need for the conflict and the acrimony sometimes exists in Buddhism between those people who hold up and say, This is the true path, path of growth or this is a true path, path of no path or they're all quite beautiful, though I think they're all quite meaningful and to vide each person who any person who walks any of these paths with worthwhile life worthwhile engagement. And if you do either one, either path well and thoroughly, I think all the differences disappear. And that's between Buddhists, but it's also between people of other religions as well. That if you follow your other religious paths, religions that have paths, and doing really well, I think all the hindrances, all the concepts that get in the way of us meeting each other, fully and completely as human beings in the beauty and the peace. So this moment, without conflict is available to all of us. And we, the idea that we're Christians and Buddhists and Jews all falls away and we just are together.

So those are my thoughts this morning. Do you have any questions, comments?

Move the bike. Where's the mic because I'm making that side of the room.

This may be a little off topic, but it's a question of I've had some curiosity about While often the instruction in meditation is to just try and focus on the breath, in this posture, and then whatever comes up, be with it until it goes and then come back to the breath. And I guess my question is that in the breath is an automatic, autonomic nervous system process, it just happens. And most of my breaths just happened without me thinking about it. And so when I think about it becomes weird because I'm controlling it and I can't just sort of let it be it's. So I've always kind of wondered about that conflict. And am I supposed to get to some point where I can observe my autonomic nervous process just happening without me controlling it? Or

can you shed any light on that?

it's certainly possible to come to a time and place where one's breathing just happens by itself and one watches it that way that we're present just feels like you're not controlling involvement, directing the breath at all. And it's gonna be quite beautiful. To kind of feel like you're riding the waves of your breathing and relaxing, peaceful way, and just happens freely to a sense of freedom in the breath, and quite beautiful. So it's certainly possible. The emphasis in mindfulness is, well, at least the way we teach it here is, the primary thing we're trying to do is to see clearly how things are. And rather than trying to make necessarily the breath, uncontrolled. So I think it's very, it's insightful for you to see now I've noticed that when you're not paying attention to your breath, your breath is free, and operating on its own. But then when you bring attention to it, you tend to get involved and control it. So that's a great, that's a great insight, it's a great thing to see that that's what happens for you. So then you want to build on that insight. And, and perhaps by studying more carefully, what it's like when you control the breath. So rather than being opposed to controlling the breath, or if you have some idea that this is wrong, it's actually more useful to set the gets curious about it and say, how does this work? What happens when I turn my attention to the breath, and you might try, you know, turn your attention away from the breath for a while, so it gets natural, then turn towards, and do that repeatedly, and to keep it so you can, what happens when I turn my attention back to the breath. And you might start noticing that there's certain ideas or certain attachment or certain emotions that come into play. And you say, Well, those emotions and ideas seem to be interacting with the way I breathe. And that's interesting. So you might want to see what goes on when you do that. And then, if you don't see much at all, then take a long time to become really familiar with what it's like to have a control breath. And that there's two things. One is you've developed in your mind three things, you develop your mindfulness that way. And you can develop mindfulness in anything, even a control breath. You start understanding what's going on in bet

bit better way you see more clearly the kind of breath you have. And the third is that By just allowing yourself to have a controlled breath and looking looking at it and just be mindful of it that way, and then allowing, it tends to relax the control. So it's a little bit of a trick to so then to relax to control and with time, you'll find that you'll be able to be present without controlling the breath. And it's a beautiful thing. And, and as you can be present for an uncontrolled breath with a free breath, it tends also to be a breath that's easier to get absorbed and get concentrated with or the concentration becomes much more enjoyable to get to kind of kind of sink into it. makes some sense.

Yes, thanks. For one

more and then we'll stop in the back. If you can move the mic to the outer Hall.

Thank you. I is working

all the close. So I love what you said. I've been meditating for many years, but always with great resistance. And I find that I resist Vipassana less than I resist Zen. And I think that you really explained it so well that I think my experience has been that it's Zen feels very harsh. It's sort of like you're just left there. So I think that you just put into words something that I've noticed. I wish I could do it with less resistance. I don't know what that's about. I know this works. But

yeah, so there's so there's, you know, a number of options for you around the resistance, I mean, one is to practice in spite of the resistance, you know, which sometimes is useful, just override it, that can be useful. Another whole use very useful approach is to make the resistance, you're then you'd be mindful of. So look for opportunities to be resistant. And it's a you know, when they when you sit down to meditate, you welcome the resistance And as if it's a good, not a good thing, but it that it's that it's something that needs your attention. They're just like a friend who's in distress needs your attention. There's something that needs your attention. So you want to bring a kind attention, and really feel and sense what's going on with resistance. And again, like I said earlier with the breath, you know, what are the feelings that come up when you're healing resistance? What are the beliefs? What are the assumptions? What are the memories, what's going on, and get curious, it might take a while. But if you keep turning into it and feeling it, and sensing it and feeling in your body, it's kind of like with the breath, you might learn about, you might develop your mindfulness just on that resistance. You can't develop very strong mindfulness and resistance. It just didn't use the nice object or not nice object, but it's, you can understand what's going on in deeper way. And if you bring non judgmental accepting attention to the resistance, maybe there's something within The resistance then can relax. But if you ignore it or fight it or in conflict with it, it just makes the whole thing stronger and stronger. So it's a good thing to sit sometimes with and do resistance meditation. So, thank you for your attention and may you enjoy your cup