

From Deer Park Monastery, it's Meet the Monastics.

I'm Brother Minh An.

I realized recently that there really is no separation between practice and everything we do in our daily life.

Either we're creating conditions for a practice space, like an internal practice space, or we're taking conditions away.

And so, if I can live in a calm and peaceful and serene way and do things that contribute to mindfulness and peace in my daily life, then I'll have a lot of success in my spiritual practice.

Each week over the next 10 weeks, we'll bring you my conversations with resident monks and nuns at Deer Park about their journey to monastic life and what inspires them now.

For our first episode, a conversation with Brother Minh Luong, Brother Generosity, who was ordained with me here at Deer Park in 2018 when he was 24.

Brother Minh Luong has lived alongside me since 2017 when I arrived at the monastery, and we have a lot in common.

We both grew up in Southern California near the beach, and as monks, we're both very physically

active, hiking, running, doing yoga, and occasionally surfing.

He enjoyed a happy childhood in Laguna Beach, a suburb of Orange County, where in high school

he played saxophone, acted in plays, and was on the surf team.

Of our community's Westerners, Brother Minh Luong is one of the most fluent in Vietnamese, and at the time of this interview, he was getting ready to spend six months at our center

in Thailand, which is filled with mostly Vietnamese monks and nuns, in part in order to deepen his fluency.

He got into spirituality when he was in college at NYU with an interest in filmmaking.

While he was there, he decided to study computer science and game design, and he also minored

in philosophy.

He took a class on Eastern religion, and that's when he listened to an audiobook by the Dalai Lama that changed his life.

Here's the interview.

I just remember this feeling of, "Wow, I knew all this stuff already that is in the book, but somehow in the busyness, in the pursuits, in all the stuff in daily life, I had lost touch with it somehow.

And God, I just don't want to lose touch with this again.

I need to just keep drilling this in.

I want to listen to this book over and over again."

I remember having that thought.

I would listen to it when I was walking to and from class.

And yeah, it was like a revelation for me.

Then the other thing that really stuck out that I read in that book, I remember, was the Dalai Lama talking about meditation practice and saying how you have to practice for a while before you can really experience the fruits of the practice.

It's not easy, and it takes time.

I remember really taking refuge in that teaching when I started practicing meditation because I had that experience of, "I don't know if this is really doing anything for me.

I'm just kind of sitting, and I don't feel any different.

I don't feel like anything happens when I do sitting."

I just kept remembering that.

Somehow, I think deep down, I also had some faith that, "I think something's going to come of this.

I think there's something to this."

But those encouraging words from the Dalai Lama about being patient and that it takes time definitely helped me get over that initial hurdle getting into meditation practice.

So when was the breakthrough?

I remember there was one time when ... I don't think it was during sitting meditation, but I was coming in and out, in or out of my apartment building.

I remember I had this thought.

It's hard to remember the details now, but I had done something wrong, and I was feeling bad about it.

I was just really beating myself up over it, saying I was a terrible person and all these things, this internal dialogue happening.

I had this aha moment where I realized, "Whoa, I'm really berating myself here over this.

I'm really hurting myself."

I hadn't realized I was having this toxic self-talk up to that point.

I connected that to my meditation practice.

I thought, "This awareness is something that I'd cultivated in my practice."

There was this feeling of freedom from that, of like, "Wow, now I see it happening, and so I'm not a victim anymore."

Then I got really into sitting meditation.

I think the other reason I liked it was because it really calmed me down, and I was feeling anxious and unsettled living in the city.

I was spending a lot of time on the computer, both with my work and with hobbies, playing video games, watching sports, stuff like that.

I just had a lot of anxiety.

I was also smoking weed with my friends, which I don't think helped.

Meditation was my escape from all that.

It was a way to calm me down.

When I finished my sit, I felt more grounded, more stable, more like myself, I guess.

Sometimes I was sitting two or three times a day, finding it just like a crucial part of my daily routine.

After you graduated from NYU, what did you do?

I happily left New York City.

I was so happy to get out of there.

I didn't realize how much I was looking forward to it.

I was so happy on graduation day.

It was short-lived because I went home and I stayed with my parents.

I didn't really know what I wanted to do.

I had told my parents six months before I graduated that I don't think I want to have a normal career.

I don't want to have a career in computer science.

