

2013-10-13 Ethics And The First Precept

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SPEAKERS

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Good morning, everyone. And today I'd like to give a talk on ethics. And in particular, on the topic of the first precept, which is not killing, perhaps it's a continuation of the earth care topic. Make some connection between it. And the precept of not killing is a precept of compassion. It's a precept it's a kind of Cardinal fundamental precept in Buddhism, because it's not just a precept of not to kill, but it's also a precept of not intentionally caught to cause harm. And so to look at the word in ethic in Buddhism for ethics or virtue, is sila spelled s.i.l.a. And it's nice to think of it as one leg of a tripod. And you know, if you have a tripod, and you only have one leg, it falls over. And if you have two legs, it falls over but you have three legs, then they can stand up, right? So, the three legs of the tripod are in the Buddhist language is sila, Samadhi, and paññā. And that's usually translated into English as virtue, meditation or personal cultivation and development, and then wisdom or discernment or investigation seeing deeply into our lives. And these three work together. The virtue has a lot to do with how we are now and how we are but how we train ourselves. And how we behave in our in our life. Samadhi has a lot to do with how we are the quality of our being. And the wisdom factor has a lot to do with how we see things, and how we investigate how we look more deeply. And so the you know, if you look and see without a change in your behavior, it's probably not so useful. If you change your behavior, but don't consider your quality of your inner life, it could be shallow, it could be you know, it doesn't really get the important information that can guide us in our lives. But these three together, that we have a way of behaving, and care and our choices that we do, but to have that be guided by the quality of our being how we are. And so part of Buddhist practice is to cultivate ourselves to train ourselves so we can change the quality of our heart, the quality of our being, we behave very differently in life. If we are obsessed with fear or anger or hate, than if we are filled with compassion and kindness and goodwill. So these are different qualities. So how do you want to? Well, how do you want to be, you don't have to just go along with whatever way you wake up one morning. But we can cultivate and develop qualities of heart called qualities of mind that are useful, productive, that are meaningful, and become important references for how we want to live our lives, the choices we make, the Samadhi the second one having to do with the cultivation of how we are involves issues like of integration, becoming wholly integrated, so all of who we are as integrated rather than fragmented, so that our hearts and minds and our bodies so not connected in form each other, so we don't have walled off areas of our life, that or in conflict with Park ourselves, because the walled off areas that conflicted areas within ourselves are often the juncture or the cracks within unethical behavior can occur. And so part of the function of meditation practice of Samadhi practices, the cultivation practices in Buddhism is to help make us whole make us integrated to be aware of all of ourselves, and then hold it together in some kind of holistic way. Samadhi practice also something people think of it just concentration, but it also involves a heightened sensitivity to develop our capacity for empathy, sensitivity, for mindfulness for awareness, because our capacity to be sensitive to the world around us to see clearly understand clearly is very much dependent on how settled we are, how calm we are. If we are preoccupied and anxious and spinning out of control in the

mind, there's probably not a lot not a lot of sensitivity to yourself in a deeper way or sensitivity to others and how they are.

