

Good Fundamentals

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A couple of months ago, *The Onion* ran a story on a Buddhist fundamentalist sect called the Kammatthana sect—and I'd like to know where they found out about the Kammatthana sect—releasing a typical fundamentalist video, but it wasn't typical at all. The spokesman for the fundamentalist sect was threatening that they were going to release unstoppable waves of peace and harmony across the world. And of course the TSA said they were going to do everything they could to prevent that.

It makes you stop and think.

When you hear the word “fundamentalist,” it usually has a bad connotation: people who are very narrow minded, stuck in old-fashioned views, and willing to kill other people who don't agree with their views.

But if the fundamentals are good, then fundamentalism isn't bad. And in the Buddhist teaching, the fundamentals are very good. That's why it's good to stick with them.

The Buddha himself said that he didn't approve of any changes in his Dhamma. He had learned a skill, he wanted to pass that skill on, and he did everything he could to make sure that it was passed on intact. This is why he left not only a body of teachings but also an order of monastics trained to question one another on the meanings of the teachings, to practice them so that the meaning of the teachings was clear, and so that they could be passed on from generation to generation.

In fact, one of the fundamentals of Buddhism is that if you associate with good people, you benefit. The more experienced the people are in terms of generosity, virtue, conviction, and discernment—particularly discernment into how to put an end to suffering—the more you benefit.

What it comes down to is the Buddha's realization that the Big Problem in life is the suffering we cause, and yet we don't have to. Why do we cause that suffering? It's not because we're fundamentally good or fundamentally bad. It's because we're ignorant.

The Buddha's word for ignorance, *avijja*, can also mean "unskilled." It's our lack of skill in how we act and think and speak that creates that suffering, but we can master skills that put an end to that suffering.

In mastering those skills, we're not depending on the fact that we're fundamentally good, because the Buddha doesn't say that either. His basic principle is that the mind is capable of anything and is very quick to change. In fact, it's so quick that he said he couldn't find an analogy that was appropriate. Here he was, a master of analogies and this is where he was left not knowing what to say. The mind can change itself so fast.

So what we've got to do is to learn how to change the mind in a good direction and keep it a good direction. That requires mindfulness, it requires alertness, it requires ardency: all the qualities we're working on as we meditate.

And what's our motivation?

Heedfulness: the realization that our actions really do shape our lives, shape our experience of pleasure and pain, so we've got to be very, very careful in what we do and say and think.

In this way, the fundamentals all keep coming back to us and to our mind, to how the mind needs to be trained, to how it *can* be trained, and to how we can do it.

That's the important point.

If we were fundamentally bad, we wouldn't be able to do anything. We'd be stuck in our badness and we'd need outside help to get us out. If we were fundamentally good, well, we wouldn't be where we are right now, that's for sure. So we have to depend on our heedfulness.

That's another good fundamental.

It's our desire for happiness that keeps us going. And our desire for the happiness to be true is what develops the qualities that the Buddha himself exemplified: discernment, compassion, and purity.

Discernment, as he said, starts with the realization that your happiness depends on your actions, and that long-term is better than short-term. Remember the first question that he said lies at the basis of discernment: What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? That's an important question to keep in mind all the time, because it can take us through all the levels of the practice.

Even when we get to the teachings on not-self—when the category of “I” or “my” in that first question finally gets dropped—it gets dropped for the sake of genuine happiness.

Now, based on this discernment comes the quality of compassion. You know the story of King Pasenadi and Queen Mallika, where one evening just the two of them are together in the royal apartments and the king turns to the queen and says, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?”

And of course, being a king, he's hoping that she'll say, “Yes, your majesty, you.”

But even a king can't get that out of his queen. Mallika responds, “No, there's no one I love more than myself. How about you?”

And he has to admit, well, no, there is no one he loves more than himself.

End of scene.

The king goes down to see the Buddha, and the Buddha affirms what Queen Mallika said. Then he draws an interesting conclusion. You could search the whole world, he said, and not find anyone that you loved more than yourself. But at the same time, you have to realize that everyone you'd meet would love themselves more than they'd love anybody else.

And what conclusion does he draw from that?

Not that it's a dog-eat-dog world. He says, “Realizing this you should never harm anybody or cause anybody to do harm.”

In other words, if your happiness depends on harming others, it's not going to last. They'll do what they can to put an end to your happiness.