I think I just want to live a really simple life.

I might want to be a monk.

I don't know.

But for about a month or a month and a half after I graduated, my mom had scheduled this jaw surgery for me to get done because I had this big underbite.

They were worried about my bite having issues or something when I got older.

I wasn't really able to do much.

I just had to wait for the surgery to happen and then there was going to be this recovery period.

So I just kind of hung out at home and then the surgery happened and it was a much bigger deal than I had realized it was going to be.

I was bedridden for weeks and I couldn't open my mouth because my mouth had been wired shut

to give time for the jaw to heal.

So I had to take all my food through a straw.

My mom would blend food for me but it would get stuck in between my teeth.

It was just really hard.

Then I was also taking these painkillers to deal with it and just zoning out and sitting

in bed all day long basically.

Either on painkillers or just zoning out on the computer.

I kind of got into a rut.

I got better but I kept staying bedridden.

I couldn't get out of this cycle of just waking up and moping around the house basically.

I just got really depressed and I didn't want to go out and do anything.

And finally my parents, after a couple months of that, my parents suggested I go on this trip to India that Deer Park was organizing.

I think my mom had gone on the website or something.

I had always wanted to go to India so I signed up for the trip a month and a half before it started and went on that trip.

I've been here at Deer Park ever since.

Was there like, you say that even coming home from college you had this idea, maybe I could be a monk.

Was that basically just from what you had read and studied in the philosophy class at NYU?

Or was there like some, had you had some interaction with a monk or like how did you even know

what a monk was?

Yeah, that's a good question.

Well I did have an interaction with a monk when I was in my third year at NYU.

I joined the Buddhism club there which was a club that met on a weekly basis and we would

listen to a Dharma talk offered by a monk from Texas.

Well he was, I think he was Chinese, but he was living in a temple in Texas.

And I think my senior year, a few of us went to Houston to visit him.

So I got to meet him there and I was really impressed by him.

I found him really lovely and welcoming and he was living in the temple by himself but

he was very joyful and very generous and offering the teachings and you know he greeted us when

we arrived and ate a meal with us and just the whole thing.

So that was my first interaction with a monastic.

But I think there was just something deep inside me of like not wanting per se a monastic

life but just feeling really drawn to the practice and wanting to really commit myself

fully to a life of practice.

And I figured that's what a monastic life is.

And then the other aspect of monastic life that drew me was the simplicity of it.

I just wanted to live very simply.

I didn't like having lots of possessions.

So like those two things combined I just kind of thought, "That kind of sounds like what being a monk might be like."

But there were little like hints here and there.

I remember I used to play this video game that had a monastery in it and I'd always

want to go to the monastery and like hang out at the monastery.

Or when I was in high school I wanted to shave my head.

No reason in particular I just thought it would like be cool, fun thing to do but my mom wouldn't let me.

Or like there was this time when I was a little kid when my dad was doing the taxes and I asked him what he was doing and he explained to me, "I'm doing taxes.

You're going to have to do this too one day when you grow up."

And I looked at him and I said, "I'm never doing that."

And my mom likes to tell that story and say that, "You figured out a way to follow that little dream."

Were there fears?

I mean it's a pretty radical way to live.

When you had a degree from a reputable college.

I think the thing I was worried about was like whether or not I would continue to like it in the long term.

Like when I moved to the monastery I was pretty open about like becoming a monk or not becoming

a monk.

I just wanted to practice and be in a practice environment.

And when people would ask me about that I would just think, "Well, I don't know.

I like living in the monastery now but who knows how I'm going to feel in a year or five years from now."

The whole career thing, that was like so out of my mind already.

I had closed the door on that.

I just knew there was no way I was going to be happy on like the computer science career path or like a typical career path in general.

It was either I was going to be a monk or I was going to live like a monk.

I was going to live simply and close to nature basically.

I just knew that was what I wanted for my life.

But I will say like the brothers encouraged me to write a letter and become an aspirant when I was here.

And after I wrote my letter and turned it in I felt really good.

I felt like this weight had been lifted.

I think partially because I didn't have to think about whether or not to do it anymore but there was also this feeling of like, "Yes, this feels right."

And I remember talking to my dad about it and him saying like, "That's a good sign that you feel so good after writing the letter."

