

2011-12-18 Reflections On Gratitude

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SPEAKERS

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One of the statements that the Buddha made, I think is useful to keep in mind is the statement that whatever you think about frequently becomes the inclination of your mind. So, whatever you think about regularly becomes a disposition becomes a habit of mind. And one of the interesting aspects of mindfulness practice is to begin tracking what you think about frequently. what goes on in your mind. And, and what are you what habits are you reinforcing what inclinations dispositions Are you reinforcing by what you are regularly thinking about and in noticing that Then also that mindfulness practice can help show you that you have some choice in the matter of what you think about. That it's not a matter of just merely thinking away. And, and being mindful of it, being aware of it. But you know that you could stop thinking about some things. And maybe not for a long time, but you can at least put it down for a little bit. You can sometimes distract yourself and focus on something else if what you're thinking about is not useful. Or sometimes you can pick up whole new things to think about and or different ways of looking at this world. And one of the remarkable things for me about having done meditation practice is the way in which it changes the state of my mind or state of how much going on my mind so that I'm not preoccupied. And mind which is not preoccupied is not rushing ahead. It's not filling itself with thoughts and ideas. It's not seeing the world through its filter of its concerns. But there's a kind of freshness or receptivity or to perception, there is a less of a tendency to see the world through the filter of what we want. And what we don't want. There are versions and desires and instead, to be, you know, to be calm, to be contented, to be peaceful to be unpretty occupied, to come out of meditation and just be in a sense without needing to do anything. is a was a new kind of experience for me as I was starting my meditation practice. And it kind of opened up to me a range of experiences of ways of being in the world, which were somewhat new for me to have regular contact with Just beingness regular contact with some calm contentedness and regular contact with just seeing the world fresh kind of like nothing needed to happen, nothing needs to be done. I didn't need to prove myself to anybody, just to hear I was coming out of the ring the bell for meditation and my mind wouldn't automatically pick up its usual concerns and desires and wishing to impress people or wanting to have certain things yourself, my eyes in there. So that was nice enough, but it was even nicer. Because one of the most common states of mind and one of the most common thoughts or feelings that would come out of that out of meditation was one of gratitude. And this is the topic for today is gratitude. And, and it's hard to be grateful if you're preoccupied just you know, there's not much space in there for it. Because you have important things to think and do and accomplish and complain about. They say that the opposite of gratitude is complaining. So if you track again, use your mindfulness to track what goes on in your mind. And you put, not that you guys complained hardly at all, but but if you put the number of complaints you have on one side of the scale, and the number of grateful thoughts you have on the other side of the scale, which way was your scale tip? And is that the way you want your scale to tip and if it's more of a complaint side gets predominance, then perhaps have some way of tipping the scales and getting more gratitude The

