

## §

*This essay on the English Buddhist monk Ven. Nanavira Thera (Harold Musson) was first published in Tadeusz Skorupski (ed.) The Buddhist Forum. Volume 4. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1996.*

### **The Dilemma of Nanavira Thera**

*"The Buddha's Teaching is quite alien to the European tradition, and a European who adopts it is a rebel." - Nanavira Thera (1964)*

In the early 1960's Somerset Maugham encouraged his nephew Robin to expand his horizons and go to Ceylon: "Find that rich Englishman who is living in a jungle hut there as a Buddhist monk," he suggested. An aged and somewhat embittered man living alone in a luxurious villa on the Riviera, Maugham's interest in a Westerner who had renounced a life of comfort to live as a hermit in Asia reflected an earlier fascination with the American Larry Darrell, the fictional hero of his novel *The Razor's Edge*.

Traumatised by his experiences of active service in the First World War, the young Larry Darrell returns home to an affluent and privileged society now rendered hollow and futile. The subsequent events of the novel unfold through the urbane and jaded eyes of Maugham himself, a narrator who assumes a haughty indifference to Larry's existential plight while drawn to him by an anguished curiosity.

Late one night in a café Larry tells Maugham how the shock of seeing a dead fellow airman, a few years older than himself, had brought him to his impasse. The sight, he recalls, "filled me with shame." Maugham is puzzled by this. He too had seen corpses in the war but had been dismayed by "how trifling they looked. There was no dignity in them. Marionettes that the showman had thrown into the discard."

Having renounced a career and marriage, Larry goes to Paris, where he lives austere and immerses himself in literature and philosophy. When asked by his uncomprehending fiancée why he refuses to come home to Chicago, he answers, "I couldn't go back now. I'm on the threshold. I see vast lands of the spirit stretching out before me, beckoning, and I'm eager to travel them."

After an unsatisfying spell in a Christian monastery Larry finds work as a deckhand on a liner, jumps ship in Bombay and ends up at an ashram in a remote area of South India at the feet of an Indian swami. Here, during a retreat in a nearby forest, he sits beneath a tree at dawn and experiences enlightenment. "I had a sense," he tells Maugham,

*'that a knowledge more than human possessed me, so that everything that had been confused was clear and everything that had perplexed me was explained. I was so happy that it was pain and I struggled to release myself from it, for I felt that if it lasted a moment longer I should die.'*

The final glimpse we have of Larry is as he prepares to board ship for America, where he plans to vanish among the crowds of New York as a cab-driver. "My taxi," he explains, "[will] be merely the instrument of my labour. ... an equivalent to the staff and begging-bowl of the wandering mendicant."

Maugham's story works insofar that it reflects an actual phenomenon: Western engagement with Eastern traditions in the wake of the First World War. Larry's anonymous return to America likewise bears a prophetic ring. But the novel fails in the author's inability to imagine spiritual experience as anything other than a prolonged mystical orgasm. The sincerity and urgency of Larry's quest is trivialised, and his final resolve fails to carry conviction.

The handful of Westerners who actually travelled to Asia in the first half of the 20th century in search of another wisdom had to leave behind not only the security of their traditions but also the non-committal Romanticism of Somerset Maugham. For the first time in nearly two thousand years, they were preparing to embrace something else. And this step was of another order than either the intellectual enthusiasms of a Schopenhauer or the muddled fantasies of a Blavatsky.

So, at his uncle's behest, Robin Maugham, an investigative journalist, novelist, travel writer and defiantly outspoken homosexual, set off on what he would later describe as his "Search for Nirvana." Six weeks later, around New Year 1965, he arrived in Ceylon. At the Island Hermitage, founded in Dodanduwa in 1911 by the German Nyanatiloka, the doyen of Western Buddhist monks, he was directed to the town of Matara in the extreme south. From Matara Maugham was driven by jeep to the village of Bundala, where the farmers led him to a path that disappeared into the forest. "It was very hot," he recalled, "I could feel the sweat dripping down me. The path became narrower and darker as it led further into the dense jungle." He came to a clearing in which stood a small hut. As he approached, "a tall figure in a saffron robe glided out on to the verandah."

The gaunt man stared at me in silence. He was tall and lean with a short beard and sunken blue eyes. His face was very pale. He stood there, motionless, gazing at me.

"Would you care to come in?" he asked.

His voice was clear with a pleasantly cultured intonation about it; it was calm and cool yet full of authority. He might have been inviting me in for a glass of sherry in his rooms at Cambridge.

Harold Edward Musson was born in Aldershot barracks in 1920. From the age of seven to nine he had lived in Burma, where his father commanded a battalion. He remembered asking someone: "Who was the Buddha?" and being told: "The Buddha was a man who sat under a tree and was enlightened." From that moment he decided that this was what he wanted to do. He was educated at Wellington College and went up to Magdalene College, Cambridge, in 1938, where he read mathematics and then modern languages.

It was during this time that he "slowly began to realise that ... I would certainly end my days as a Buddhist monk." He nonetheless volunteered for the army in 1940 and became an officer in Field Security, first in Algiers and later in Italy. His task was to interrogate prisoners of war. In 1945 he was hospitalised in Sorrento and became absorbed in a book on Buddhism called **La Dottrina del Risveglio** ("The Doctrine of Awakening") by the Italian Julius Evola.

Julius Cesare Andrea Evola was born to a devout Catholic family in Rome in 1898. Having served in a mountain artillery regiment during the First World War, he found himself (like his fictional counterpart Larry Darrell) incapable of returning to normal life. He was overcome with "feelings of the inconsistency and vanity of the aims that usually engage human activities." In response, he became an abstract painter involved in the Dadaist movement and a friend of the founding figure, the Rumanian Tristan Tzara. But by 1921 he became disillusioned with the Dadaist project of "overthrowing all logical, ethical and aesthetic categories by means of producing paradoxical and disconcerting images in order to achieve absolute liberation."

### *Spiritual unrest*

He finally rejected the arts as inadequate to the task of resolving his spiritual unrest and after 1922 produced no further poems or paintings. A further response to his inner crisis was to experiment with drugs through which he attained "states of consciousness partially detached from the physical senses, ... frequently approaching close to the sphere of visionary hallucinations and perhaps also madness." But such experiences only aggravated his dilemma by intensifying his sense of personal disintegration and confusion to the point where he decided, at the age of twenty-three, to commit suicide.

He was only dissuaded from carrying this out by coming across a passage from the **Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikaya I, 1)** in the Pali Canon where the Buddha spoke of those things with which the disciple committed to awakening must avoid identifying. Having listed the body, feelings, the elements and so on, he concludes:

Whoever regards extinction as extinction, who thinks of extinction, who reflects about extinction, who thinks: "Extinction is mine," and rejoices in extinction, such a person, I declare, does not know extinction.

For Evola this was "like a sudden illumination. I realised that this desire to end it all, to dissolve myself, was a bond - 'ignorance' as opposed to true freedom."

During the early 1920's Evola's interests turned to the study of philosophy and Eastern religion. During this time he came into contact with Arturo Reghini, a high-ranking Mason and mathematician who believed himself to be a member of the Scuola Italica, an esoteric order that claimed to have survived the fall of ancient Rome. Through Reghini Evola was introduced to René Guénon, whose concept of "Tradition" came to serve as "the basic theme that would finally integrate the system of my ideas."

Evola distinguishes two aspects of this concept. Firstly, it refers to "a primordial tradition of which all particular, historical, pre-modern traditions have been emanations." Secondly, and more importantly, Tradition

has nothing to do with conformity or routine; it is the fundamental structure of a kind of civilisation that is organic, differentiated and hierarchic in which all its domains and human activities have an orientation from above and towards what is above.

Such civilisations of the past had as their natural centre an elite or a leader who embodied "an authority as unconditional as it was legitimate and impersonal."