And yeah, as I've stayed here over the years I've just felt more and more affirmed like I'm still enjoying it.

It's been four years now, four and a half years.

So what was India like?

Oh man, India was really cool and I kept this travel journal that I still look back on sometimes.

I had never been to a place like India before.

It was in many ways like a third world country in terms of the poverty you saw and just like farm animals in the street, elephants, cows, all kinds of things.

But at the same time there was this like sense of vibrant life, like just massive humanity and so much happening in the public sphere that really impressed me.

You could walk down the street and you'd see people, barbers would be shaving people on the sidewalk.

There would be like a line of people getting food.

I don't know if it was like a neighborhood kind of cookout or it was a business but it was all happening on the street.

It wasn't like everyone kind of alone in their own little corners.

So I remember just being there and feeling so much like the sense of like communal life and like being in this flow and also just such diversity, so many different animals and so many different people and energies.

I really enjoyed it.

The trip itself was really fast paced.

We were jumping around like spending one or two days in each place.

At that time I was reading Eckhart Tolle's book, *The Power of Now*, and really being inspired by that.

I was also really focused on my practice during the trip, like on the bus rides and all that stuff.

It was also the time when I was first exposed to all the Plum Village practices like Dharma sharing and we read the Sutra on the Better Way to Live Alone.

We did a recitation of the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

I remember being really touched by the Dharma sharing because I had been really lonely

staying

at home during those months, during the recovery from the surgery, but also when I lived in New York I didn't feel like I had my people over there.

Being listened to in a tender way and the warmth of the other people was very healing for me on that trip.

I also remember being really touched by the Five Mindfulness Trainings and this one line in the fifth about not using consumption to cover up anxiety and loneliness.

That was like an arrow straight to my heart.

I was like, "Oh my God, that's exactly what I've been doing."

The last three years and that's what I need to stop doing.

That was a teaching that really spoke to me.

You got to know the Sangha a little bit too.

Yeah, that's right.

The abbot of Deer Park at the time, Thay Phap Ho, was on the trip as well as the Deer brother, Hue Truc, Sister Kinh Nghiem, Sister Man Nghiem, and a few other brothers that I still know well in the Sangha.

I had been visiting other practice centers before that trip.

Whenever I went to a center, I would try to connect with the teacher there and get a sense of their practice and the fruit of their practice because I was looking for a teacher.

I remember making eye contact with Thay Phap Ho on one of the early days of the trip and smiling at him, probably with curiosity in my eyes, and then him smiling back at me.

It was a simple gesture, but I was really touched by his friendliness, which was something

I hadn't seen in the other teachers I'd come across up to that point.

It was like an opening of the door for me.

It feels very humanizing to connect with a monastic for the first time like that.

So then you came back to Deer Park immediately after, or did you go home first?

I think I came here immediately after.

I had scheduled a two-week retreat to do after the trip because I figured it would be a bit different retreating here versus being on a trip with the Sangha in India.

I wanted to experience Deer Park.

Maybe I was home for a day or two, but I think it was basically straight back here.

I remember talking to the brothers, and they knew me from the trip and stuff, so we had a relationship.

It was great.

It was a great two weeks.

I remember at the end of the two weeks, one of the novice brothers said to me, "Please come back.

This is your spiritual home now."

I really felt that.

I really felt invited, and I really felt at home.

So as soon as I got home from that two-week retreat, I scheduled the next one, which was right after the holidays.

So that two-week retreat was in November, and then I wanted to spend Christmas and stuff

and New Year's with my family, and then I came back here in January.

You touched on this a little bit earlier, but I'm wondering why does it have to be monastic life for you?

It's so extreme, it's so radical.

Isn't there another way?

Isn't there something a little bit more mellow or easy where you could have a family, have a job where you have enough time to stay involved in the sangha?

What makes it so that you have to be a monk?

Yeah, it's an interesting question.

I think at the beginning, I didn't think I had to be a monk.

Something I've learned about as I've lived here over the years, like I said at the beginning,

I just knew I really loved the practice and I wanted to devote my life to the practice.

So when I was still at home, I tried my best to practice.

I already had the aspiration, so what was I waiting for?

But it was really hard for me to just have the discipline to do sitting meditation every day, to be honest, let alone multiple times a day like we do here.

One thing I did was I kept a meditation journal to try to keep myself accountable.