and so the kind of remarkable thing for me in discovering this whole world of gratitude was it didn't exactly come from reflecting about what I am grateful for, which is a beautiful thing to do. But it didn't come from thinking about, you know, the list. But rather it came from a way of being from just being present in this relaxed content, open way, calm way, peace being peaceful, and in that state, or to go out and look at a tree or go out and just meet a friend or I would just walk down the street or just be and with that seem to come a sense of gratitude. And know why I never, you know, I didn't for years, I never thought about exactly why I just was. And in fact, part of the reason you know, when I was growing up in Buddhism was a Zen tradition. And then we that's custom now As always to end session a meditation with a bow bell ringing your bell. And for that bow for me, they came away where I could express that gratitude. And it often felt incomplete. If I didn't have some way of expressing the appreciation, the gratitude that I felt, and because some things need to be expressed, you know, it's not enough sometimes just to feel something, but they kind of come to completion or they get developed or something if we, if we bow I remember after spending three years at the Zen monastery Tassajara where we do a lot of bowing to people. You know, it's like the you know, in doubt, if in doubt, bow and you have to bow everybody, every time you pass someone in the past and in monastery hallways, you'd have to bow to them and they brought to you and it was so much as sometimes people would got to walk the long way around. They wouldn't have to bow there's a beautiful thing and And so when I left the monastery where you didn't see many people And just like that, sometimes we were 5060 people who live there. After three years I went to it was the day after I left I was up at College Avenue in Berkeley is a kind of a city, right? Lots of people and, and all these people passing me by and those people, and I had this appreciation I just there was you know, it was appreciation for people and people are so beautiful and I really wanted to bow to people. And but I thought that you know, you can't really do that. In public if people are strangers to walk up to them. It's wouldn't work so well. And but I felt this kind of built up feeling inside like I have to bow and, and, and then down the street, about half a block across the street. I saw someone who had been to Tassajara that summer and I ran over after her Stop. I hate to bow to someone. So maybe, you know, you know, maybe I was addicted I guess I was worse addictions. Gotta have my bow I gotta have my expression of gratitude and appreciation. So maybe it's you know, so this idea that gratitude can come not necessarily from any reflection per se, but just from way of being was, you know, the big one of the big treasures or jewels that I discovered through doing this practice that we have. And you know, and how much of our life actually is a gift, how much of our life you know, it's hard to be grateful if you think that your everything depends on you. And you have to make everything work. Or it's hard to be grateful if you think that you deserve whatever you're supposed to have is coming your way. But if you have a sense that it's that things have kind of occurred as a gift, that's beautiful things, things that you really appreciate, you can't quite take credit for them. But if you really appreciate having these, I think that one of the kind of more natural kind of arisings is some sense of gratitude and appreciation for that. And so, you know, the sense of calm and contentment and peace and joy that has come through meditation, sometimes a sense of connectedness to the world, and an intimacy with the world and others that comes from having this open eyes open clarity of seeing, I can't quite take credit for it. I mean, I did sit down to meditate. So you know, as opposed to some other things I could have done. But, but there's something about the deeper or the fuller experiences of meditation, where they don't lend itself very well to interpreting or feeling as this is mine. You know, I'm the one who's

You know, made it happen. There's something but it's gratuitous or it's free or just seems to arise in the in the environment. And then that's maybe that's the reason why the sense of gratitude can arise and be there.

And then in recent years, there's been a lot of research done on gratitude. I think good now there's a whole field of psychology called, it's called positive psychology, with the idea that's supposed to be the antidote to negative psychology. The antidote towards the cycle of psychology that mostly focused on pathology and suffering and how to this is kind of nice oppose. Abraham Maslow was probably part of one of the great grandfather's of this whole positive psychology and movement. And, and so what so they're studying particular You know, positive emotions. And so one of the emotions they're studying is gratitude. And it's delightful to see these kinds of studies and they're finding that gratitude is a really good thing. It's better than your vitamins. And they do they've done experiments, you know, they have people like for eight weeks every day, they have to write down three or five things they're grateful for. That's one step one control group. The other control group writes down what they're what they have to complain about. And another control group writes down only thing things that were significant that day, but with no emphasis and whether it's something they were grateful for or not grateful for just being significant. And, and then they had a group I guess, who did nothing, I forget. But they've I don't exactly remember the results except that it was over the top beneficial to endure. To those that list of five things you're grateful every day. For eight weeks, the debts How you know you remember what you think about regularly becomes your inclination. That's something that somehow change people in such a way that they were much happier people. Also, so I'll read read a passage that kind of summarizes some of this research.

A large body of recent work has suggested that people who are more grateful have higher levels of well being grateful people are happier, less depressed, less stressed, and more satisfied with their lives and social relationships. Grateful people also have higher levels of control over their environments, personal growth, purpose in life and self acceptance. Grateful people have more positive ways of coping with the difficulties they experience in life, being more likely to seek support from other people be interpreted and grow from that experience and spend more time planning how to deal with the problem. Greater people also have less negative coping strategies, being less likely to try and avoid the problem. The neither is a problem playing themselves or cope through substance abuse. Substance Use grateful people sleep better. And this seems to be because they think less negative and more positive thoughts just before going to sleep. Well, so many emotions and personality traits are important to well being. There's evidence that gratitude may be uniquely important. First log to log into tutorial study showed that people who are more grateful cope better with a life transition. Specifically people who were more grateful before the transition rather less stressed, less depressed, and more satisfied with their relationships three months later. Second, two recent studies have suggested that gratitude they have unique relationship with well being and they can explain aspects of will well being that other personality traits cannot That's pretty good. So, you know, the court, you know, so it's interesting to have this kind of research. And, you know, it's it's statistical results, right? So probably doesn't relate to you, you know, you're you probably the easiest statistical anomaly. No, I think that it's a, I think it has all these beautiful basic qualities that we have that we don't have to leave to chance. And you don't have to wait for your meditation to get settled enough to hope that doesn't kind of you walk out and you see the trees and you're grateful and something. But you can actually if this idea of gratitude is meaningful for you, or you think that it's meaningful enough to experiment with it, you can don't run the experiment yourself. You can spend some time actively considering what you're grateful for. You can actively, you know, you could take a very common exercise Given now in these researchers and books and various places, is to do gratitude lists. It seems to be the number most common suggestion of how to develop gratitude is to have a list every day, spend some time coming up with a list of five things you're grateful for. Maybe for that day, or just in general. And, and, you know, I would think that most people be able to find five things they're grateful for they think about it. And they might take a while to kind of get into it to understand. But there's so much that our life is gets so much tremendous support. We live in one of the most humanly interdependent economic social systems that the world has ever seen. And so much so