So Samadhi is a way of training ourselves to have a heightened sensitivity. And then from that sensitivity heightened sensitivity comes as a basis for ethical decision making. In this wisdom part, the paññā, prajñā, has a lot to do with how we see it but also how we investigate how we understand the perspectives that we use. And one of the primary ethical perspectives in Buddhism or the primary one is to avoid causing harm to oneself or to others. That's the standard for ethical decisions. The so that helps us from taking, for example, the precepts in what could be called moralistic terms black and white terms as if their criteria in and of themselves for a behavior. The precepts our criteria for our behavior, but they are understood through the framework of not causing harm. So that, you know, plays out, I think most dramatically for some people in the modern world around sexuality. The, you know, Buddhism for lay people, the precept around sexuality, is avoid inappropriate sexual behavior or sexual misconduct. And how do you know what that is? And there are people who have particular ideas of what sexual behavior is deviant and what is acceptable, as if it is defined by the behavior in Buddhism that we understand the ethics of sexuality has to do with is it causing harm, not by the behavior, not by whether it's your heterosexual or homosexual or whatever it might be? Is it causing harm. Then you get a different evaluation, different determination of sexual ethics, then if you have come how authoritarian that comes down from someone else that certain behaviors are acceptable and certain or not. So the same thing then with all the other precepts, the fundamental framework for them is, do they cause harm, to avoid causing harm. So, that requires us being able to see harm, to recognize harm and the possibility of harm and to recognize how to avoid causing that harm. So, the Samadhi practices were cultivating a heightened mindfulness sensitivity integration helps us to understand how to tune in to what's harmful, what isn't harmful, in a way that it's very hard to do if it just kind of an analytical exercise to figure out what's you know, what is causing harm. So the most basic way that these ethics are taught in terms of behavior in Buddhism for laypeople is the five precepts. And these five precepts are precepts in the sense that they're principles of training, that we train ourselves around these guidelines. In order to develop our virtue in order to develop our Samadhi and develop our wisdom. They're not meant to be black and white, you know, all or nothing, you know, rules. In fact, to have a strong rule based approach to spiritual life, probably limits the capacity to develop virtue into this integration and Samadhi and wisdom, wisdom requires kind of in deeper engagement and exploration and investigation into these realms for us to get the most benefit from them. There's a beautiful passage about the first precept not taking life abandoning the taking of life when abstains from taking life. This gives freedom from danger, freedom from hostility, and freedom from troubles to limitless numbers of beings. In doing this one gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity and freedom from trouble.

There is understood in the early tradition that living by the five precepts can partly be done as a gift to others. We make ourselves safe to others. People don't have to be afraid of us we create a community a society that feels comfortable to be in. One of the remarkable things about going on a meditation retreat and the personal retreat is the degree of safety in these in these groups when we're together, it's a place where some people feel more safe in a retreat than almost anywhere else in their life. Because it's just there's a shared commitment to a higher ethical standard. You could leave your wallet right in the middle of a retreat center. And chances are pretty high, higher than most of the places in the world that either be there or it'll be returned, turned into the office, and you can pick it up later. And you don't have to, in fact, most retreat centers, people don't lock their bedroom doors, they live in buildings that are locked. It's kind of you know, far fetched that this you know, it's kind of unusual. How many of you live there and you know, go to sleep at night with your doors unlocked. Most people I think lock them in, feel safer that way. So they're safe place to feel the safety is very meaningful for the heart and

meaningful for this cultivation of practice. And here in this quote, it says in giving this freedom from fear and animosity to others, you gain a piece of that. Isn't that great? It's a reciprocal mutual relationship. We live ethically, and we support others with that. And in return, we're supported by that.

Sometimes the, what's this five precepts to they are not killing, not taking what's not given, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, and not intoxicating oneself with alcohol or drugs. These in the in the Buddhist tradition are considered very important. They're kind of partly because they're five simple things that you can remember relatively easily. In the ancient world, the Buddha didn't actually teach much about the five precepts it didn't say The attire my way of reading the early text is it wasn't really a big emphasis. But what became a big emphasis was something closely connected to these five. And these are called the ten skillful actions. And the ten skillful actions are interesting because they are more than just guidance guidelines for a particular way of behaving. So the first four are the same, not to kill, not to steal, not engage in sexual misconduct, and not to lie. The next four. Next three have to do with other aspects of speech, not to gossip, not to have harsh speech, and not to engage in trivial pointless speech.