But what I discovered when I got home was I had this strong impetus to meditate when

I was living in New York because I was suffering so much and I was so anxious.

So it was like I had to meditate, otherwise I was just going to be totally lost in it.

But being at home, surrounded by my family, I was living in a beautiful place, I had all this space, I wasn't suffering as much and so I didn't sit as much.

And it really bothered me because I wanted to be practicing, but it was like I couldn't somehow.

So that was how I knew I needed to live in a practice center.

But when I came to Deer Park, what I discovered was this sense of like brotherhood and community.

I remember sitting outside with some of the brothers and lay friends, having a meal during a lazy evening and just feeling this deep sense of connection to everyone that I hadn't felt before.

I had never felt in New York with my friends.

And that was very powerful and very wonderful.

And on a practical level, being in a community of people who are all doing sitting meditation in the morning, it makes it so easy for me to do that.

I think I have this training from school over many, many years of like if the group is doing something, if school is happening, I just have to go.

And if everyone's have sitting meditation at 5:45, I just feel like I just have to go.

I don't feel like I have a choice, which is a good thing.

So I think I'm like humble about what I'm able to do by myself, basically.

It's because I have the support of the community, the schedule, the land of Deer Park, all of those things together makes it possible.

So that's why living in community is important.

And then I would just also want to add, the next step beyond that, being a monastic and practicing the monastic precepts has been like a huge source of spiritual support for

me that I wouldn't have if I was just living here at Deer Park as like a long-term.

You know, I had a lot of habit energies from the world when I came to the monastery, and it was only because of the precepts and because of being able to share with my brothers about my difficulties and my successes that I've been able to transform my habits and live my whole life in support of a spiritual practice.

I realized recently that there really is no separation between the practice and everything we do in our daily life.

Either we're creating conditions for a practice space, like an internal practice space, or we're taking conditions away.

And so if I can live in a calm and peaceful and serene way and do things that contribute to mindfulness and peace in my daily life, then I'll have a lot of success in my spiritual practice.

And so by following the precepts, I'm doing that.

I'm building my practice space.

[BIRDS CHIRPING]

Do you feel like you have to sacrifice anything to become a monk or to be a monk?

Yeah, that's an interesting question.

It's all about perspective, isn't it?

I mean, this is very common, right?

People come to the monastery and they say, you have to give up so much in order to live this way.

You have to, like, whatever, give up your clothes, your hair, your relationship.

Yeah, yeah.

I mean, they're right.

You have to give up a lot.

And I know that there have been times when I felt like, man, I miss being able to wear clothes I want to wear or, I don't know, cook a meal I want to cook whenever I want.

Travel, do stuff, hobbies, go surfing.

So looking at it from an outsider's perspective, yeah, I totally get that.

And you do sacrifice a lot.

But I never felt like I was giving up a lot.

Because like I said, I just really wanted to put my life into the practice.

So like coming here to Deer Park and living in the community and following the schedule,

I felt like I was going towards something and I was getting something really valuable that I didn't think about how I wasn't able to do X, Y, or Z.

And what's your aspiration, basically?

Like you say you want to put your life into the practice, but what's the practice really about for you?

Yeah, it's a very deep question.

And it's something I have tried to answer and have had difficulty answering.

You know, when we're aspirants, our mentor tells us like, please write about your spiritual aspiration so that you can like refer to it when you have difficulties or whatever so you can remember it.

And I had a lot of trouble writing it down.

So I've always felt this call to understand life

more deeply, to see beyond just kind of the mundane way of looking that we normally have.

I remember when I was in high school, feeling a bit alienated by my peers and not feeling like excited or scared of the same things that my peers were worried about.

Just feeling like this is all kind of, this isn't it.

This isn't like what it's really all about.

And I was really scared that in the busyness of life, I would forget that there was like

a deeper dimension and that all this stuff that we worry about in our daily life, like

you know, the car or the power bills or you know, what our friend is doing with his girlfriend

or I don't know, whatever we worry about is like, it's in the end, it doesn't matter.

You know, it's all just going to be water under the bridge.

But it's so easy to just get caught up in life and just kind of like run after these

kind of superficial things and worry about this and that and miss what's actually going on.

And what is actually going on?

I don't know what's actually going on, but I feel that there is something, something

deeper, something happening in life and I want to be in touch with that.