much of our life is dependent on other people providing the infrastructure for it. And there's seems to be a correlation between the more we consume and are supported by the tremendous network of people. And the less grateful people are. I mean, it's been pointed out that people who are more subsistence subsistence lives living, you know, close to the land or poor, to take care of themselves more and feel the connection to maybe to nature, that they feel much more grateful for their life. But you know, how many of you have been, you know, when you drove here today, or walked here today, we're grateful for the people who lay down the asphalt, you know, or decide with cement in the sidewalk, or who designed the car that allowed you to come here. You know, there's there you know, there's you can go on and on and on. There's a tremendous, tremendous network of people who made it possible for this day to be the way it is for you. And it's very easy to kind of take up for granted, just kind of go ahead and, you know, in our, you know, I've lived in different countries around the world and here in this country

you know, if I need, you know, order, you know, install a new telephone in my home, you know, if the repairman doesn't come between eight and 12 o'clock, as they said they would in the next day or so, you know, it's like imposition, it's a problem, you know, and, you know, why aren't they and other countries I've lived in, you know, if they come within the first two or three weeks approximately install the phone, you know, you're really grateful that's really special. You know, you're so lucky to have a phone. And here it feels like you know, it's a it's a right, you know, to have a phone committed certain time and, you know, we have important things to do and Why, what what, why, you know, why not feel grateful things that we take for granted or we think that we have a right to we expect them to be a certain way? I don't have a good answer for that. But I do know that if you get settled and calm, you have to have less stress. If you're less than driven by desire and wanting to accomplish things and do things and get things and if you're less driven by a fear and resistance and aversion to things, then I think it's a lot easier to feel grateful to, you know, just kind of feel, look at that. They came Isn't that nice? And it's a lot easier, but then it works in reverse as well. It's a lot easier to feel calm and relaxed and present, if you're grateful. And so to spend some time reflecting on what you're grateful for, I think it's like one creates a wonderful feedback loop. Back to do something like meditation. What would happen if you started your meditation sessions with an exercise in gratitude? Thinking about what you're grateful for before you start sitting with that change kind of the mood, you know, for the meditation. So I'm curious now to hear from some of you what are the conditions that support you to or make it more likely for you to feel gratitude?

simply just the Buddhist practice.

So the Buddhist practice already grateful for beautiful so it's a great tool to have the practice and the practice itself is a condition from our gratitude

Something, some something that Cheryl had discussed many times. I don't know if people really realize it. But in a lot of places in this country, there's people who are sitting groups of just one person, and they don't have access to the Dhamma. And in the Bay Area, we're just so fortunate how much opportunities we have to practice. I mean, we've spoken to people around the country and it's just so envious is not the right word. I mean, it's just so wonderful the opportunity to practice

here

For me, I feel very grateful when I slow down. And I also have a practice of when I feel frustrated, or I think something isn't going well, or the way I wanted to, I turn and look at what is going well, and there are thousands of things every moment.

Yeah, it's true. It's true, you know, 99.99999999% of what it takes for us to live successfully is not up to us. And then we complain about the point 000000 1% that's, you know, that somehow you know, issue of the moment. Yeah.

Just thinking the flip side of, of not being gratitude is the paradigm of not having enough

The idea of abundance has, you know,

the idea of

tied into the amount of possessions or money that you have. And so the only way to have that sense of abundance is to have a sense of gratitude for what you have. That's the I think that's the only way to escape the paradigm of scarcity not having enough.

