Foundations of Mindfulness Part 8 - Mindfulness of Feeling Tones

Gil Fronsdal

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So on these Monday evenings, we're in the middle of a series of talks on the Buddha's teachings on the four foundations of mindfulness. The fundamental text, a kind of origin genesis, the source text for the whole mindfulness phenomena that we have around the world now, comes from this one text, really. And in this text, they have thirteen, kind of like thirteen exercises to do. These exercises are meant to develop a heightened sense of awareness, a heightened awareness. An awareness is so strong that we know that we're aware. We're not preoccupied with the things we're aware of—our thoughts, our concerns, our taxes, whatever it might be—but we are.

The existence or the presence of awareness is palpable. It's not visible, but we know it can be perceived in the mind's eye, really clear: I am aware. Wow! And that, once that awareness gets that strong, that opens the door for seeing. Having insight that is liberating. So the whole purpose of these exercises is to move a meditator towards liberation.

And so what it means by these exercises is that they have a particular purpose, and it's not using mindfulness in order to help us with many of the different important events, stories, situations of our life that we run into. We know that mindfulness helps in all kinds of things, and certainly can help us with the challenges of our life that we have to think about and reflect on or something. But this mindfulness practice is honing in the attention to those phenomena, those ways of experiencing ourselves that support this heightened awareness. The point of the practice is not to sort through the life issues we have. It's almost like the life issues, you know, are put on a shelf. Or we see the life issues, if we focus on them, in a new way.

So we're not really dealing with the issues. We're dealing with something much more fundamental. And that distinction is very important to see, because if people are doing mindfulness practice and they're trying to kind of explore and deal with their personal issues, but the instructions are actually to go a different way, they can set up tension. And some people, you know, there's nothing wrong. Actually, it's actually very important at times in life to use mindfulness to look at our personal issues. It's actually a very important part of life, and we grow and develop through it and sort our life out.

But some people, I think, some people that I meet, it seems like that's all they think mindfulness is about. And so it's all about focusing on their psychology, their emotions, their stories, what's happening in their lives in a way that is never ending. It's kind of like a labyrinth, you know, a maze—once you go into certain parts of our life, and if you really go in there, you'll never come out. So it's like stepping away to look back at the entire life we have through a different perspective. And now this new perspective, I think, becomes particularly clear when we get to the seventh exercise of the thirteen, which is a mindfulness of feelings.

Now, some people now get really excited, finally, "We're going to deal with emotions, and you know, feelings, good old feelings." The problem is that it's not emotions, and it's rather unfortunate that translating this Pāli word $vedan\bar{a}$ as feelings—just that, you know, in some ways, it's the most straightforward, simple English thing we could choose. The word comes from the verb vedeti, which means to know or to experience, to have direct, immediate experience. Not like you had an experience of the beach today. It's like you to know the you. But if you are at the beach, you can experience the contact of the wind against your cheek. That kind of sensory contact, and that's what the verb refers to in $vedan\bar{a}$, is a misery.

Literally, it means something like "that which is known" or "that which is experienced." And there's many, many things that we can experience, but it's placed into particular categories. All the things we can experience, in the different places in the suttas, the Buddha categorizes $vedan\bar{a}$ —the things that we can know, or the things we can experience directly—in many different ways. But in this text of The Four Foundations of Mindfulness, he does it in a particular way, which is he focuses on what can be seen as the common denominator of all experiences. All experiences we have have one of three qualities to it. And so it's the feeling, which was referred to as feeling, is these three qualities that all experience can have.

And what's interesting, when you have something that's the common denominator, something that's common or universal to all experience, then you have to hold into being mindful of them, or paying attention to them, that you can use in all these different—in anything. You can come to any situation at all. You have this kind of perspective you can bring to bring

the mind to a kind of different state of heightened awareness. So it's a very powerful state. This thing, this $vedan\bar{a}$, in this exercise, as is described in these feelings of idea, there is a distinction that's made, or two general categories that are very important.

And it's kind of like, if you think of a—I don't know, like a walnut, you know, a walnut nut, you know, you take it off the tree, and it has a shell around the outside, right? It's hard, and many seeds have a shell on the outside that just protect the germ of the real seed in the inside. And, you know, but with a walnut shell, it's really hard. It takes some work to get to the meat, they call it, the seed that's inside. But with *vedanā*, there's—it's almost like we say there's two. There's the shell that can be known, and then there is that which is more essential inside the seed.