And then the last three, this is what kind of makes them particularly more applicable or have deeper meaning in our lives and the five precepts. To avoid greed. To avoid hate, and to avoid what's called wrong view. So now we're into the world of the heart of the mind with motivates us to act. Some teachers will teach the five precepts emphasize that it's best to take them. black and white. Don't kill, don't steal, don't, don't engage in sexual misconduct Don't lie. And somehow, some people complain and say, Well, you know, there's always exceptions, and it's to kind of moralistic and I'd rather rather than say, don't kill, I'd like to say, live compassionately for all beings, which is a nice sentiment, but it's not so obvious what living compassionately means. It's kind of clear what killing means. So if you're going to kill the ants in your house, and the precept precept says, Don't kill, you know, that would probably force you to think a little bit. If the precept is to be compassionate. You know, what does it mean to be compassionate to those ants, it makes things a little bit, you know, you know, maybe it's easier to kind of well, you know, something different. And so perhaps the five precepts have the power by taking them in narrow sense as being literal. And not in a kind of figurative sense or some people do and not kill it not taking was not giving means means don't dominate the conversation by just talking all the time, then you're taking the person's time, which hasn't been given. That's nice, very, it's wise. But once we start kind of getting getting into the other aspects of the five precepts, the subtle subtleties are applications that way, some people feel they lose their power, and they lose their power when they're done strictly. So in in Thailand, for example, people there tend to understand the precepts very clearly you just don't kill any living. Be And for lay people, they might have make exceptions for themselves in their lives. Except for the days they go to the temple, the Buddhist temple, then they, they're impeccable about following it. No exceptions that day. So they kind of had a sense that it's a duty as a training or something. So this so the 10 skillful actions, however, are are the ones that go deeper in there, not just black and white or clear kind of cut thing. Because for the first one not to kill, it's worded this way, abstaining from killing living beings with weapons laid aside, gentle and kindly, when abides compassionate to all living beings. So here the standard is a little bit different. Here the standard is yes, avoid killing But more but also be compassionate, cultivate compassion, abide with compassion to the world. And the idea of having compassion and being informed by your compassion in your ethical decision making is a very useful thing to do. How do you live your life? If you're closely in touch with compassion, if you ask yourself, what's the compassionate thing to do now, as opposed to, you know, what's the right thing to do? Now, this becomes important also in Buddhist ethical consideration. What we see in the early Buddhist tradition that I feel most connected to is ethics is keeps being referring back to what you would do in your particular situations. That's the investigation that's a consideration. So in the immediacy of your life, how would you live your life when What choices you would make, as

opposed to generalizing. And generalizing can lead to what and can be like moralizing to in a kind of rigid way, which is kind of oppressive. for other people. There's a different use of the word more. moralistic sometimes has negative connotations, as you sometimes have someone has a very who generalizes on issues of right and wrong, and often has a sense of superiority that they know better than others, and others should live the same way. Different ways of using the word, but the idea that others should be this way as well. We should generalize into our society wide is a different ethical decision to sit and kind of consideration than what you would do.

What would you do in a particular situation? What would you do if you are in the slaughterhouse? Looking in the eyes of a cow That you're going to you're going to eat? How would you you know, what decision would you make then as opposed to we should not have slaughterhouses? Maybe we should, maybe we should. Who knows. But that's the, you know, instead of generalizing the pointing of ethics in Buddhism is in the experiences of life that you encounter. How do you behave? What do you do? And I think that, that kind of pointing to yourself, saves us a little bit from immediately asking you for looking for exceptions. But what about in those circumstances? It is easy to then want to give exceptions in those circumstances. But it's probably pretty rare that most of you are going to have be in those circumstances. One of the very common exceptions that are commonly used around not lying, is one of the Nazis come and you how harboring a Jew and youur house, it's unlikely that's going to happen anymore. It means something similar might happen again, it happens other places in the world. But that particular example is a generalization. What do you do then? It's interesting exercise. But it takes the, that easily takes the focus away of what we would do in a situation. And the point of Buddhism is to come back here to what's Close, close at hand into what you can, what you're encountering, and how would you live in the world that you encounter? What are the decisions you would make? Because if you really see someone in the eye then how do you relate to them? How do you what how does it touch your heart to see someone in the eye? That as opposed to you know not? I've I've read stories of people hunters who were out hunting and they saw a deer and they put the In the scope of the rifle to shoot, and somehow they looked right into the eyes of the deer. And when he saw it through the eyes of the deer, they saw a life there that they couldn't kill. I've heard of it. You know, people sometimes when humans get executed, hoods are put over their heads, so that you don't see the humanity don't see the eyes of the people. I have known people who've had enemies and stood face to face to the enemies. And only when they looked each other deep in the eye, that somehow the something opened up in the person that they couldn't see them as an enemy anymore. So what happened, you know, the emphasis on the direct human contact and experience? How is it in our life? How do we see things? How do we do things, I think is more of a focus on Buddhist ethics rather than moralizing. An abstract ways to make some sense. So I probably more or less never talk queries anyway today but it's so hard not to, not not so black and white these things right or the line is not so sharp to what I mean. So one of the key ways that we use in Buddhism, to investigate the present for the immediacy of our experience, ethically, is to ask ourselves, what is the intention we have? what's what's motivating us in what we want to do? So if we do want to kill a mosquito, what's motivating if you want to if we do want to kill another person, what's motivating it? Is it in fact, do are we motivated by hate? Are we motivated by greed? Are we motivated by fear? What is what is going on for us? And I would suspect that the people here some of you you know, someone in the Your house, you know, came into your house broke into your house, probably fear would be the operating emotion. And if you wanted to kill that person into self defense probably would be motivated by fear. But what happened if you didn't, you knew how not to be motivated by fear. Fear didn't have the upper hand. Would he give you the ability to look and see in other ways. I've known people who have in fact been held up by guns and knives, who somehow maybe because of the intensity of the situation, did not get afraid.