Yes, I think so. To the, it's very painful in our society, I mean, so much suffering people have around haves and have nots and, and submit some, you know, some of it has to do with you know, people's happiness and has something to do with their social context of where they're at. I mean, some people who are poor and unhappy in their poverty in this country have much more than people who are well to do and in some countries in the world, you know, relative. And some people have a lot of money in this world and don't feel like they have enough. Many years ago I met a man who called himself a psycho economist. And, and his his specialties as a therapist was to work with people who had a lot of wealth. But who realized they had a psychological problem because they had a strong feeling that they didn't have enough. That goes on. He talked about a man had \$40 million. And he was really worried he didn't have enough to make it. So they come to see him. Probably a lucrative business.

But the, the idea that, you know, it's hard, you know, it's a painful area in life, but what Have and Have not and all this stuff. And it's hard to hard to you know, it's very delicate, and even say anything about it because of how much suffering involves. But I think one of the beautiful things about the meditation practice is you don't have to say anything. But as the mind settles from its conditioning as it settles from you know that preoccupation with desires and, and an aversion settles from its preoccupied With where we feel the need settles for occupation with compares to others, comparing ourselves to other people. There's a kind of de conditioning, deconstruction process that goes on in the mind. And when the mind has managed to deconstruct itself from all its thought patterns and preoccupations, and just can be present and alive with some kind of clarity and openness, then there is a kind of sense of abundance there and gratitude. And some of the most grateful and wealthiest people I know, are the people who have very little money. Question, yeah.

How do you integrate this

into gratitude when there is a deep loss? I don't mean the superficial loss. I was talking with a friend who became a paraplegic. Yes, no, he'll ask.

So the question There's how in terms of you know, when there's a serious loss? How do you integrate the idea of gratitude into this idea of lungs? You mentioned a friend who became paraplegic after an accident? There's a number of answers to that question potentially, I don't know, how it is for any one individual. But what I just said just now is very important is that some of people's issues of people have very strong people, that all of us you know, have very strong ideas, that we operate on, about who we are our identity, what we need to do in order to be successful person, we need to be able to get and

accomplish and, and when those things are challenged, we feel quite miserable difficult. So you know, if you if your if your sense of happiness in life depends on a particular job, and you lose the job, some people it becomes, you know, really, really difficult to suicidal some people because their whole sense of meaning and life is dependent on it. Or if someone his life was dependent on a certain kind of looking, you know, certain kind of way, and then something accident happens or, you know, sickness happens, perhaps aging happens and not not to you. And then the, you know, our parents is a different than if you know, and so that's really challenging if our identity is so tied to it. So something like paraplegic, you know, my heart goes out to person like that. But they also probably had before their accident, all kinds of things, they were attached to identity issues, accomplishment where they fit into society. And it's very, very tender, difficult to tell them, you know, maybe you should look at those. But a lot of people who get serious transitions difficult in life, if they get through it in a way that's going to help you often end up looking at that. And I've known people who've looked back and said, I'm really grateful for that, because I was so attached to being a certain way, I had no idea there was no other way of being. I had no idea of, you know, to be relaxed and open and present. And, you know, it'd be so simple I was holding on to so many things I thought I could accomplish and do. And there's something to be something to be said about not getting what you want. It's a really important thing and because if you got what you want, you'd want more. Or if you get what you want, you don't question it, you don't question the assumptions, the identity and the issues behind it. But sometimes if you don't get what you want, you're kind of forced to look and deal and if you're lucky, if you look carefully, you'll see what you're holding on to maybe it's not necessary to hold on to. So I've known people with serious transitions like this and it's it's a while takes a while to difficult it can be inner wrestling, inner kind of struggle to deal with the various beliefs and thoughts and feelings that are related. to it, but I've known people who've done sometimes, you know, deep inner wrestling, to find out how to let go and see life anew in situations like that. And I remember meeting many years ago, it was the postema student who was paraplegic and, and they, he, you know, he had started his own he was he was a happy man. He said that he's always in pain, but he figured out how to cut off his pain, separate himself from his lower part of his body. And, and, as far as I could tell, he was happy man, but he was also a very, very much involved and he'd set up a nonprofit to go and train fire departments in emergency personnel and counties in Northern California. How