So an important part of wisdom is developing compassion, taking other people's happiness into consideration. But how far can you do that?

I was reading recently someone saying that Buddhism is going to have to change, that nibbana is no longer good enough for us, it no longer meets our needs. We need a more compassionate teaching that straightens out the world first before we all go off to nibbana.

Well, one of the problems of the world, of course, is that everybody is trying to straighten everyone else out. But the Buddha's realization is that we have to straighten ourselves out. Again, this is where that issue of skill and lack of skill comes in. There's no way you can force anybody else to practice. The Buddha himself never tried to force anybody. Someone once came to him and asked if all the world was going to go to awakening or half the world or a third, and the Buddha didn't answer.

Ananda, who was sitting nearby, was concerned that the person might get upset that the Buddha didn't answer his question, so he took the person aside and gave him an analogy. He said, it's like a royal fortress, with a wise gatekeeper who walks around the fortress. The fortress has one gate, and as the gatekeeper is walking around he sees that aside from the gate there's not a hole large enough in the wall even for a cat to slip through, much less a person.

And what does the gate keeper know from that? He doesn't know how many people will go in and out of the fortress, but he *does* know that whoever goes in or out of the fortress will have to go in or out through the gate. In the same way, the Buddha knows that whoever will go to awakening will have to develop the path: abandon the five hindrances, develop the factors for awakening, and follow the noble eightfold path. But it's going to be up to each individual to decide to do that or not—which is why the Buddha can't say how many people will follow the path.

So the kindest thing you can do is, one, follow the path—because that’s one of the ways that we keep the Dhamma alive, by sticking to the path—and two, if you have the ability, you teach it to others who are willing to hear and are willing to try it. That’s the kindest thing you can do.

So this idea that nibbana is somehow irresponsible, or going to nibbana is irresponsible, is a total misunderstanding. You can’t just slip off there and disappear. The path to nibbana requires generosity, compassion, and a quality that the Buddha called purity, in which you look at your actions to see: Do they really lead to long-term happiness? Are they really harmless? Do they really embody compassion?

Before you act, ask yourself these questions: “Will this action I’m going to do cause any harm either to me or to anyone else?” If you see that it’s going to cause harm, you don’t do it. If you don’t foresee any harm, you can go ahead and do it. If, while you’re doing the action, you find that it’s causing harm, you stop. If not, you keep at it.

Once you’re done, you ask questions again: Did this cause any harm? And if you realize that it didn’t look like it was going to cause harm before you did it and you didn’t see any harm when you did it, but after it was done you realize that it did cause harm, you resolve not to repeat it and you go talk with someone who is further advanced on the path to get that person’s advice on how not to repeat the mistake.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha set up the Sangha, this is one of the reasons why friendship with noble people is an important part of the practice: so that we don’t have to keep reinventing the Dhamma wheel for ourselves, so that we can get good advice on how to stop causing harm.

Now, if you don’t see any harm either before, during, or after the action, then you can take pride and joy in the fact that you’re developing on the path.

Notice, the Buddha here isn't saying, "Don't make mistakes." He's saying, "Try not to make mistakes but be willing to admit the mistake after it's done. And don't be afraid to see your mistakes. Learn from your mistakes." And in these steps before, during, and after the action, he's showing you how.

In my time with Ajaan Fuang, I got called on issues I had never been called on in my life before, criticized very heavily for little tiny things. At first my feelings were hurt, but then I realized, "Wait a minute, he's not doing this to hurt my feelings. He's doing it to teach me, to show me what's right and what's wrong so I can improve." After all, he couldn't just pour the knowledge into my head. It was a skill that I had to learn.

So one of the skills you've got to learn is how to take criticism, how not to get blown away by it or discouraged by it. See where you've made a mistake, resolve not to repeat it, and then stick with the path.

These are some of the fundamentals in Buddhist fundamentalism, and they're all good fundamentals. Which is why—in this one area, unlike a lot of other areas in the world—there's nothing wrong with being a fundamentalist. In fact, being a Buddhist fundamentalist is one of the best things we can do for the world.

We straighten ourselves out in thought, word, and deed, set a good example for others, share our knowledge when we can, and stop causing suffering both for ourselves and for all other beings,

This, the Buddha said, is one of the greatest gifts you can give to others, if not the greatest gift of all.