I'd like to believe that people who practice meditation for a long time so I'd like to believe their meditation kind of kicked in and, and they engage the person in a compassionate way in a clear way. And it disarmed the whole situation. And I have no I have one friend who didn't do that. And he and he's Someone ended up in jail You know, he got calm somehow got pulled into his anger and, and kind of basically went after the person. And so he was the one ended up in jail. So the idea the ability to stay calm, sometimes leads to wiser decisions and to act impulsively out of fear, anger. So we look at ourselves so if we if we have the ability to reflect and decisions don't have to be made right away. what's motivating us, greed, hate or fear, and I suspect that a lot of motivation around some of the decisions we have to kill some involve one of the one one of those three. We also investigate, are there alternatives, the idea of alternatives and taking time to invest the second considered I think, is extremely important one Because I run into people often enough for these kinds of discussions, who are for some reason very quick to want to justify the use of force the use of violence. I don't know why it's such a strong one. It's a strong desire to justify so quickly. It's very similar to the strong justification for anger. But anger has a purpose. And violence is a maybe a quick solution. And sometimes you get what you want quickly. But the consequences in the long term might not be so useful, so meaningful. The this morning in the New York Times, there was a article about a man who was as big as a soldier in the Irish Republican Army. His job was to be an assassin. And he spent many years in British jail. And now trying to I guess, make amends for what he did. But the article discusses he talks about I think he wrote a book about his experience. And he killed many people, apparently only one person kind of. He walked, walked into a bar and, and shot someone who. Later he found out he was misinformed about what this person had done. He hadn't done what they thought he had done, and why they thought he was justified to kill him. And so he shot this guy in the back and killed him. And then he he left and there was a woman who was getaway driver drove him off, they went off and when they were going to part ways, the woman said, I feel sorry for your mother. I feel sorry for your mother. quite something. What about the mothers? What about their network of consequences that go out or that person's mother or children? I am kind of blown away by how long violence survives in the extended network, the consequences understanding network of people who been affected by it. might have some of you have told her anything. My father in law died this summer in August. And he was a Holocaust survivor. And the violence and the that he experienced or 70 years ago, was still very fresh for him. And, and it was so fresh for him that my spending my last week of his life with him. What happened to him and World War Two had a deep impact on me. You know, 70 years ago, something happened and it's still you know, same packed in had a deep impact on my 15 year old son who interviewed him about his experience in the war. And I suspected that experience will be with my son. The memory of them I put my son filmed him because he likes to make documentaries. So I'm sure it's gonna stay with him for probably it could be for his lifetime. And if he lives to be the same age as his grandfather, it'll mean that 140 years, hundred and 40 years after World War Two, there are still people who feel a personal connection to the violence that happened there. Isn't that amazing?

You know, and understands a little bit about why the violence of civil war as still such a big impact on the United States, or the violence of slavery has such a big impact that continues down to this, you know, down down to today and our society. So what are they What do they extend you? And what are they extensive network of consequences that violence has? Even though it seems like you get what you want in the moment? What is, you know, how does it affect people? So part of the investigation is not just what's the situation here and now in the choices we're involved in, but what are the consequences into the future? Or to around us in other ways? That I think I've told this before too many times, but I'll make the point.