not to go it when they go into In a house where they've been called for 911, someone is dying or just died, how to how to treat the situation with some reverence and care, as opposed to going in there and treating it like an emergency and, you know, and they bring in all their equipment and loud and boots, and they kind of bang around and they carry the courts out. And they, you know, they do, they're there, they, you know, they feel like they have to do everything they can do, but they're already dead. And that situation, it's better for the family if it wasn't treated like an emergency. So he did this, he did this, you know, in his wheelchair going around, you know, different counties, you set up these trainings. So I don't know if that's going on and on here, but so this is, you know, it's a good question. So this so part of the mindfulness practice is to help with this is to do the inner reflection and the inner work that one needs to discover what's going on and what what at what we are thinking about what we are attached to what we are driving us and seeing what can we let go Well, what can we shift and change? And no matter how serious, I think no matter how serious, the challenge is, it's possible to come to a different relationship to it. And remember the quote that I read, it said here that people who are grateful, I guess, to begin with, go through transitions much easier. Yes.

So I like your line, aging happens. And I don't want to jinx myself. But one of the things I'm grateful for is having lived as long as I have, because it's given me a different perspective. And it's allowed me access to the Dharma teachings. And a lot of the people I know haven't lived as long as, as I have

already. And so I'm really grateful for that. It gives you a different perspective than I think I could had 10 or 20 years ago.

So so part of that part of your part of the condition for your gratitude is it's also caused some sensitivity, some some awareness of what it'd be like if you hadn't had this time hadn't had this access to teachings like this. And that contrast makes you Wow, this. You're lucky.

On a lighter note, I wrote my bicycle in today. And when you ride your bike, you have a much different relationship with the asphalt and Redwood City, retard their whole downtown and put new bike lanes on Broadway. And I was really appreciative of the, of the new bike lanes and the new asphalt particularly so you

came here grateful already for the basketball before I mentioned it.

That's right. I did. But I didn't quite realize I did. But yeah.

Jim Go ahead.

I think the condition for my gratitude tends to be not being grateful, which I'd like to change that dynamic. But like last couple of days, I've just been dissatisfied with all sorts of stuff. And I think I was just rushing around too fast. But like, this morning, I woke up and it was like, this has to change. And just that that no conviction, sort of set off the troubleshooting mind state that Oh, yeah, you know, there's all this stuff that I'm grateful for. So it does work, but that's a little inefficient.

We better if I could, I don't know. Hold that a little bit more. consistently.

Thank you. So then to pass it down here to Jim was the other mic.

The Christian tradition has the concept of the prodigal son that we are grateful for something when it's been removed, and then returned. And it seems so simple and obvious, but it still surprises me. how powerful it is. I mean, why, why we could simply appreciate it when it was there.

But but

it works. And I had shoulder surgery Monday, and it was about four days until I was able to sleep comfortably and digest food. And there was one point where I was lying in bed about three and I found a comfortable spot. If I could lion, nothing hurt, and I realized that I was going to go back to sleep. Now, that could happen every night. But, but I never noticed it because

it happened every night.

to please good.

Um, I wanted to sort of ask about the idea of

I feel like too often in my life when I'm grateful for something, it's a comparison to someone else. Hmm. Like I have a friend who

is about my age, you know, relatively young and she's had Crohn's disease since she was 12. She's in the hospital all the time getting transfusions. It's really I mean, it's, it's been amazing to sort of watch her deal with me, she's a pro, but at the same time, every time I hear about something that's, you know, she had to go to the ER again or whatever. I'm like, Thank God that I don't you know, I don't have to deal with this and i i, and that feels, I mean, there's there's an element, it feels a little shameful, but I'm feeling that. So I guess my question is How?

I don't know, is that something I should be shameful about? Or is there another way?

Is there another way to sort of position that in your in your mind or you know, not do the sort of comparison dichotomy of I am higher than lower than better than healthier than and I guess, how do you reframe that?