It comes as no great surprise, therefore, that Evola strongly identified with the Right and supported the rise of Fascism in both Italy and Germany. Following Reghini he denounced the Church as the religion of a spiritual proletariat and attacked it ferociously in his book **Pagan Imperialism** (1927). Around the same time he published such titles as **Man as Potency and Revolt Against the Modern World**, revealing his indebtedness to Nietzsche and Spengler. He did not, however, join the Fascist party and looked down upon Mussolini with aristocratic disdain. (Towards the end of his life he declared that he had never belonged to any political party or voted in an election.)

After Hitler came to power, Evola was feted by high-ranking Nazis, his books were translated into German and he was invited to the country to explain his ideas to select aristocratic and military circles. But, as with many of his German admirers, he kept aloof from what he considered the nationalist, populist and fanatic elements of National Socialism. He claims in his autobiography that because of his position as a foreigner from a friendly nation, he was free to present ideas which had they been voiced by a German would have risked imprisonment in a concentration camp. Nonetheless, when Mussolini was overthrown in 1943, Evola

was invited to Vienna by a branch of the SS to translate proscribed texts of Masonic and other secret societies.

In the same year **The Doctrine of Awakening**, Evola's study of Buddhism, was published in Italy. He regarded the writing of this book as repayment of the "debt" he owed to the doctrine of the Buddha for saving him from suicide. The declared aim of the book was to "illuminate the true nature of original Buddhism, which had been weakened to the point of unrecognisability in most of its subsequent forms." The essential spirit of Buddhist doctrine was, for Evola, "determined by a will for the unconditioned, affirmed in its most radical form, and by investigation into that which leads to mastery over life as much as death."

As its sub-title ("A Study on the Buddhist Asceticism") suggests, Evola's aim was to emphasise the primacy of spiritual discipline and practice as the core of Tradition as represented by Buddhism. He condemns the loss of such asceticism in Europe and deplores the pejorative sense the term has assumed. Even Nietzsche, he notes with surprise, shared this anti-ascetic prejudice. Today, he argues, the ascetic path appears with the greatest clarity in Buddhism.

Evola bases his arguments on the Italian translations of the Pali Canon by Neumann and de Lorenzo published between 1916 and 1927. Like many of his generation, the Pali texts represented the only true and original source of the Buddha's teaching. He was nonetheless critical of a large body of accepted opinion that had grown up around them.

### ***Renunciation***

Renunciation, for example, does not, for Evola, arise from a sense of despair with the world; he maintains that the four encounters of Prince Siddhartha should be "taken with great reserve." For true aryan renunciation

is based on 'knowledge' and is accompanied by a gesture of disdain and a feeling of transcendental dignity; it is qualified by the superior man's will for the unconditioned, by the will ... of a man of quite a special 'race of the spirit.'

The bearing of such a person is "essentially aristocratic," "anti-mystical," "anti-evolutionist," upright and "manly." This race of the spirit is united with the "blood ... of the white races who created the greatest civilisations both of the East and the West" - in particular males of warrior stock. The aryan tradition has been largely lost in the West through the "influence on European faiths of concepts of Semitic and Asiatic-Mediterranean origin."

Yet in the East, too, Buddhism has degenerated into Mahayana universalism that wrongly considers **all** beings to have the potentiality to become a Buddha. As for

Buddhism being "a doctrine of universal compassion encouraging humanitarianism and democratic equality," this is merely one of many "Western misconceptions."

Evola considers the world of his time to be perverse and dysfunctional. "If normal conditions were to return," he sighs, "few civilisations would seem as odd as the present one." He deplors the craving for material things, which causes man entirely to overlook mastery over his own mind. Nonetheless,

one who is still an 'aryan' spirit in a large European or American city, with its skyscrapers and asphalt, with its politics and sport, with its crowds who dance and shout, with its exponents of secular culture and of soulless science and so on - amongst all this he may feel himself more alone and detached and nomad than he would have done in the time of the Buddha.

Evola believed that the original Buddhism disclosed through his study revealed the essence of the aryan tradition that had become lost and corrupted in the West. For him aryan means more than "noble" or "sublime," as it was frequently rendered in translations of Buddhist texts. "They are all later meanings of the word," he explains, "and do not convey the fullness of the original nor the spiritual, aristocratic and racial significance which, nevertheless, is preserved in Buddhism." Other "innate attributes of the aryan soul" that are described in Buddhist texts are an absence "of any sign of departure from consciousness, of sentimentalism or devout effusion, or of semi-intimate conversation with a God." Only among some of the German mystics, such as Eckhart, Tauler and Silesius, does he find examples of this spirit in the Western tradition, "where Christianity has been rectified by a transfusion of aryan blood."

Not only does Buddhism display an aryan spirit but, for Evola, it also endorses the superiority of the warrior caste. Brushing aside the Buddha's well-known denunciation of the caste system, Evola notes that "it was generally held that the bodhisatta ... are never born into a peasant or servile caste but into a warrior or brahman caste." He cites several examples where the Buddha makes analogies between "the qualities of an ascetic and the virtues of a warrior." Of all the Mahayana schools the only one he admired was that of Zen, on account of its having been adopted in Japan as the doctrine of the Samurai class.

What appeal could this book have had for an officer of the Allied forces advancing through Italy as part of a campaign to overthrow a regime based on notions of aryan supremacy? Yet Captain Musson immediately set about translating *The Doctrine of Awakening* into English, a task he completed three years later. In his brief foreword he offers no apology for the author's extreme views, but simply asserts that Evola had "recaptured the spirit of Buddhism in its original form." The book cleared away "some of the woolly ideas that have gathered around ... Prince Siddhartha and the doctrine he disclosed." But its "real significance" was to be found in "its encouragement of a practical application of the doctrine it discusses."

If one ignores Evola's suprematist and militaristic views, *The Doctrine of Awakening* offers a clear and often thoughtful account of early Buddhist doctrine. Evola proudly recalls that the English edition "received the official approbation of the Pali [Text] Society," through their "recognition of the value of my study." It is nonetheless curious that in 1951, so shortly after the war, the book would be published in London by a reputable Orientalist publisher (Luzac) without any reference to the author's extreme right-wing views.

By the time *The Doctrine of Awakening* appeared in print, Musson had followed the book's advice and was already a bhikkhu in Ceylon. "I think the war hastened my decision," he later told Robin Maugham in the course of their conversation. "Though it was inevitable, I think, in any case. But the war forced maturity on me."

Since Harold Musson, like Larry Darrell (and probably Julius Evola), had a private income, he did not have to seek work upon leaving the army. He settled in London. With time and money on his hands, he leisurely worked on his translation of Evola and "tried to get as much pleasure out of life as I could." Then one evening, in a bar, he ran into Osbert Moore, an old army friend who had shared his enthusiasm for *The Doctrine of Awakening* while in Italy. They began comparing notes. "Gradually we came to the conclusion that the lives we were leading at present were utterly pointless. We shared the belief that the whole of this existence as we saw it was a farce." By the time the bar closed, they had resolved to go to Ceylon and become bhikkhus.

They left England in November 1948 and were ordained as novices in an open glade at the Island Hermitage by Nyanatiloka, then an old man of seventy-one, on April 24, 1949. Moore was given the name "Nanamoli," and Musson "Nanavira." In 1950 they both received bhikkhu ordination in Colombo.

For the next year Nanavira devoted himself "fairly continuously" to the practice of meditative absorption (jhana, samadhi), the attainment of which, he later declared, had been his motive in coming to Ceylon. A few months before Maugham's visit he had explained to a Sinhalese friend that it was "the desire for some definite non-mystical form of practice that first turned my thoughts to the East:"

Western thinking ... seemed to me to oscillate between the extremes of mysticism and rationalism, both of which were distasteful to me, and the yoga practices - in a general sense - of India offered themselves as a possible solution.