And now the shell is how they refer to it in the text. They call it "of the flesh," things of the flesh. The preceding six exercises have been all about the body, mindfulness of the body. And it's mostly mindful to the body through the flesh, through, you know, the sensory apparatus we have that we can feel and connect to the world when we feel it, and how it is in the body. And that's kind of the shell. And Buddhism puts tremendous importance on mindfulness of the body, in being embodied. There's no denigration of it, or it's very, very important. But it's still a kind of the shell, and there's something like a seed, something inside, and that's called "not of the flesh."

Now, it's kind of provocative that Bhikkhu Bodhi, who translates so many of these texts, he calls these two categories—of the flesh and not of the flesh, what I'm calling the shell and the seed inside—he calls it "worldly" and "unworldly." So there's the worldly experiences, and then there's the unworldly. Which would you prefer? It's a little strange. But literally, the text, literally, the literal Pāli means "of the flesh" and "not of the flesh." And "of the flesh" are those experiences that come from our kind of on the surface of our face, and "not of the flesh" are those that well up more deeply inside. I like to think of them as being connected to the quality of our inner life, quality of our inner being and now.

And so, you know, we can go through life, and we can be in the rain and cold, and that's kind of maybe miserable, and then, you know, the rain stops, the sun comes out, and that's kind of delightful, and that's kind of all of the flesh, that's worldly, kind of on the outside. It comes and goes, these things. But the deeper, the real, you know, how are we? How are we really deep inside? You might—the surface might be kind of like, you know, a little bit bummed about the rain, but deep inside there might be very deep contentment, our sense of well-being and happiness. The sun might come out and be beautiful. On the surface we feel like we relax. We take off our raincoat. That's how nice it is. But if you really go deep inside, we

find, "I'm really lonely," or "really kind of sad about something." So what is it like, really inside deep?

And so that's what kind of—we're kind of getting into what I call the quality of our inner life. And it turns out that we're the custodian of that quality. No one else can do it for us. How we are in the depths of our being is—we're the caretakers of that. And learning how to take care of that, learning how to be mindful of that, learning how to practise in such a way that we can start caring for what's going on in and supporting and nourishing our inner life so that it becomes nourishing, nurturing, supportive, helpful and, in the end, for the Buddhist purpose, can be liberating. So there's *vedanā*, this feeling.

So it talks about—these texts talk about two categories of feelings. Some people call it "feeling tones." These things are the qualities of what we can experience. That's a common denominator to all qualities. They can be—all experiences can either be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. That's about as—I, that's about as exciting as it gets.

And now, you know, it's kind of like, you know, suddenly the room gets quiet and dull—either like pleasant, unpleasant, nor like, you know, that's pretty uninteresting. And you know, I'd rather have rapture, or rapture is pleasant. This is boring: pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, you know. This is like getting complicated work that's unpleasant for you. I've known people and I've done this where I go into a situation—maybe that's socially quite complex. The dynamics in this party are difficult. The noise in the store or somewhere, just like, you know, complicated and difficult, and, you know, trying to find our way, trying to make sense of it, trying to find our peace with it, and then stepping back and realize, "Wait a minute, this is just an unpleasant situation."

And to simplify it like that gives a total—gives a perspective to relate to it: "Oh, it's just unpleasant." I don't have to go into all the details of who did what, and who said what, and the conditions that brought it up. It's just unpleasant. And the stress that I feel of being in this difficult situation is mostly a reaction to how unpleasant it is. Instead of trying to analyze a situation, trying to—here the idea, keep it really simple and an experience, it has an unpleasant aspect of this complicated situation. The unpleasantness is much more simple. It gives us a—to hold, to be present for it, to see it, without getting swept into the complexity of the stories and all these things. It's just unpleasant, the same thing as something that's intensely pleasant.