It's a great question. I appreciate that a lot. And I don't know if I have a good answer for you. The certainly, I think all the things necessary to feel shame at all. And sometimes we people are ashamed into gratitude. You know, it's just think about those people and you know, how much you have and you know, that sense of obligatory gratitude like that I don't think is helpful. And certainly should feeling shame. But you know, that I could feel you know, you know, there is a kind of poignancy or kind of awkwardness or tension between you feeling kind of grateful that you're having a good situation and your friend who is so much difficulty and so this thing I think speaks well for you that you'd feel some awkwardness, some tension there some you know, and I don't think you should stop feeling grateful for what you have. But you know, but maybe you acknowledge it's a little bit, a little bit feels a bit funny for you to feel that way and uncomfortable. But probably for your friend, you know, if you feel your great gratitude, certainly, but maybe if you feel some awkwardness that you should feel this in relationship to your friend, in that awkwardness, rather than feeling shame. Be inspired to just feel compassion for your friend or co worker Dark Turn, Turn your gratitude event that you've gotten. Maybe you can just you know, give, you know, offer a little more friendship to your friend who has them? Yes. Where's the mic? Oh, yes, please.

When I started doing my gratitude list, I only had five things that I would repeat and thank you for having a job my car house and then I would think of anything I couldn't think anything else that I would just repeat the same thing. And gradually as I practice doing my just writing and every night five things before I go to bed, I came up with more things. Now even if I'm outside, I will you know, I will be grateful for the traffic light or, you know, thank you for those little leaves on the sidewalk or, you know, a little child has By smile, just be grateful for that. And now I'm being grateful for the negative things and those complaints in my life. Because it has the issues, because I learn to how to grow out of them. And I'm grateful for all of those negative things that I used to complain about. Now I'm grateful for them.

Beautiful. So you know, whatever you regularly think about becomes an inclination. So, did you have something dark back there? I saw a hand and then by then, but you could be the last one. Just watch it go. Go ahead since you're holding it

up a couple things. A couple conditions that helped me be grateful. One is mindfulness. When I'm running around Helter Skelter and my mind is flashing every which way and the monkeys are jumping up and down. I can be mindful of that and I realized I just stopped and I look around the room and whatever their photographs Wherever I am in my office or at home, or I'm grateful for that, and I just take a breath, beautiful, the other condition is a fresh air. When I go out for a walk, I'm immediately like in a different space, I see the trees and the trees are reaching for the sky, like in gratitude. And I just feel the same.

Thank you, to him in the last one here. So this concept of gratitude,

I actually have found it to be extremely powerful. And it's one of the things that I'm very much appreciate. And one of the places where I found that it's really useful to think about is as you enter a conversation, perhaps with a difficult person or a person who you've been in conflict with, to sit for one second, two seconds and think about three or four things about this person that you're grateful for, and begin that conversation. It changes the whole equation and the ground by which you stand. Maybe it doesn't change the other side, but it changes your ground uniform and if you can conclude the car With one or two thoughts of gratitude, it often changes the relationship in a very substantial way, done over several times, it can change the whole relationship.

Beautiful. Thank you. So partly was, I wanted to talk about gratitude. Because it felt like there, I felt kind of more gratitude felt more poignant for me with this time of year, kind of coming to the end of the year. And somehow, you know, reflecting over the year and this transition that we've invented for ourselves with going into the new year four in the Gregorian calendar, at least, that, you know, it's a good time to remember gratitude and, and there's a few things I wanted to say but being grateful for one is certainly I'm very grateful for this community. And for all of you and to the fact that people come here and meditate and practice and engage in the Dharma is a beautiful thing. And I benefit from it. I'm very grateful for all of you and to share the practice with you and be able to do it all year and so many years here, it's a beautiful thing. And And thanks to all you know, my my, my ideal world all of you would have some gratitude for the others in the room here. The fact that university even though it's crowded and full and stuff like that, it still is kind of special. To have so many people with enough like minded interests that they're willing to sit still. Like this. It's beautiful. It's a beautiful thing. It's a rare thing, even if the person next to you fidgeted and, and the other is, you know, to make something like this possible. There's a lot of people who volunteer you know, here IMC is only volunteers. It's run by going volunteers, there's no paid staff. And it's a lot of volunteers who have make this possible. And it might be nice for everyone. If perhaps those of you who volunteer here, Now those of you and who have volunteered in the past, could you stand

so thank you very much all of you. And it's a beautiful thing to support your community this way and support yourself this way, but if community and some of you didn't stand here, I never do. I know I've done things and now so maybe I don't know why that why he's shy or you don't think what you do counts. But

so

So, thank you