This is what he had seen as the "real significance" of Evola's book and, as he confirmed sixteen years later, the point on which "Eastern thought is at its greatest distance from Western." But after a year's practice he contracted typhoid, which left him with chronic indigestion so severe that at times he would "roll about on [his] bed with the pain." It also prevented him from attaining anything more than the "low-level results of [the] practice."

Unable to pursue the jhanas he turned his linguistic skills to the study of Pali, which he soon mastered, and set about reading the Buddha's discourses and their Singhalese commentaries. His analytical bent led him to assume that "it was possible to include all that the [Buddha] said in a single system - preferably portrayed diagrammatically on one very large sheet of paper." But the more he read, the more he realised that this approach was "sterile" and incapable of leading to understanding. And the more he probed the discourses, the more he came to doubt the validity of the commentaries, which, "in those innocent days," he had accepted as authoritative. His friend Nanamoli, meanwhile, had likewise mastered Pali and was preparing to translate the greatest Commentary of them all: Buddhaghosa's Visuddi Magga.

Over the following months and years Nanavira became increasingly independent in his views, both challenging the accepted orthodoxy and refining his own understanding. Temperamentally, he acknowledged a tendency to stand apart from others. "I am quite unable," he wrote in 1963, "to identify myself with any organised body or cause (even if it is a body of opposition or a lost cause). I am a born blackleg." Having renounced a life of comfort in England and all the values it stood for, he now rejected the prevailing orthodoxy of Singhalese Buddhism. But he did not turn against the Buddha's word: "It was, and is, my attitude towards the [Buddha's discourses] that, if I find anything in them that is against my own view, they are right, and I am wrong." He came to view only two of the three "Baskets" (Pitaka) of the Canon as authentic: those containing the discourses and the monastic rule. "No other Pali books whatsoever," he insisted, "should be taken as authoritative; and ignorance of them (and particularly of the traditional Commentaries) may be counted a positive advantage, as leaving less to be unlearned."

This radical tendency towards isolation led him in 1954 to leave the Island Hermitage for the physical solitude of his hut in the jungle. "Aren't you lonely?" inquired Maugham. "After a bit," he replied, "you find you simply don't want other people. You got your centre of gravity within yourself ... You become self-contained." Two years earlier he had confessed: "I am one of those people who think of other people as 'they,' not as 'we.'" Despite persistent ill-health, his study and practice of mindfulness continued with increasing intensity.

Then, on the evening of June 27, 1959, something happened that radically changed the course of his life. He recorded the event in Pali in a private journal:

HOMAGE TO THE AUSPICIOUS ONE, WORTHY, FULLY AWAKENED. -

At one time the monk Nanavira was staying in a forest hut near Bundala village. It was during that time, as he was walking up and down in the first watch of the night, that the monk Nanavira made his mind quite pure of constraining things, and kept thinking and pondering and reflexively observing the Dhamma as he had

heard and learnt it, the clear and stainless Eye of the Dhamma arose in him: "Whatever has the nature of arising, all that has the nature of ceasing." Having been a teaching-follower for a month, he became one attained to right view.

Thus he claimed to have "entered the stream," (sotapatti) glimpsed the unconditioned Nirvana, and become, thereby, an arya.

The Buddha used the term "arya" to refer to those who had achieved a direct experiential insight into the nature of the four truths (suffering, its origins, its cessation and the way to its cessation). For such people these truths are no longer beliefs or theories, but realities. When someone comes to know them as such, he or she is said to have "entered the stream" which culminates, within a maximum of seven further lifetimes either as a human or a god, in arahat-hood, i.e. the final attainment of Nirvana. While the Buddha used this term in a purely spiritual sense, he maintained a distinction between an arya and an "ordinary person" (puthujjana), i.e. one who had not yet had the experience of stream-entry. The experience, however, is available to anyone, irrespective of their social position, sex or racial origins. By offering this radical redefinition of "nobility," the Buddha introduced into caste-bound India a spiritual tradition able to transcend the limits of the indigenous culture. Yet in the final analysis, concluded Nanavira, "the Buddha's Teaching is for a privileged class - those who are fortunate enough to have the intelligence to grasp it..., and they are most certainly not the majority!"

Up to this point Nanavira had maintained a continuous correspondence with his friend Nanamoli (Moore). Now he stopped it, because "there was no longer anything for me to discuss with him, since the former relationship of parity between us regarding the Dhamma had suddenly come to an end." And it was never to be resumed, for eight months later, on March 8, 1960, Nanamoli Thera died suddenly of a heart attack in a remote village while on a walking tour. He left behind some of the finest English translations from Pali of key Theravada texts. Added to this loss had been the death three years earlier of Nanavira's first preceptor, Nyanatiloka, on May 28, 1957.

In the year following his stream-entry (1960) Nanavira began writing a series of "notes." By the summer of 1961 he had finished two such notes, one on "Paticcasamuppada" (conditionality) and one on "Paramattha sacca" (higher truth). In July of the same year, a German Buddhist nun called Vajira (Hannelore Wolf), who had been in Ceylon since 1955 and since 1959 had been living as a hermit, called on Nanavira for advice. He subsequently sent her a copy of the two notes he had just finished typing. These had a tremendous impact on her. "Your notes on vinnana-namarupa," (consciousness-name/form) she wrote, "have led me away from the abyss into which I have been staring for more than twelve years." And added: "I do not know ... by what miraculous skill you have guided me to a safe place where at last I can breathe freely."

The correspondence and one further day-long meeting resulted in Vajira likewise "entering the stream," in late January 1962. Vajira underwent an ecstatic but turbulent transformation from an ordinary person (puthujjana) to an arya, the validity of which Nanavira did "not see any reason to doubt." Vajira, from her side, now regarded Nanavira as an arahat. But the rapidity and intensity of the change provoked a kind of nervous breakdown and the Ceylonese authorities deported her to Germany (on February 22, 1962). On her return she ceased to have any contact with her former Buddhist friends in Hamburg. This, commented Nanavira, was "a good sign, not a bad one - when one has got what one wants, one stops making a fuss about it and sits down quietly."

Four months after Vajira's departure, Nanavira's chronic indigestion (amoebiasis) was further aggravated by satyriasis - a devastatingly inappropriate malady for a celibate hermit. Satyriasis - "the overpowering need on the part of a man to seduce a never-ending succession of women" (Britannica) - is the male equivalent to nymphomania in women. "Under the pressure of this affliction," he noted on December 11, "I am oscillating between two poles. If I indulge the sensual images that offer themselves, my thought turns towards the state of a layman; if I resist them, my thought turns towards suicide. Wife or knife, one might say." In fact, the previous month he had already made an unsuccessful attempt to end his life. Although he realised that the erotic stimulation could be overcome by meditative absorption, such practice was prevented by his chronic indigestion. By November 1963, he had "given up all hope of making any further progress for myself in this life" and had also resolved not to disrobe. It was simply a question of how long he could "stand the strain."

While for the ordinary person (puthujjana) suicide is ethically equivalent to murder, for an arya it is acceptable under circumstances that prevent further spiritual practice. For the arya is no longer bound to the craving that drives the endless cycle of death and rebirth, his or her liberation being guaranteed within a finite period of time. Nanavira cites instances from the Canon of arya bhikkhus at the time of the Buddha who had taken their lives and become arahats in the process. He does not seem to have been driven by the conventional motives for suicide: resentment, remorse, despair, grief. He writes openly of his dilemma to friends with droll understatement and black humour:

All the melancholy farewell letters are written (they have to be amended and brought up to date from time to time, as the weeks pass and my throat is still uncut); the note for the coroner is prepared (carefully refraining from any witty remarks that might spoil the solemn moment at the inquest when the note is read out aloud); and the mind is peaceful and concentrated.

His friends responded with a mixture of concern, bewilderment and alarm. "People want their Dhamma on easier terms," he reflected, "and they dislike it when they are shown that they must pay a heavier price - and they are frightened, too, when

they see something they don't understand: they regard it as morbid and their concern (unconscious, no doubt) is to bring things back to healthy, reassuring, normality."