Now, why would you want to step back and just, you know, if once it's pleasant, you only just go off indulge in it, but indulging in something—it's certainly fine in some ways, but it's not conducive to cultivating this heightened liberated awareness. And this heightened liberated

awareness is really special to have. And so even in a very pleasant situation, someone might decide, "I don't want to get swept up in that. Oh, it's just a pleasant situation, supposed to be enamoured. We are enchanted with, 'It's just a pleasant situation.'" And we set that in space, the mind can wake up. It's not kind of caught in it. And the degree to which we can avoid getting caught in what's pleasant, we develop a capacity to also make a catch in what's unpleasant. It's actually a very important thing to become aware of.

And now, this boring thing of pleasant and neutral—a long mouthful to even say—turns out to be one of the Buddha's most important teachings, one of the most important teachings of Buddha. And the part of the reason for that is that it lies at the genesis of the nexus of so much of our life. Turns out, it's rather humbling to realize how much of our life is constructed on our reactions to the basic pleasant and unpleasantness of experience. The Buddha describes how, as a whole, complicated religious philosophies have their genesis in someone experiencing something as pleasant or unpleasant. Probably political platforms and political points of view started with, "Someone experienced something, this is unpleasant, and I have to get rid of it, and now have to have a whole political philosophy to explain why," or something is pleasant.

For the Buddha's analysis is that pleasant and unpleasant are fundamental to our reaction and construction of ourselves and the life in the world we live in. And if we can get a handle on this, if we can see how we react the moment of contact in the present moment, we can actually see the experience of pleasant and unpleasant, and not be swept up into the reactivity to it in the constructive aspect of the mind, the story-making of the mind. Then we have a yet better chance of cultivating this heightened awareness that we're looking for here in mindfulness practice. So the Buddha said that. So he said the instructions are: When things are pleasant, know them as pleasant. When things are unpleasant, know them as unpleasant, and when they are neither pleasant nor unpleasant, know them as such as that, neither pleasant or unpleasant.

So some people find this instruction phenomenally helpful, and I know some people not. For me, I find it helpful, but I don't make it my primary practice. But I've known people who really have taken this in and really helped them get concentrated, helped them get mindful, helped them be free of their experience, really stay and see this experience in this kind of way. But then it goes on after he says—this introduces these three types of feeling. That's the common denominator to all experience. And then he says that when there's a pleasant experience of the flesh, one knows it's a pleasant experience of the flesh. When there's a pleasant experience, it's not of the flesh—this deeper place, what's deeper inside—one knows that to be a

pleasant experience, not of the flesh.

So what's going on here? I think there's a transition being made in this text, and so bear with me a little bit here. So there's thirteen exercises. The seventh one is the midpoint. And so I think whoever constructed this text very carefully constructed the midpoint of it to highlight something important. In the midpoint, in the midpoint, there's a transition from of the flesh to not of the flesh, from the shell to the kernel inside. And so there's a movement away from what can be called of the body now, to that which is deeper inside. And the first step of that is the feeling tone. And then we'll see next week that the next exercise has to do with mind states and mind states. Now, really getting down into the quality of inner life, how we really feel, which goes on, and to be able to cut and out tune into mind states. A is now beginning to care for this inner quality.

And then after that, there's five more exercises that have to do with understanding how our mind states are influenced by particular mental factors, getting really deep down into the mind, and how we get caught, entangled, knotted up, and how we get into it, how we get free, which is, you know, all elements have to do with this depth of earth, what I call the inner quality of being. So there's a wonderful tradition, almost like a movement here from the body to that which is more—I wouldn't call it mind, that keeps all my mind on the surface, but that kind of the inner quality of how we feel, how we are. So sometimes this "not of the flesh" is called that. It's those feelings that are related to the practice that we do as we meditate. There are a series of upwelling emotions, sensations, feelings that arise from the practice itself. We're not getting a message: We're not getting good food. The well does not depend on the weather. It's dependent on the capacity of the mind to let go temporarily of worldly concerns, and to begin in not letting go, deep letting go, to be able to develop concentration and stillness and peace, and a certain kind of inner joy that can well up. And it wells up. It's kind of like it's welling up for no good reason except that we're getting concentrated.

So that's, for some people, that's a—a revolutionary kind of experience to have, because for some people, until that time, they've always been dependent on something in the world being just right, having the right flavor ice cream, you know, or right weather, or being with the right people, or not being with the wrong people. Or, you know, something has to be, something has to be lined up in, you know. And again, happiness and well-being is dependent on the conditions of the world. Then it's a little bit like we're all constantly shifting and changing the conditions that are around us. So we can always have it just right and get that sweet spot where we're just happy. It's kind of like shifting the deck chairs in the Titanic as it's going down. You know, we're all going down, you know? So we're shifting and moving around.

