

A Note on Fundamental Structure

By Bhikkhu N. Ñāṇamoli

I'll try to say something about *Fundamental Structure* (FS) here—the way I understand it—in an attempt to help those who are struggling to make any sense of it at all. I don't think that the next paragraphs will clarify things to an any significant degree, but what they might do is contribute to the perspective of a reader and perhaps give a direction in which one has to go in order to understand Ven. Ñāṇavīra's last part of *Notes on Dhamma*. Although, Ven. Ñāṇavīra himself said that it is not too important to understand it in order to make progress in Dhamma, it is nevertheless a very valuable instrument of thought which can help one shed many wrong views, acquired in a course of time, which are indeed preventing one from seeing the Dhamma. Let me begin:

1. FS, the way Ven. Ñāṇavīra presented it, is more of a *description* of a phenomenological world, than an explanation of a theory he had about the nature of our experience. In order to get an initial understanding one must forget about the scientific outlook we are all so accustomed to and see things in their nature, i.e. as phenomena. The best example of the difference between the scientific outlook and the phenomenological one, is the most common mathematical question - “How much is one and one?” If the purpose is science, we would say “two” (and perhaps add “of course” to our answer). However, if we are interested in the nature of things, our answer should say - “one”. This can also be extended, so the answer would remain the same even if the question was - “How much is one and one, and one, and one...?” The answer is always—*one*. If someone asks how much is one and two, you would say two. Why is this? It is because in the first instance we have *one thing*, while in the second we have *two*. No matter how many times someone presents you one thing, it will always be *one thing*, and the number of its appearances (which can go into infinity) would all point to the same nature of *that thing*. So, whether it is one here, and one over there, it remains *one nature* of the present thing, i.e. one phenomena. In the second instance, we have one and two, i.e. *two different natures*, thus two different things.

2. Without going into further detail here, this is the attitude one has to have when one approaches FS, in order for it to be intelligible. This was Ven. Ñāṇavīra's starting point and from there he was only describing the present experience, never abandoning the phenomenological outlook. Incidentally, I discovered that the scientific outlook can also be represented in FS as:

○ ○	○ ○
○ x	x ○
○ x	x ○
○ ○	○ ○

The fact that science is included within FS patterns as one of the possible ways you can regard things (i.e. *view* them), once they are given, only shows that it comes secondary to one's experience, and it is often quite misleading, because *ignoring* the nature of the experience as a

whole is a necessary prerequisite for science to arise.

3. Let me try to explain this more clearly. Ven. Ñāṇavīra said that he is trying to outline the framework “within which things exist”¹. It is the existence of that very framework that usually deceives people into believing that things themselves are *permanent*. This is because the framework, or the nature of the nature of things (this also goes into infinity), appears as more stable and permanent², than other more *particular* things within it. Sometimes, even when some of those particular things are actually seen as impermanent, they are still being *held* (or *assumed*, as I prefer) as permanent. The reason for this is obvious—the framework *within which* they come to be is *assumed to be permanent*. So the only way of resolving this is to see that framework as impermanent, as something which *directly depends* upon things, and vice versa. The scientific or objective view *does not* acknowledge the impermanence of a thing at all, in the Buddha's sense of the word, so the possibility of seeing the framework as impermanent is prevented to arise.

4. To explain this further we can use the figures from FS. We've seen that a thing can be represented as:

o o
o x

This arrangement represents *one aspect* of a thing, a *current* aspect. Obviously, there are three more positions that *x* can take so all of the combinations put together would look like:

o	o		o	o
o	x		x	o
o	x		x	o
o	o		o	o

This picture represents a thing *O*, and this is how things appear in *immediacy*, like a simple *O*; we all know that, for example, when we are absorbed in worldly activities (i.e. unaware), things somehow are what they are. They seem solid and completely enclosed in themselves. That is *O*. This representation above, however, *does not* reach the phenomena of a thing, since it represents a *mere collection* of the four different aspects of that thing (*x*-s and *o*-s are all equally arranged, thus we have just *O*, regardless of how far the picture becomes expanded). So no matter how far our reflection goes the picture above will still represent only *O* (for example —no matter how much detail of a certain thing we reveal, it is still the *same* thing). This is *science*; a collection of different aspects of a thing without really affecting that thing as a phenomenon.

5. As one can see from above, this collection cannot show the impermanence of *O*, and although the original experience gave us the glimpse of it in

1 *Notes on Dhamma*, FS, para. 3; Path Press Publications, 2009, p. 93

2 People don't necessarily see this, but they do *feel* it.

o o
o x

the fact that we later represented it as

o	o		o	o
o	x		x	o
o	x		x	o
o	o		o	o

means that we have removed it from our sight³. Again, this is the way science works, and that is what I meant when I said that it comes secondary to our experience and misrepresents⁴ it. If we want to stay true to the original experience of a thing

o o
o x

we ought to represent it as

o	o		o	o
o	x		o	x
o	o		x	x
o	x		x	o

This picture maintains the nature of phenomena, which is the nature of *change*, i.e. impermanence. This is how things are seen in *reflexion*. In this representation, the *negative of a thing has been preserved*, thus that “stable” and “permanent” sense of a thing we had in immediacy is seen here as something that will change, thus it becomes “unstable” and “impermanent”, or rather the original impermanence of a thing has been acknowledged and made more obvious (whether one recognizes it as impermanence or not is a different matter, e.g. *authenticity*, which doesn't necessarily operate in terms of impermanence, though Heidegger's way of discovering it was in repetitive acknowledgement and contemplation of one's own death).

6. Ven. Nāṇavīra's FS is more strict than that which I have written above; more strict in the sense of mathematical approach, but nevertheless if one maintains the phenomenological attitude throughout, either of them will be intelligible and interchangeable. The paragraphs above might be able to help one in getting started with FS, and get to the same, or perhaps even deeper conclusions. The main point is that one has to recognize that a *positive* thing draws its existence from its *negative* possibilities. In other words, positive and negative are both responsible for forming our experience as a whole. Seeing this can be a starting point.

3 One might say that the *x* is still there in the picture, and that is indeed true, but instead of representing a fact that a given thing will change, it became a *property* of a permanent thing. This is very important to note. By doing this the unpleasant nature of impermanence is concealed from ourselves, because even if we acknowledge it, as the picture above does, it comes *secondary*, after the established sense of permanence (how often we hear scientists taking about the things constantly changing, without really making any difference to the amount of our existential suffering). The fact is that the objective outlook of the world can never remove the sense of impermanence of a thing (no matter how hard it tries), but what it can do is blind itself in regard to it.

4 This doesn't mean that science in good-faith is not possible.