Most of 1963 was taken up with preparing his notes for publication, something he would have considered "an intolerable disturbance" had his health not prevented him from practice. Despite such disclaimers, one has the strong impression that he wished to communicate his vision of the Dhamma to a wider public. (Maugham records him as saying: "I'm hoping to find an English publisher for [them].") Through the help of the Ceylonese Judge Lionel Samaratunga a limited edition of 250 cyclostyled copies of Notes on Dhamma (1960-1963) was produced towards the end of the year and distributed to leading Buddhist figures of the time and various libraries and institutions. The response was largely one of polite incomprehension.

When Robin Maugham entered the tiny hut at the beginning of 1965, Nanavira had largely completed the revisions to his Notes on Dhamma. "I looked round the room with its faded blue walls," Maugham recalls. "There was a table made from a packing-case with an oil-lamp on it, a chair, a chest and a bookcase. There were two straw brooms and two umbrellas - and his plank bed and the straw mat I was sitting on." But he was quite unaware of Nanavira's work. The questions he asked as he squatted uncomfortably on the floor were typical of those a sympathetic but uninformed European would still make today. Maugham's principal interest was to understand Nanavira's character. To this end he asked at length about his relations with his family, the reasons why he became a monk, if he felt lonely and whether he missed the West.

Maugham left the first meeting with a positive impression "I liked his diffident smile and I admired his courage," he reflected. "But I still wondered if he was completely sincere." During the second meeting his doubts were put to rest. Nanavira explained how his mother had come out to Ceylon and tried to persuade her only child to return home. When he refused she suffered a heart-attack. As soon as she recovered she went back to England and died. "His voice was quite impassive as he spoke," explained Maugham. "I find it hard to describe the tone of his voice. Yet if I don't I shall miss the whole point of the man I'd travelled so far to see. There was no harshness in his tone. There was no coldness. There was understanding and gentleness. And it was only these two qualities that made his next remark bearable."

'My mother's death didn't worry me,' he said. 'Even now, during this life, every moment we are born and die. But we continue. We take some other shape or form in another life.'

Nanavira fell silent. He was visibly tired. Then he added: "The whole point of Buddhism is to bring an end to this farcical existence. The whole point of our

present existence is to reach Nirvana - complete understanding of natural phenomena - thereby ending the chain of re-birth."

In Nanavira's account of the meeting, however, it is Robin Maugham's sincerity that is put into question. "The visitors I spoke of in my postcard," he wrote in a letter two days later,

came and talked and took photographs and notes for several hours on the afternoon of the eighth. The older one is Robin Maugham, a nephew of the celebrated Somerset Maugham. He is a novelist (third-rate, I suspect) and a writer of travel books. Although they both seemed interested in the Dhamma, I rather think that their principal reason for visiting me was to obtain material for their writings. I had a slightly uncomfortable feeling of being exploited; but, unfortunately, once I start talking, I like going on, without proper regard for the repercussions later on. So probably, in about a year's time, there will be a new travel book with a chapter (complete with photographs) devoted to yours truly, and the romantic life he is leading in the jungle.

Contrary to his own version, Maugham was not alone. Thus the dramatic encounter between two tormented souls - the man of the world and the hermit - is compromised by the presence of a third man - probably Maugham's secretary and assistant. Nanavira's prediction about the outcome of the visit proved entirely accurate except in the timing. Maugham's sensational account of the meeting was published in the People newspaper of September 26, 1965, but it took ten years before the travel book (*Search for Nirvana*, 1975) appeared. This book devotes most of its pages to Maugham's search for Nirvana in the arms of dusky-skinned youths, but a chapter (complete with photographs) is given to his meeting with Nanavira.

At root, though, Maugham seems sincere. As they were parting, he had the strong impression that Nanavira still wanted to tell him something "of such importance that it would change my whole life." But the monk abruptly averted his "mellow gaze" and simply said goodbye. Maugham and his companion walked away towards the path that led from the jungle glade to the village. Then he turned back: "His lean gaunt figure in a saffron robe was standing motionless on the verandah. Perhaps he knew a truth that would make the existence of millions of men a happier thing. Perhaps he knew the answer. Perhaps he had found the secret of life. But I would never know."

The revision of his Notes completed, Nanavira returned to his simple routine of meditation, correspondence and daily chores. His chronic indigestion continued to be aggravated by satyriasis. Six months (Maugham, presumably for dramatic effect, says two weeks) after their meeting, on the afternoon of July 7, 1965, Nanavira ended his life by putting his head into a cellophane bag containing drops

of chloroform. Only a month earlier his letters had been exploring the meaning of humour.

The memory of the English monk from Aldershot continued to haunt Robin Maugham. In 1968 he published *The Second Window*, an autobiographical novel about a journalist who becomes entangled in a child sex-abuse scandal in Kenya. As a digression from the main theme, the protagonist visits Ceylon to track down a certain Leslie Edwin Fletcher who is rumoured to be living there as a Buddhist hermit. While clearly based on Maugham's encounter with Nanavira, the fictionalised version turns him into a gloomy, confused and pathetic figure. A radio-play (*A Question of Retreat*) followed in a similar vein.

Shortly afterwards, in 1972, Julius Evola published his autobiography. Towards the end of the war Evola had been injured by a bomb in Vienna and for the remainder of his life was partially paralysed. He returned to Italy and became a focal figure for the far right, receiving in his apartment a steady trickle of those who still admired the values he espoused. Although he died in 1974, he has been resurrected recently as a hero of resurgent neo-fascist groups in Italy.

Recalling *The Doctrine of Awakening*, he wrote in his autobiography: "The person who translated the work [into English], a certain Mutton (sic), found in it an incitant to leave Europe and withdraw to the Orient in the hope of finding there a centre where one still cultivated the disciplines that I recommended; unfortunately, I have had no further news of him." Evola also confessed that he himself was not a Buddhist and his study was intended to balance his earlier work on the Hindu tantras.

He saw Buddhism as the "'dry' and intellectual path of pure detachment" as opposed to that of the tantras which taught "affirmation, engagement, the utilisation and transformation of immanent forces liberated through the awakening of the Shakti, i.e. the root power of all vital energy, particularly that of sex." The only other work of Evola's to have been translated into English was *The Metaphysics of Sex* (London, 1983).

In 1987 a book was published by Path Press, Colombo, with the title *Clearing the Path: Writings of Nanavira Thera (1960 - 1965)*. This hard-cover book of nearly six hundred pages contains the text of Nanavira's revised *Notes on Dhamma* (1960 - 1965) together with 149 letters of varying lengths written by Nanavira to nine correspondents, which serve (as the author himself stated) as a commentary on the *Notes*. The texts are scrupulously edited, extensively annotated and cross-referenced by means of a comprehensive index. The compilation, editing and publication of this book was a labour of love performed (anonymously) by Ven. Bodhesako (Robert Smith), an American samanera from Chicago, who died suddenly of gangrene of the intestines in Nepal in 1989, shortly after completing

the work. With his death Path Press ceased to function and the book can now only be obtained from a Buddhist distributor (Wisdom Books) in London.

Clearing the Path is presented by Bodhesako as a "work book. It's purpose is to help the user to acquire a point of view that is different from his customary frame of reference, and also more satisfactory." As such it is to be used as a tool for inner change. This supports Nanavira's own contention in his preface to the Notes that "the reader is presumed to be subjectively engaged with an anxious problem, the problem of his existence, which is also the problem of his suffering." He adds:

There is therefore nothing in these pages to interest the professional scholar, for whom the question of personal existence does not arise; for the scholar's whole concern is to eliminate or ignore the individual point of view in an effort to establish the objective truth - a would-be impersonal synthesis of public facts.

He later remarked that the Notes "were not written to pander to people's tastes" and were made "as unattractive, academically speaking, as possible." He declared that he would be satisfied if only one person were ever to benefit from them.