You know, sometimes when my kids were really young, they were challenged challenge like all kids are. And I sometimes found the only thing that would work in my limited ability to be a parent was to use my

strong voice. That's what I call that. Sometimes I'd warn them I mean, use my strong voice. And a strong way of saying no, very loudly. Can't do that. And I thought honestly, you know, I kind of thought I like worked. That was good. It worked until the day where I heard my older son use that same voice for a younger brother. Then I thought, oh my god, what have I created? What have I done? Because the kids learned from us, right? how we behave. And so what are they? So I know in the moment of using strong voice, the consequences were good, and I thought, but the little design can anticipate how the influence was going to have down through time. So how do we take this into account these kinds of things? One of the ways we take it into account is what is the influence it has on us when we act in certain ways, how does it affect what is how does it train our hearts? How does it this mighty part? How does it cultivate our hearts in a way that's useful. So I try hard not to kill insects. And I've never been known to go out and catch mosquitoes in my hand my cup my hand around them and then carry them out of the house as someone opened the door because I can't and let them let them go. And you know, is that silly it's consequential these mosquitoes you couldn't count you know, it's just a waste of time. There's more important things to do then chase them around the house for them. Or done. Same thing with flies, you catch them with Butterfly nets and take them outside. The but one of the things that one of the consequences for me having done that is that there is a visceral, visceral memory in my heart, of a nice feeling that came from that kind of care. And that nice memory is with me some of these cutting of mosquitoes whereas mosquito land, or go back 25 years. And I don't really remember all the circumstances of it, but I remember what it felt like to do that they kind of it kind of was a conditioning for me. And I know what it feels like to go like that to the mosquito. And I tell you, my conditions me in a different way. So part of the consequences also in ourselves to investigate in it, and then to consider what are the alternatives? Are there alternatives to take the time even before you find yourself in a situation where violence is the seems like the right answer, to consider what are the alternatives that are possible? So some people in our country are quick to buy guns and feel very justified to defend themselves with guns sometimes do they agree that it could involve killing someone else? But have they taken the time Time to cultivate and develop alternative strategies. Even if they do have a gun in the house. Have they done and they train themselves in non violent ways of defending themselves? Have they trained themselves in some of the skills and techniques have they put on alarms in their house if they don't all the things they can do to provide to prevent needing to use the gun some people don't want to do that because they feel it's in position to do so much work it just easier just have a gun and they feel justified in it. But is that really the best thing for for yourself and for the world around you? I suspect that the people who have been justified in killing and have killed I suspect most of them are deeply affected by this. And, and I don't know if in retrospect, we'd look back and say I wish I hadn't done that. Probably wish they hadn't done that. Probably. it you know, it's a heavy, heavy thing to carry on the heart to do this. So to consider alternatives to killing What are they? So I spent a lot of time trying to figure out alternatives to killing those ants that come into my kitchen. And I tried all kinds of things. And the two things that I finally figured out that works for us that doesn't involve killing them. They certainly keep the kitchen clean. But cinnamon and the consequences that now we have occasion once at once or twice a year we'll have these little piles of cinnamon where they get come in the ants come in, but the ants don't cross the sidman.

Isn't that nice? So it took a while to get to that. But I feel so much better having cinnamon around my house and then having having having poison that you put out you know that the ants eat the poison and they take or take take it back to the ad colonies and then everyone dies in the colonies. I don't like that idea. But tenement cross. So are there alternatives? So how do we so they say investigating and looking and questioning ourselves? What motivates us? What are the consequences? What are the alternatives are all part of the ethical training in Buddhism. And that training benefit has benefits a lot from the integration work of That's very nice.

The windows, we had cell phones go off in the beginning in the early years, I used to take them as kind of like an imposition. And now I think of them as a wonderful mindfulness bells get to stop and look and pause and In the beginning, when I started started to put stop and pause and look rather, I could feel that some you know, this certain kind of negative feelings and ideas would come up. But that shouldn't be that way. How could they? But I don't need to think that way why this is what we're doing here. This life of ours, we're here to kind of be better off by judging shouldn't be this way, just because of our cell phone. Are we better off using it as a mindfulness Bell? Pause, look around. They one of the cardinal kind of red Cardinal. But one of the, I think, first approaches to almost anything for people who are dedicated to mindfulness is to investigate, what is this what's going on now. So for this first precept, not to kill investigation look more deeply. Cell phones Go on, go off, stop investigate what's going on? whatever's going on. Look. So I was gonna give a short talk today I apologize. It's okay. Moses boring for me to go on and on.