We're constantly shifting that which is very impermanent. It just doesn't stay the same.

I had—I saw this in myself today. I was kind of uncomfortable for a while today. Then I was comfortable, and then I was uncomfortable, and then I was uncomfortable some more, and then I was uncomfortable some more. So I went and had food. I had lunch, and after lunch I thought that was good, but then maybe I ate too much or something, but I felt a little drowsy, and so I didn't like being drowsy. And so then I went and lay down to take a ten minutes nap. But I woke up not so contented. So what am I do then? So then I went for a walk, and that was nice except it was raining. That was nice except my pants got all wet. You know, just go on and on, right? The conditions of the world, and so you know, you sometimes go from one and a. But to put—to discover a sense of deep inner well-being that's not dependent on the conditions of the world, is a phenomenal thing to do.

And then to realize I don't have to—I don't have to always be changing the conditions, adjusting everything to be happy or well. I just had to kind of tap into this inner way of being and be the custodian of it, the caretaker of it. How is it, you know? So we learn that when we start meditating, to start meditating and learning slowly over time to let go of the concerns of the day, the stories that we are caught up in, let go of our self-preoccupation, let go of our self-representations, the stories of who we are—me, myself, and mine—that we swim in, and be able to let go temporarily our concerns for the world and settle into some deeper sense of simplicity, steadiness, stability, peacefulness, joy, happiness. Even, oddly enough, there are various kinds of love, and it's one of the great, fantastic things of this kind of deep inner quality below the shell—that is, that the idea that we can have forms of love that have no object. Most love has an object, you know, like a person, you know, "I am so in love with that person," and which is nice maybe or not, but to have this feeling of love well up that has no object, no person, no thing—not even ourselves, just a radiance of love. We have all these wonderful capacities of this vital under the shell, this inner quality of being that can well up from the inside, independent of the conditions of the world around us. And then to be able to step into that and carry that with us through the world is one part of the art of this practice.

So first, the exercise is to know, just simply note, experience is as pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant or unpleasant. And as we tune in to that level of experience, to be able to use that, to study, to be aware of how we react to that. And there's sometimes a very frequently instantaneous reactivity to us. But things are pleasant or unpleasant, for we go for or against. We like it. We don't like it. And it's possible to kind of see how that reactivity happens to the pleasant and unpleasant, and stop doing it.

It's possible to settle back and just let the pleasant be pleasant, with no reactivity, no holding

on, no leaning towards it, and the unpleasant to be just the unpleasant. One of the benefits of that capacity to just be free in the middle of pleasant and unpleasant is that it's possible to have a joy together with pain. If we're reactive to pain and we're caught in the grip of pain and reacting and pushing and wanting it differently, there's no room in the psyche for joy. I've had intense pain and very intense joy at the same time, mostly in meditation. A very kind of—things are simple enough that you kind of navigate through that there.

So I'd recommend it for you through this week is, as you go through your life, try to keep it so simple that what you tune in to—the pleasant and unpleasant quality of what's going on—and see how that can be a mirror to your reactivity, to your preferences, to your likes and dislikes, your ways of going for and against. And ask yourself, "Do I need to like or not like this? Do I need to for or against it? Don't need to go towards the pleasant and hold on to it. Do I need to react, pull away from the unpleasant? Is it possible I like just to be there breathing and stable and steady right in the middle of it? Oh, this is an unpleasant situation."

But then the exercise goes a little deeper, as I've been saying. And then once we get a sense of this pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, then it's possible to begin distinguishing the pleasant and unpleasant that's kind of more of the shell, more of the flesh, more kind of have to do with the vicissitudes of life from the kind of deeper not of the flesh, not of the world. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, these deeper kind of spiritual—some people translate "spiritual feelings"—that can begin bubbling up and arising, that are there independent of the vicissitudes of life. And can you kind of tune in and notice that for yourself? Can you notice how some things that are pleasant are just because the weather is a certain way, and other things are just seem to be connected to some deeper root inside of us? Things that are unpleasant—are they of the world, or are they connected to something deeper inside of us?