In their final version, Notes on Dhamma consist of the two essays on "Paticcasamuppada" (conditionality) and "Paramattha Sacca"(higher truth) and twenty shorter notes on a range of key Pali terms, such as "Atta"(self), "Citta" (mind), "Rupa" (form) etc. They are all written in a dense, exact style in numbered sections, most of the key terms remaining in Pali. Nanavira composed them as an explicit critique of the orthodox Theravada position "with the purpose of clearing away a mass of dead matter which is choking the [Buddha's discourses]."

In keeping with Nanavira's wishes, the Notes have not been indexed. This, he felt, would turn the book into a "work of reference." Whereas "it is actually intended to be read and digested as a single whole, with each separate note simply presenting a different facet of the same central theme." Elsewhere he describes his Notes as being like "so many beads inter-connected with numbers of threads, in a kind of three-dimensional network."

This holomorphic character of the Notes is reflected most explicitly in the fourth and final section entitled "Fundamental Structure," which consists of two parts, "Static Aspect" and "Dynamic Aspect." In his usual ironic manner, Nanavira describes this section as "really a remarkably elegant piece of work, almost entirely original, and also quite possibly correct. I am obliged to say this myself, since it is improbable that anybody else will. It is most unlikely that anyone will make anything of it." This is certainly true for the present writer.

"Fundamental Structure" attempts to describe by means of terse philosophical language and symbolic diagrams the "inherent structure governing the selectivity of consciousness" which is common to both the enlightened and unenlightened

person alike. Nanavira compares this fundamental structure to a chessboard on which both "passionate chess," i.e. a game following the rules but complicated by the influence of passion, and its opposite, "dispassionate chess," can both be played. But he admits that these ideas are "only indirectly connected to the Buddha's Teaching proper." He sees them as a possible corrective to certain tendencies in abstract, scientific thinking to distance oneself from a sense of concrete existential location. For someone who does not suffer from this problem, however, he acknowledges that it will serve no purpose to study "Fundamental Structure."

Nanavira recognises a yawning gulf between the world-view of the average Western person and the Teaching of the Buddha. For those uninclined to the somewhat dry and technical approach of "Fundamental Structure" he recommends prior study of Existentialist philosophy, as found in the writings of Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus and, in particular, Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. For these thinkers had also discarded the detached, rationalist approach to philosophy and emphasised immediate questions of personal existence. He also speaks highly of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the early novels of Aldous Huxley, and the writings of Franz Kafka, all of which had a strong influence on him as a young man. Nanavira nonetheless warned against confusing Existentialism with Buddhism. For "one who has understood the Buddha's Teaching no longer asks these questions; he is *arya* 'noble,' and no more a *puthujjana*, and he is beyond the range of the existential philosophies." The Dhamma does not offer answers; it shows "the way leading to the final cessation of all questions about self and the world."

Nanavira also found the very positivism he so deplored in the West infecting the writings of some of the most respected Sri Lankan authorities on Buddhism. K.N. Jayatilleke, O.H. de A. Wijesekera and G.P. Malalasekera are all taken to task on this point. Despite their being professed Buddhists, Nanavira compares the former two unfavourably with the Christian thinker Kierkegaard. He criticises Jayatilleke, for example, for presenting the Four Noble Truths as though they were propositions of fact, thus obscuring their character as imperatives for action. He compares them to the bottle in *Alice in Wonderland* labelled "Drink Me!" From this perspective (also that of the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*),

the Four Noble Truths are the ultimate tasks for a man's performance - Suffering commands "Know me absolutely!", Arising commands "Abandon Me!", Cessation commands "Realize me!", and the Path commands "Develop me!".

Startling images of this kind abound throughout Nanavira's letters, which reveal him both as a rigorous analytical thinker and also a literary stylist of a high order. By reflecting, in addition, the radical seriousness and renunciation he adopted towards the personal realisation of the Buddha's Teaching, Nanavira's writings stand out as one of the most original and important contributions to Buddhist literature this century.

But why then, if this is true, does Nanavira Thera remain such an obscure figure? The short answer is because he singularly fails to fit the popular stereotype of what a contemporary Buddhist should be.

It is frequently assumed in the West that Buddhists are mystically inclined, liberal, ecologically sensitive, democratic, pacifist, tolerant, life-affirming, compassionate and spiritual. After reading *Clearing the Path*, however, such are not the qualities one would readily ascribe to Nanavira Thera. Since the image he presents is at odds with this stereotype, he is liable to appear to many Western (and modern Asian) Buddhists as instinctively unattractive. What validity then does the stereotype have? Could it be that it is no more than a romantic re-invention of Buddhism, which presents a model of "spirituality" that embodies those values the "materialistic" West feels it has lost? Is the real reason for Nanavira's unattractiveness the challenge he presents to the assumptions on which the stereotype is based? Or, alternatively, is the stereotype valid and Nanavira Thera deluded and misguided?

As the first step in unravelling Nanavira's motives, it is helpful to consider his relation to the book that inspired him to become a bhikkhu and its author Julius Evola. In only one of his published letters (21 February 1964) does he mention (in passing) Evola's *The Doctrine of Awakening*. He adds in parenthesis: "which, however, I cannot now recommend to you without considerable reserves." But nowhere does he state what those reserves are.

While there is no evidence in Nanavira's writings that he subscribed to Evola's political or racist views, there are a number of threads that forge a link between the spiritual outlook of the two men. One of these threads would be Nanavira's privileged military background and somewhat aristocratic bearing, which would have been endorsed by Evola's ideas on the superiority of the warrior caste and the aristocratic nature of Buddhism. While nothing in the content of his writings suggests any conscious promotion of such values, his capacity for self-discipline and his wry, detached tone of voice reflect a person who assumed authority as a right rather than a privilege.

Perhaps the strongest thread is the fact that Harold Musson's foreword to *The Doctrine of Awakening* could, with minor adjustments, have served as a foreword fifteen years later to Nanavira Thera's *Notes on Dhamma*. For the aim of the two works is essentially the same. To summarise Musson's foreword, these are: (1) "to recapture the spirit of Buddhism in its essential form;" (2) "to clear away some of the woolly ideas" (the preface to *Notes on Dhamma* says "dead matter") which have gathered around the Buddha's Teaching; and (3), and most importantly: the "encouragement of a practical application of the doctrine."

While Nanavira makes no reference to, and could well have been unfamiliar with, Evola's Gu`E9nonist conception of Tradition, he certainly is a traditionalist,

though in a narrower sense than Gu`E9non. He says at one point that there is nothing he dislikes more than someone who declares that the aim of all religions is the same. While Gu`E9non, who spent the last twenty years of his life as a convert to Islam in Cairo, eventually came to include Buddhism as part of the revelation that lies at the heart of all religions, Nanavira came to regard any view that did not accord with his reading of the early Buddhist Canon as deficient. He is dismissive of theistic belief and religion in general and Christianity in particular.

Nanavira likewise shares Evola's contempt for the modern world. He is scathing about evolutionary and relativist conceptions of ethics and regards the Buddha's ethical code as an absolute and invariable truth. He also has little sympathy for the Western devotion to democracy, which he describes as "a general inadequacy in modern European thought - the growing view that the majority must be right, that truth is to be decided by appeal to the ballot-box." For Nanavira the majority are simply a majority in delusion and therefore unlikely to arrive at the kinds of conclusions which would be reached by an enlightened minority of aryas . He would disagree with Evola, though, in the value of pursuing any course of political action. For Nanavira it is not the modern world that is flawed, but existence as such.

A real but rarely acknowledged problem lies in the Buddhist conception of a "superior" person, one who has gained privileged insight into the nature of existence. This view is held in common by all Buddhist schools and is pivotal to the oft-repeated argument that Buddhism, unlike other traditions, offers a practical way of personal transformation through spiritual practice. As Evola was aware, this doctrine plays into the hands of the political right. This principle was the basis for the government of old Tibet, which believed that the best way to run a country was by an enlightened elite, particularly an elite motivated by boundless compassion for all beings.