So then the question that but you know, the issue of not killing is there's a tendency in Buddhism sometimes to be very, in traditional Buddhism, be very clear. Don't kill it all. But it goes there's a there's a conflict that some people see between the more fundamental prison preceptive not causing harm or minimizing harm and not killing. So what causes the least amount of harm in the world not Spraying for malaria mosquitoes or spraying for malaria mosquitoes. So, when we if if there's malaria in the area and you spray for them, or west here in California, West Nile or West West Nile virus, what causes the least amount of harm? If the precept is don't kill, then those mosquitoes can make human being sick, or sometimes lethal. We had a friend who died from malaria. If If so, what do we do? And how do we make this decision? If where do we make the decision? Most of us here I suspect would not think twice about using antibiotics to to kill those bacteria if you're sick. You know, that's the least amount of harm is about you know, for you Is the bacteria die? Not you? What about if you have mosquitoes that have malaria? Do you spray? We have a well in our property. So one of the decisions is, do we put in poison in the well to so they don't mosquitoes can breed because mosquitoes breed narrow Well, they go into our neighbor's property and they spread out all over Emerald hills. And so, you know, do we have a responsibility not to be a vector for West Nile virus if it comes to this area? You know, what should we do there? You could say that I mostly can cop out of the decision because the cemetery county comes around every few months and drops pellets into our well. So now somebody else does it, but what do we do? And then what about you know, there's mice and rats? I guess that had been been a plague in California. So what do you do then if you know there now we're getting to mammals in our close relatives to have a bionic leg. Do we kill them? Do we not kill them? What's what causes the least amount of harm? From the point of view of precept not to kill you don't you don't kill the rats. With the point of view of maybe saving your your life or your kid's life? Maybe you don't want to have those near your house. Oh, gophers. You know, do you kill them? Or do you let your garden die? What do you What's your choice? Do you make some people when you get these kinds of questions, some people choose to live lifestyles that they're not involved in that kind of life whatsoever. And sometimes I've seen monastics very clearly not didn't become monastics because they want to avoid those things. But they were content or happy that in being monastics, they didn't have to be involved in any of those kinds of decisions. So is that copping out, letting other people make the decisions, not being part of that part of the world. But all of us here are late people. So how do we participate in these kinds of decisions? You know, so there's immediate ones in our lives. And then there's a whole slew of them, that we participate by virtue of being in our society and member the citizens of the society. We participate in directly. How responsible are how are we involved in these kinds of decisions more widely? How can we be involved in these that our behavior and votes and money affect these things? How do we decide in ways that is not more realistic, but, you know, we feel the impact in our choices.

So I want to list a whole bunch of interesting important topics that fall under the investigation for the not killing, precept war, military, abortion, suicide, euthanasia, meat eating, hunting, firearms, pest management, killing of wildlife investments, capital punishment, laboratory research on animals and then use of natural resources. The second lot of death happens around the use of natural resources. So how do we you know, how do we from our Individual point of view, how we live in our society? How do we participate? How do we engage? And how do we consider these the larger impacts of our lives? And I think our motivation or intention, are the consequences of our choices. And then what alternatives are the investigate more deeply? What's going on? For these larger issues in our lives, is one of the very easy motivations is the motivation of avoidance. It's not much not to me, this is like other people make these choices and so kind of certain delusion of indifference that go on. But how do we participate in this? How do we are involved and I'll end this way with all the you know, this, the all these precepts, but but the precept of killing, I think that it's a very meaningful and important area of PR. No exploration. And as we explore this precept and how we live with it, how does it make us better people? How does it help to cultivate and develop the best in our hearts? A settled and peaceful and sensitive empathic heart? How does it do that? As opposed to the moralistic idea of good or bad? If I do, yes, in one way or the other? How do we how do we cultivate the best in our hearts, because I have a lot of confidence and the best in human hearts, the goodness in human hearts, and if we can cultivate that, then that will spread out and the choices we make and how we live in our in our communal life as well. So that how we live becomes a gift to the world around us, which is one of the things that Buddha said that follow the precepts and you become a gift. Okay, thank you. And those who have who are interested in about 1015 minutes we'll meet back in here for kind of an open discussion about now this topic exactly, but on earth care, environmentalism, living living green, mostly, the practical, immediate inspiring things that we can do this fall up last week's earthcare discussion. Thank you.