Then they say that the unpleasant experiences, which are not, which are not of the flesh, the kind of a deeper place—that's what's how that's explained. For it's that unpleasant feeling that can come when we're disconnected from the goodness inside, or when we are—unpleasant feeling when we really want to practice, we really want to tap into the deeper roots inside us to see this essence inside of us. We're not tapping into it, we're not practicing it. We would like to move on the path of freedom, but we can't. And that frustration, that disappointment, that yearning, which is unpleasant, the tradition calls that's an experience of the flesh, not of the flesh that's unpleasant. But we can pursue that. We can practice, we can engage in meditation, for example, or being on the path to practice, then that's when these not of the flesh, these deeper wellsprings, get tapped into and bubble up.

And what do you know about these deep, flowing wellsprings inside of you? What do you

know about goodness and well-being and peace or something beautiful that resides in your inner, in the quality of your inner life that's worth pursuing or developing, worth protecting, worth acknowledging? It's worth giving time to and allowing it to grow and nourish and develop. That you want to incubate it. You want to sit on it and be with it and allow it to kind of develop and grow. This not of the flesh, this inner quality of stuff—it's, for some people, quite fragile. Some people hardly ever tap into it, don't even know it's there. And what occasionally kind of happens by accident, and it can easily be lost because so easily swept up into the big concerns of our life. But how do we stay close to it and incubate it? How do we stay close to it and allow it to nourish and grow and develop and become strong? It's kind of a task. But one of the ways to do that is to recognize it: "Oh, this is not of the flesh. This is this inner quality. This is so."

So repeat something as I—and this little is. And I find it quite remarkable that in this exercise the Buddha is simplifying what we focus on in being mindful to. There's no story, there's no analysis, there's no, you know, complicated ideas. It just is radical simplicity. Is it pleasant, is it unpleasant, or neither? And that so much can come out of that. That's really a kind of a doorway or gateway into a tremendous amount of depth in this practice.

So we have about ten minutes, and I don't know how clear I was with this. And so if you would like to ask any questions, you are welcome to. Or if you have testimonials about practising with these $vedan\bar{a}$, these feeling tones, be nice to hear.

Gil: Suppose I've had an opportunity to be generous and you can see that your generosity is doing some good for someone, and that feels good. Maybe you didn't even get thanked, but just knowing that you've done, been helpful, feels very good. Would that be more—would that kind of happiness or pleasant feeling be more of this world or inner, what you say? So if one has a pure form of generosity and that, and there's an upwelling of good feelings inside, is it of the flesh or not of the flesh? I suspect it's not of the flesh, if it's really pure innocence. You know, it's a—you know, I could be generous to someone, and I hope everyone noticed that was really good. People noticed how generous I was, that was great. No, not that. Not that. Yes, crumbly. I mean, there's a defense. Can be a lack of feeling here. Er, yes, der, but as if it fails to have some depth to it. Okay, that was my question.

Can one of the traps I get into my mind is I imagine a situation and I can turn it into this very painful experience internally. If it is, nothing is not going to happen. It didn't happen. It's not going to happen. We mean all based on fear. If I imagine a certain situation, I can imagine which way it would go, either good or bad. Then you, in that moment, I suppose if I were being mindful, it would be to label that pleasant or unpleasant?

Yes, or just stop the thinking altogether. Be nice? Yes, maybe. If you saw the fantasy that you're making up, the imagination making up is being something unpleasant, then you might—two things might happen. You might either might say, "This is so unpleasant. I only to bother with this if that is." So many times I know where it's going. It's not—"This is unpleasant," and just pull back and let go if you can. The other thing that might happen that then sometimes it's more useful, more realistic is because it's not so easy to let go. If then we can see, "Oh, this is unpleasant, but why am I chasing it? Why am I staying? And, you know, gnawing it, I added." And then you might see the attachment you have, or the fear you have, or the emotion that's propelling it. So sometimes that simplicity of your seeing pleasant and unpleasant can help us look at the reactivity or the drive we have that's connected to it.