As soon as one seriously introduces Buddhist values into the arena of politics, one will encounter difficulties in reconciling them not only with capitalism and consumerism, but also with liberal democracy. While it may be fashionable to draw on Buddhist doctrines such as interconnectedness to support a Green political ideology, for example, one needs to be aware that the body of doctrine that enshrines such a notion could also be used to support a Green totalitarianism, a society governed by an enlightened minority who would compassionately dictate what would be best for the survival of the planet.

Not that any of these questions would have been of concern to Nanavira. For in many ways Nanavira represents the kind of Theravada Buddhist monk that Mahayana Buddhists would criticise as self-centred and uncaring. (It comes as no surprise that he vehemently asserts that the "Mahayana is not the Buddha's teaching.") Only once in his writings does he mention the traditional Theravada meditation of loving-kindness (mettabhavana), only to say that he has never

formally practised it. His tendency to physical isolation could arguably reflect a philosophical tendency to solipsism; in one letter he describes the appearance of another person as merely "a certain modification of my experience that requires elaborate description." And elsewhere he writes: "I am far more strongly moved by episodes in books than by those in real life, which usually leave me cold." He is quite unequivocal about Nirvana being the cessation of existence in any form. "There is a way out," he insists, "there is a way to put a stop to existence, if only we have the courage to let go of our cherished humanity."

Nor should Nanavira's experience be judged negatively according to Mahayana Buddhist standards. A so-called "Hinayana" arya is considered even in the Mahayana traditions as part of the Buddhist Sangha, and, as such, an object of respect and refuge. Nanavira may not have been motivated by great compassion, but he did claim to have experienced directly the unconditioned reality of Nirvana, which is the central truth of all Buddhist traditions.

Is a right-wing misogynist with uncontrollable lusts and a penchant for suicide thereby automatically disqualified from experiencing Nirvana? Nanavira points to passages in the Pali Canon where the stream entrant is shown to be capable of anger, jealousy, deceit and drunkenness, transgressing the lesser monastic rules, even disrobing on account of sensual desire, and, as a layman, breaking the five precepts. "Unless you bring the [practitioner] down to earth," he writes, "the Buddha's Teaching can never be a reality for you. So long as you are content to put the sotopanna (stream entrant) on a pedestal well out of reach, it can never possibly occur to you that it is your duty to become sotapanna yourself ... here and now in this very life."

For Nanavira, Buddhism offers a radical and uncompromising praxis as a response to the deepest questions of human existence. As such it avoids the extremes of rationalism and romanticism. A scholar of Buddhism, he comments, can only feel safe as long as his subject "is not one day going to get up and look him between the eyes. ... (Quite the last thing that a professor of Buddhism would dream of doing is to profess Buddhism - that is left to mere amateurs like myself.)" He is likewise aware of how his solitary life in the Ceylonese jungle is liable to be interpreted romantically: "The British public wants romance," he complains, "and I am not a romantic figure, and have no desire to be portrayed as one." As in the Buddha's famous parable of the raft, Buddhism is a means to an end and not an end in itself. For Nanavira even the terms "Buddhism" and "Buddhist" carry "a slightly displeasing air about them - they are too much like labels one sticks on the outside of packages regardless of what the packages contain."

Towards the end of his life Nanavira was convinced that the Dhamma was "very far from being understood in the West." For whether aware of it or not, Europeans were still fundamentally preoccupied with the question of God, the very idea of a "moral but Godless universe" being utterly alien. Yet behind the belief in God lies

the even more deeply entrenched sense that the universe has a meaning or purpose. He approvingly quotes Nietzsche:

Has existence then a significance at all? - the question that will require a couple of centuries even to be heard in all its profundity.

Nietzsche's question disturbs in the same way as Nanavira's suicide. For such statements challenge those collectively held, Christian-based views about the nature of life which still dominate our instinctive ethical sense of good and evil. For Buddhism to penetrate deeply into the European psyche it will have to reach such pre-articulate strata of experience. Otherwise it is liable to become merely a consoling set of beliefs and views still founded on a Theistic ethos. Enlightenment is not a transcendent mystical rapture but an ethical experience that reveals the nature of the existential dilemma and the way to its resolution.

Nanavira firmly challenges the idea that the Buddha's Teaching is in any way life-affirming. He condemns the fairly common practice at his time among Buddhists to call upon the good authority of notable non-Buddhists to attest to the Buddha's good character. He finds it particularly galling that a certain Sri Lankan professor would recruit Albert Schweitzer to this purpose. For "Schweitzer's philosophy is 'Reverence for Life', whereas the Buddha has said that just as even the smallest piece of excrement has a foul smell so even the smallest piece of existence is not to be commended."

This scatological view of existence is for many Western people very difficult to swallow. Yet Nanavira feels justified in making such statements not merely on the basis of Canonical authority, but on the authority of his own enlightenment, his stream entry. And it is this authority that he likewise calls upon to justify his final act of suicide.

The debate over the validity of Nanavira's claim to be a stream entrant had already begun in Sri Lanka before he died. It is an offence deserving expulsion from the order for a bhikkhu to declare himself to have a spiritual attainment that he in fact does not have. Even if he does have the attainment, he is forbidden to tell of it to anyone except a fellow bhikkhu. Nanavira's claim to stream entry was recorded in a letter in a sealed envelope that was only to be opened by the senior bhikkhu of the Island Hermitage in the event of his death. For some reason (perhaps a rumour of suicide?), the letter was opened in 1964 and the contents became known. To defuse the matter, Nanavira spoke openly about it for the first time to a fellow bhikkhu in Colombo, thus letting "this rather awkward cat ... out of the bag."

How does one decide whether another person really is a stream entrant or whether they are deluding themselves? According to the suttas, only an arya can recognise another arya. It would follow, therefore, that only a bona fide arya would have the authority to deny Nanavira's claim. But then the same questions would arise with

regard to that person, which would require the authority of yet another bona fide arya , and so on ad infinitum.

Subjectively, however, the attainment of stream entry can be validated by a discernible and definitive psychological change. For upon attaining stream entry three "fetters" (samyojana) disappear for good: (1) views that a self abides either in or apart from the psycho-physical aggregates (sakkaya-ditthi); (2) doubts about the validity of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, the Training, Conditionality and other key doctrines (vicikiccha); and (3) attachment to the efficacy of mere rules and rituals (silabbata-paramasa). For Nanavira to have made the claim he did implies that he actually experienced the disappearance of these tendencies from his own mind. But only he (or another clairvoyant arya) would have been able to know this. Although his writings bear no trace of these attitudes, that alone would be insufficient evidence to conclude anything about the degree of the author's attainment; for it could reflect merely a commitment to doctrinal orthodoxy.

One also cannot rule out the possibility that Nanavira Thera was suffering from a delusion, that he was driven to suicide by unconscious fears and desires over which he had no awareness or control. The clearest statement of his own views on the matter appears in a letter of 16 May, 1963. "Do not think," he writes,

that I regard suicide as praiseworthy - that there can easily be an element of weakness in it, I am the first to admit... -, but I certainly regard it as preferable to a number of other possibilities. (I would a hundred times rather have it said of the Notes that the author killed himself as a bhikkhu than that he disrobed; for bhikkhus have become arahats in the act of suicide, but it is not recorded that anyone became arahat in the act of disrobing.)

It might help overcome the unease about the stigma of suicide if one described Nanavira's act as one of "enlightened euthanasia."

The greatest irony of this story is how a passage from a sutta saved an Italian fascist from committing suicide, in gratitude for which he wrote a book that impelled an English army officer to become a bhikkhu, who eventually committed suicide with the conviction that it was fully justified by the suttas.