Especially I feel like as a Plum Village monastic, we're, you know, we're serving people, we're

helping ourselves to be happy, we're awakening, we're taking care of suffering and it can

be very broad, you know, what we, I mean, there's so many valid aspirations to be a

monastic, you know.

Sure.

Yeah, sure.

I was just telling one of the lay friends who's here the other day how like, you know, not everyone can master meditation practice and I think that's true among the monastics and there's certain monks whose aspiration and whose life is more about service, serving the Sangha, serving people who come, doing charitable work.

There's others who focus more on studying, learning broadly and sharing their knowledge with others and applying it to the Buddhist teachings.

Yeah, for me, like, I'm really aware of like the pitfall of like just doing a lot of work or yeah, doing a lot of reading and not, and missing the chance to really go deeply into the practice.

I really love practicing meditation and I have had a lot of experiences of like deep peace and happiness and that's what it's all about for me.

That's where my aspiration is at, is like, can I rest more stably in that?

And I know I can help the world by doing that.

So you've been living at Deer Park for about four and a half years and we ordained together about three years ago and we recently received the bhikshu precepts and became fully ordained

monks and I'm wondering what, yeah, exactly.

Celebrate.

Yeah, what does that mean to you and how do you relate to that?

It is a kind of a, in our tradition in particular, it's a big deal and it's talked about from our elder siblings, you know, as like something that we should really look into.

So yeah, how have you related to that?

It's new, it's what, a month ago or whatever.

Yeah, yeah.

I mean, I've been, I think I've been basking in the glow of being a bhikshu.

You know, it's funny you say it's a big deal, but I feel like it's kind of played down in Plum Village as opposed to like other Mahayana traditions.

We really say like when you ordain as a novice, you're a monk.

But yeah, it's hard to explain because in some sense I don't feel different and my daily life isn't so different, but I feel more mature and I feel more of a sense of responsibility for my practice.

You know, we had this huge ceremony, all these venerables came, the sangha had to organize this thing and we received these precepts that have been passed down from great monks, so many generations, 2,500 years down to us.

And I feel like the sense of duty, a sense of responsibility, like I want to do something with this, you know, I don't want to waste this gift.

And there's this kind of like spiritual, mystical thing going on where I just, I just have noticed that I'm spending more time in my personal practice than I did before.

And it's not because of any ideas I have or like I'm not pushing myself like I have in the past.

I just feel something that's been happening very naturally.

And I think it's just a maturing of my, it's just me maturing as a spiritual practitioner,

I think.

But I'm still wearing the novice robe mostly.

I really like that robe.

It kind of looks like old now, which I like that.

And to me, it kind of symbolizes also this kind of like arrived home, like I already had a lot of conditions to practice as a novice and like I wasn't chasing after becoming a bhikshu or having a higher status or something.

So I'm just going to keep doing like I've been doing, you know.

So usually after the bhikshu ordination, we think about changing centers.

We have a lot of centers scattered around the world.

Yes.

In our tradition.

So yeah, it's sounding more and more like you'll be heading to Thailand at least for a time.

And yeah, what's the importance of that for you?

Why do you feel like now is the right time and what do you hope to get out of that experience?

Yeah, yeah, I'm really excited about that.

And something I've also been contemplating on, you know, we recently had a meeting about it and the brothers approved for me to go.

But I was kind of thinking about like, what would it be like if the brother said no?

And I just had to stay here at Deer Park.

I think there is a little bit of this like restlessness.

Like I feel like I need to go like somewhere I need to do something.

And I don't know, I don't know exactly where it's coming from or what it's about.

But that's definitely playing a role.

I just want to like say that out because I haven't said it yet.

But the reason I want to go to Thailand is multifold.

I think the biggest reason is that Thailand is this country where Buddhism has thrived for so many centuries.

And there's such a strong culture around Buddhist monks.

And I feel like out here at Deer Park, I like to say we're kind of in the frontier of Buddhism.

Like it's very new to Southern California.

It's very new to the West in general.

And I just feel like going back to Asia, I'm going to get a better sense of what it really means to be a monastic and what are like monastic values, what is monastic culture about, you know.

And being in that environment, I'm hoping that they will kind of just soak in and I'll kind of embody them by the end of it.