And so when you feel something not of the flesh, like a good feeling of contentment or wellbeing, you suggest you can just stay with it and enjoy it, like during meditation. Yes, you can. The idea of enjoying it is a little dangerous. And because it can have attachment in it, I think that I—but it's also enjoying it. Maybe it's a kind of word that straddles our two sides, you know, straddles indulging and just allowing it to be there. So we can allow it to be there and appreciate it, but we don't indulge in it again, like I find that I could let it be in, but I water that when it's not. That'd be looking for it now. So if it's there, yes, let it be, but appreciate its presence, value it, without being attached to it, because if we don't acknowledge it and appreciate it, it's easy. It's easy to overlook it and get caught up in other things. So we want to kind of nourish that and allow it to be there. But we can kind of take some of the life out of it if we are too actively indulging in it. Or, you know, "This is as great as is the best." It's just us, very simple. Just feel it and be with it. It actually gets—actually, a paradox is that to have some degree of concentration and focus and have these good feelings well up, they actually get stronger. If you don't indulge in them. Indulging in them kind of makes it worse. You're in to take some of life, or somebody squeezes them a little bit. So if you really want to indulge, don't. Thank you.

Isn't a part of the idea of meditation practice to learn to not label things as good and bad? I'm trying to reconcile this with now sort of bringing a more continual presence to his eyes. Is what I'm experiencing is as good, or is this matter as it's neutral? I think that the meditation practice, at least in this Buddhist tradition, does involve making some—learning to make distinctions. Good and bad are so vague and unhelpful—probably not useful to do that. But it's useful to distinguish between what is healthy and unhealthy, oh, and what is helpful and not helpful. So there are distinctions that are useful. So if you know that then it's not helpful

to be lost in fantasy, then you can—then you know it is not helpful. So I should like all this. If you know it's helpful to focus on the simplest, simple pleasant-unpleasantness of experience, and that keeps you present and keeps you kind of free and not entangled in things, then we can pursue that. So there are distinctions being made that are different than good and bad. And I don't think I used the terms good and bad today. It was pleasant and unpleasant, and pleasant and unpleasant are a little bit more almost like inherent in the experience. So I'm sitting here right now, and I put my foot on top of my right foot, on top of my left ankle, and it's actually a little bit unpleasant, you know. I would actually say, "Yeah, it hurts," but you know it, you know, but it's unpleasant. And then I have my—the way I'm sitting here, you know, leaning on my left arm and stretching, and that feeling of stretching is actually pleasant. I'm not manufacturing it necessarily. I'm not like, you know, making a value judgment on it either. One is—I'm not saying one is good and one is bad. The ankle thing is not, and the saying, "It's good and bad." It just is—just unpleasant, the stretching of my arm. I'm not—good or bad. It just wants—well, that's pleasant. And so—and I'm not making that up. Whereas good and bad, we're making up, you. So maybe want one more over here, if you can, the corner.

So one of the things you offered was—I suggested we could offer was testimonials. I have a testimonial: Working with Unpleasant Feeling Tone shortly after I sat a very long retreat. I was hospitalized for a period of time and needing to get a lot of blood drawn and you—lots of being poked as a pin cushion. And I very quickly came to get really curious about the experience of having blood drawn and being poked. And it's now a very pleasant experience to watch what those sensations are like, and to watch them change. So it's both awareness of feeling tone and of impermanence and of change. Experience is not static. It's different every time. And that, like investigation, that curiosity and watching it shift, has just brought so much joy. I would have never thought that it was—I enjoy it so much as I like this.

Allow what you're saying. And what I'm assuming here or thinking is that the young, you know, when—if we experience something as being painful or bad or something like that, we simply—we kind of like miss—it's very reductionalistic sometimes to be able to have careful mindfulness, see all the different aspects of it, the details of it. Some of those details are becoming pleasant and interesting. But in addition, what would happen to you was the investigation became pleasant. And this idea that we have this power of attention in looking more deeply and being curious about things, then we start becoming free of the event—pleasantness or unpleasantness. And we have—we tap into this beautiful quality: "Oh, this is interesting. It's unpleasant. Let's take a look." The "Let's take a look" is pleasant. That

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is close enough to, "Yes, it's great." So I hope you have a few experiences that are pleasant or unpleasant this week. So you can—you can even have something to study if you're lucky enough. There'll be a few. So thank you all.