The value of Nanavira Thera's life lies not so much in the answers it gives but in the questions it raises about what it means for a European to be a practising Buddhist. His writings clear away many woolly ideas about the Buddha's Teaching (at least as found in the Pali Canon) and force one to address uncomfortable questions that are usually ignored. Are either Evola's fascist or Nanavira's life-denying interpretations of the Buddha's Teaching any more or less tenable than the liberal-democratic and life-affirming readings of the tradition that abound in the West today? Even if Nanavira's work only forces us to recognise the sub-conscious and culturally biased assumptions we project onto Buddhism, then it will have

provided an important service. This does not mean that we would then have to adopt his (or, heaven forbid, Evola's) views rather than our own, but simply that we would have stepped free of one more "thicket of views," thus enabling a clearer vision of how to proceed along a path whose ultimate destination we cannot know.

Whatever reservations one may have about Nanavira Thera, one has to acknowledge that he was the first European to have left such a vivid and rigorous account of a life dedicated to realising the truths disclosed by the Dhamma. Of course, it is impossible to say whether other Western Buddhists have not accomplished the same or more. But their published writings tend not to discuss these matters. Nanavira's uniqueness lies in his having embraced the Dhamma with wholehearted confidence, having sought to clear away with reason much of the confusion surrounding its orthodox interpretation, having practised it relentlessly, having recorded his experience of it in detail, and ultimately having sacrificed his life for it.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Since completing this essay (an earlier version of which was originally intended as a chapter in my book *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* [London, Thorsons/ Berkeley, Parallax, 1994]) further writings by and concerning Nanavira Thera have come to my attention.

By far the most significant of these is an unpublished volume of 638 typewritten pages entitled *Early Writings (1950 - 1960)*, likewise compiled by Samanera Bodhesako. The bulk of this volume (426 pp.) consists of Nanavira's extensive correspondence with Nanamoli Thera from 1954-1959. Unfortunately, only fragments of Nanamoli's side of the correspondence have been found. These letters shed considerable light on the relations between the two men and provide a wealth of material on the formation of Nanavira's thought prior to his "stream entry." The remainder of the volume includes two early essays (*Nibbana and Anatta and Sketch for a Proof of Rebirth*) as well as notes from a *Commonplace Book* and *Marginalia* from books owned by Nanavira.

I hope at some later date to be able to incorporate this additional material into a more detailed and critical study of Nanavira, Nanamoli and their times.

Stephen Batchelor

June, 1995.

Ven. Nyanawimala Thera

"Ven. Nyanawimala Thera, formerly known as Friedrich Moller, was a teacher of Rackow College, Hamburg. He was the first German recruit of the German

Dharmadutha Society for Buddhist Dharmadutha training having personally met Asoka Weeraratna while the latter was on an exploratory visit to Germany in early 1953 surveying the potential for propagation of Buddhism. Friedrich Moller arrived in the island on the 5th of June, 1953. He was a pupil of Ven. Nyanatiloka Maha Thera. Ven. Nyanawimala Thera, who is over 85 years of age, is currently resident at the Island Hermitage at Polgasduwa, Dodanduwa."

Senaka Weeraratna

Evola believed that the original Buddhism disclosed through his study revealed the essence of the aryan tradition that had become lost and corrupted in the West. For him aryan means more than "noble" or "sublime," as it was frequently rendered in translations of Buddhist texts. "They are all later meanings of the word," he explains, "and do not convey the fullness of the original nor the spiritual, aristocratic and racial significance which, nevertheless, is preserved in Buddhism." Other "innate attributes of the aryan soul" that are described in Buddhist texts are an absence "of any sign of departure from consciousness, of sentimentalism or devout effusion, or of semi-intimate conversation with a God." Only among some of the German mystics, such as Eckhart, Tauler and Silesius, does he find examples of this spirit in the Western tradition, "where Christianity has been rectified by a transfusion of aryan blood."

Not only does Buddhism display an aryan spirit but, for Evola, it also endorses the superiority of the warrior caste. Brushing aside the Buddha's well-known denunciation of the caste system, Evola notes that "it was generally held that the *bodhisatta* ... are never born into a peasant or servile caste but into a warrior or brahman caste." He cites several examples where the Buddha makes analogies between "the qualities of an ascetic and the virtues of a warrior." Of all the Mahayana schools the only one he admired was that of Zen, on account of its having been adopted in Japan as the doctrine of the Samurai class.

What appeal could this book have had for an officer of the Allied forces advancing through Italy as part of a campaign to overthrow a regime based on notions of aryan supremacy? Yet Captain Musson immediately set about translating *The Doctrine of Awakening* into English, a task he completed three years later. In his brief foreword he offers no apology for the author's extreme views, but simply asserts that Evola had "recaptured the spirit of Buddhism in its original form." The book cleared away "some of the woolly ideas that have gathered around ... Prince Siddhartha and the doctrine he disclosed." But its "real significance" was to be found in "its encouragement of a practical application of the doctrine it discusses."

If one ignores Evola's suprematist and militaristic views, *The Doctrine of Awakening* offers a clear and often thoughtful account of early Buddhist doctrine.

Evola proudly recalls that the English edition "received the official approbation of the Pali [Text] Society," through their "recognition of the value of my study." It is nonetheless curious that in 1951, so shortly after the war, the book would be published in London by a reputable Orientalist publisher (Luzac) without any reference to the author's extreme right-wing views.

### **War forced maturity**

By the time *The Doctrine of Awakening* appeared in print, Musson had followed the book's advice and was already a bhikkhu in Ceylon. "I think the war hastened my decision," he later told Robin Maugham in the course of their conversation. "Though it was inevitable, I think, in any case. But the *war forced maturity on me.*"

Since Harold Musson, like Larry Darrell (and probably Julius Evola), had a private income, he did not have to seek work upon leaving the army. He settled in London. With time and money on his hands, he leisurely worked on his translation of Evola and "tried to get as much pleasure out of life as I could." Then one evening, in a bar, he ran into Osbert Moore, an old army friend who had shared his enthusiasm for *The Doctrine of Awakening* while in Italy. They began comparing notes. "Gradually we came to the conclusion that the lives we were leading at present were utterly pointless. We shared the belief that the whole of this existence as we saw it was a farce." By the time the bar closed, they had resolved to go to Ceylon and become *bhikkhus*.

They left England in November 1948 and were ordained as novices in an open glade at the Island Hermitage by Nyanatiloka, then an old man of seventy-one, on April 24, 1949. Moore was given the name "Nanamoli," and Musson "Nanavira." In 1950 they both received *bhikkhu* ordination in Colombo.

For the next year Nanavira devoted himself "fairly continuously" to the practice of meditative absorption (*jhana, samadhi*), the attainment of which, he later declared, had been his motive in coming to Ceylon. A few months before Maugham's visit he had explained to a Singhalese friend that it was "the desire for some definite non-mystical form of practice that first turned my thoughts to the East:"

Western thinking ... seemed to me to oscillate between the extremes of mysticism and rationalism, both of which were distasteful to me, and the yoga practices - in a general sense - of India offered themselves as a possible solution.

This is what he had seen as the "real significance" of Evola's book and, as he confirmed sixteen years later, the point on which "Eastern thought is at its greatest distance from Western." But after a year's practice he contracted typhoid, which left him with chronic indigestion so severe that at times he would "roll about on

[his] bed with the pain." It also prevented him from attaining anything more than the "low-level results of [the] practice."

Unable to pursue the *jhanas* he turned his linguistic skills to the study of Pali, which he soon mastered, and set about reading the Buddha's discourses and their Singhalese commentaries. His analytical bent led him to assume that "it was possible to include all that the [Buddha] said in a single system - preferably portrayed diagrammatically on one very large sheet of paper." But the more he read, the more he realised that this approach was "sterile" and incapable of leading to understanding. And the more he probed the discourses, the more he came to doubt the validity of the commentaries, which, "in those innocent days," he had accepted as authoritative. His friend Nanamoli, meanwhile, had likewise mastered Pali and was preparing to translate the greatest Commentary of them all: Buddhaghosa's *Visuddi Magga*.