I think I'm going to learn a lot.

And I'm really open to that.

Not just monastic culture, but also like Buddhist culture in general.

I'm really interested to learn more about like how Thai monks live and how they relate

to the world outside.

And then also Vietnamese culture, because it's very much a Vietnamese center that we have.

It's in Thailand, but it's populated mostly by Vietnamese monastics.

And because our culture, I mean, our tradition, Plum Village tradition comes from Vietnam, of course.

I think an understanding and appreciation for Vietnamese culture is something really important.

You know, we talk a lot about like Buddhism in the West and like bringing monasticism to the West and, you know, this is this practice that's helped me so much.

I want to bring it to my people, the place where I grew up, Southern California.

But I think we still have a lot to learn about Buddhism and about monasticism.

And I don't think we should try to like cut off the parts that seem like they're just Asian culture that have been like added to Buddhism.

I think they're really closely connected.

And you know, the stuff about like seniority and, you know, respecting and paying tribute to our elders, our parents, our teachers, having the sense of like duty and responsibility to take care of the lay people and for the lay people to take care of us.

I think all of these aspects are really important parts of Buddhism and of monasticism.

And I think we need to learn and study more about them from our friends in Asia.

And finally, I've been studying Vietnamese for a long time.

And this is a center where Vietnamese is the main language spoken.

So I'm really excited to, you know, have an immersive Vietnamese experience and really learn this language and to the ends that I've been talking about, you know, learning Vietnamese will help me learn from the Vietnamese ancestral teachers and Vietnamese lay friends, etc.

How do you relate to being a Western monastic?

And yeah, what do you want to say to people who are interested in being a monastic in the West who might not really know much about it, except that they feel this call, like you say, like to live differently, to live simply?

I think I feel somewhat intimidated by being a Western monastic, because I don't feel like there's a lot of precedent for it.

So I feel like it's not an easy path.

And I don't want to take my monastic life for granted.

Yeah, so part of that for me means like, not saying that I'm going to be a monk for my whole life, because I don't want to like, you know, count my eggs before they hatch.

I know it's going to be hard, and the monastic path isn't easy.

And I think I have to learn a lot from the elder monks and nuns that have come before me.

And I need to learn more about the culture and the way of life that has supported them.

In terms of people who are interested in monastic life, I would say, you know, come to the monastery

and practice with us.

I think it's really wonderful.

I think it's a really wonderful way of life.

But I think people can be very individualistic about their practice.

We can learn nowadays from many different traditions and teachers, and we can kind of pick the things we like and jump around between different things.

And monasticism is really about going deep in one direction.

I think that's really important.

So if you're considering being a monk in the Plum Village tradition, you should go to the

Plum Village Center, and you should just practice the Plum Village practices for like a three-month

rains retreat, for example.

You know, don't practice Vipassana.

Don't practice.

Don't read, you know, New Age spiritual teachers or other Buddhist teachers.

Just read Thay's books.

Practice mindful walking, mindful breathing.

Practice playing.

Practice laying in the hammock.

You know, try to recreate the experience of being a Plum Village monastic as best you can.

And then see if you feel nourished.

See if you feel like you're making progress.

You know, you're getting insight.

You're getting healing.

And if you feel like you are, then I would say continue.

And don't be afraid if there's parts of it that don't totally resonate with you, because we're not going to find the perfect spiritual community that fits every part of our heart and soul perfectly, you know.

The main thing is to find a place that's good enough, and then you can enjoy the practice.

Well thanks so much for listening to this first installment of Meet the Monastics.

Each week over the next nine weeks, we'll release another interview, so please subscribe.

And if you enjoyed the episode, please help us spread the word.

Today's episode is produced and edited by Kenley Neufeld.

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Meet the Monastics is recorded at Deer Park Monastery, a mindfulness practice center in the Plum Village tradition of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh in Escondido, California on the traditional and unceded lands of the Kumeyaay Nation, to whom we extend our gratitude and respect.

Deer Park offers mindfulness retreats and public days of mindfulness throughout the year, and a five-year monastic training program for 18 to 35-year-olds.

If you're interested in visiting, check out our website, deerparkmonastery.org, or follow us on social media.

I'm Brother Minh An, see you next week.

I felt like I did all the talking, is it supposed to be like that?

(laughing)