Over the following months and years Nanavira became increasingly independent in his views, both challenging the accepted orthodoxy and refining his own understanding. Temperamentally, he acknowledged a tendency to stand apart from others. "I am quite unable," he wrote in 1963, "to identify myself with any organised body or cause (even if it is a body of opposition or a lost cause). I am a born blackleg." Having renounced a life of comfort in England and all the values it stood for, he now rejected the prevailing orthodoxy of Singhalese Buddhism. But he did not turn against the Buddha's word: "It was, and is, my attitude towards the [Buddha's discourses] that, if I find anything in them that is against my own view, they are *right*, and I am *wrong*." He came to view only two of the three "Baskets" (*Pitaka*) of the Canon as authentic: those containing the discourses and the monastic rule. "No other Pali books whatsoever," he insisted, "should be taken as authoritative; and ignorance of them (and particularly of the traditional Commentaries) may be counted a positive advantage, as leaving less to be unlearned."

This radical tendency towards isolation led him in 1954 to leave the Island Hermitage for the physical solitude of his hut in the jungle. "Aren't you lonely?" inquired Maugham. "After a bit," he replied, "you find you simply don't *want* other people. You've got your centre of gravity within yourself ... You become self-contained." Two years earlier he had confessed: "I am one of those people who think of other people as 'they,' not as 'we.'" Despite persistent ill-health, his study and practice of mindfulness continued with increasing intensity.

Then, on the evening of June 27, 1959, something happened that radically changed the course of his life. He recorded the event in Pali in a private journal:

HOMAGE TO THE AUSPICIOUS ONE, WORTHY, FULLY AWAKENED. -

At one time the monk Nanavira was staying in a forest hut near Bundala village. It was during that time, as he was walking up and down in the first watch of the night, that the monk Nanavira made his mind quite pure of constraining things, and kept thinking and pondering and reflexively observing the Dhamma as he had heard and learnt it, the clear and stainless Eye of the Dhamma arose in him: "Whatever has the nature of arising, all that has the nature of ceasing." Having been a teaching-follower for a month, he became one attained to right view.

Thus he claimed to have "entered the stream," (*sotapatti*) glimpsed the unconditioned *Nirvana*, and become, thereby, an *arya*.

The Buddha used the term "*arya*" to refer to those who had achieved a direct experiential insight into the nature of the four truths (suffering, its origins, its cessation and the way to its cessation). For such people these truths are no longer beliefs or theories, but realities. When someone comes to know them as such, he or she is said to have "entered the stream" which culminates, within a maximum of seven further lifetimes either as a human or a god, in *arahat-hood*, i.e. the final attainment of *Nirvana*. While the Buddha used this term in a purely spiritual sense, he maintained a distinction between an *arya* and an "ordinary person" (*puthujjana*), i.e. one who had not yet had the experience of stream-entry. The experience, however, is available to *anyone*, irrespective of their social position, sex or racial origins. By offering this radical redefinition of "nobility," the Buddha introduced into caste-bound India a spiritual tradition able to transcend the limits of the indigenous culture. Yet in the final analysis, concluded Nanavira, "the Buddha's Teaching is for a privileged class - those who are fortunate enough to have the intelligence to grasp it..., and they are most certainly not the majority!"

Up to this point Nanavira had maintained a continuous correspondence with his friend Nanamoli (Moore). Now he stopped it, because "there was no longer anything for me to discuss *with him*, since the former relationship of parity between us regarding the Dhamma had suddenly come to an end." And it was never to be resumed, for eight months later, on March 8, 1960, Nanamoli Thera died suddenly of a heart attack in a remote village while on a walking tour. He left behind some of the finest English translations from Pali of key Theravada texts. Added to this loss had been the death three years earlier of Nanavira's first preceptor, Nyanatiloka, on May 28, 1957.

In the year following his stream-entry (1960) Nanavira began writing a series of "notes." By the summer of 1961 he had finished two such notes, one on "Paticcasamuppada" (conditionality) and one on "Paramattha sacca" (higher truth). In July of the same year, a German Buddhist nun called Vajira (Hannelore Wolf), who had been in Ceylon since 1955 and since 1959 had been living as a hermit, called on Nanavira for advice. He subsequently sent her a copy of the two notes he had just finished typing. These had a tremendous impact on her. "Your notes on *vinnana-namarupa*," (consciousness-name/form) she wrote, "have led me away

from the abyss into which I have been staring for more than twelve years." And added: "I do not know ... by what miraculous skill you have guided me to a safe place where at last I can breathe freely."

The correspondence and one further day-long meeting resulted in Vajira likewise "entering the stream," in late January 1962. Vajira underwent an ecstatic but *turbulent transformation* from an ordinary person (*puthujjana*) to an *arya*, the validity of which Nanavira did "not see any reason to doubt." Vajira, from her side, now regarded Nanavira as an *arahat*. But the rapidity and intensity of the change provoked a kind of nervous breakdown and the Ceylonese authorities deported her to Germany (on February 22, 1962). On her return she ceased to have any contact with her former Buddhist friends in Hamburg. This, commented Nanavira, was "a good sign, not a bad one - when one has got what one wants, one stops making a fuss about it and sits down quietly."

Four months after Vajira's departure, Nanavira's chronic indigestion (*amoebiasis*) was further aggravated by satyriasis - a devastatingly inappropriate malady for a celibate hermit. Satyriasis - "the overpowering need on the part of a man to seduce a never-ending succession of women" (Britannica) - is the male equivalent to nymphomania in women. "Under the pressure of this affliction," he noted on December 11, "I am oscillating between two poles. If I indulge the sensual images that offer themselves, my thought turns towards the state of a layman; if I resist them, my thought turns towards suicide. Wife or knife, one might say." In fact, the previous month he had already made an unsuccessful attempt to end his life. Although he realised that the erotic stimulation could be overcome by meditative absorption, such practice was prevented by his chronic indigestion. By November 1963, he had "given up all hope of making any further progress for myself in this life" and had also resolved not to disrobe. It was simply a question of how long he could "stand the strain."

### **Conventional motives**

While for the ordinary person (*puthujjana*) suicide is ethically equivalent to murder, for an *arya* it is acceptable under circumstances that prevent further spiritual practice. For the *arya* is no longer bound to the craving that drives the endless cycle of death and rebirth, his or her liberation being guaranteed within a finite period of time. Nanavira cites instances from the Canon of *arya bhikkhus* at the time of the Buddha who had taken their lives and become *arahats* in the process. He does not seem to have been driven by the conventional motives for suicide: resentment, remorse, despair, grief. He writes openly of his dilemma to friends with droll understatement and black humour:

All the melancholy farewell letters are written (they have to be amended and brought up to date from time to time, as the weeks pass and my throat is still uncut); the note for the coroner is prepared (carefully refraining from any witty

remarks that might spoil the solemn moment at the inquest when the note is read out aloud); and the mind is peaceful and concentrated.

His friends responded with a mixture of concern, bewilderment and alarm. "People want their Dhamma on easier terms," he reflected, "and they dislike it when they are shown that they must pay a heavier price - and they are frightened, too, when they see something they don't understand: they regard it as morbid and their concern (unconscious, no doubt) is to bring things back to healthy, reassuring, normality."

Most of 1963 was taken up with preparing his notes for publication, something he would have considered "an intolerable disturbance" had his health not prevented him from practice. Despite such disclaimers, one has the strong impression that he wished to communicate his vision of the Dhamma to a wider public. (Maugham records him as saying: "I'm hoping to find an English publisher for [them].") Through the help of the Ceylonese Judge Lionel Samaratunga a limited edition of 250 cyclostyled copies of *Notes on Dhamma* (1960-1963) was produced towards the end of the year and distributed to leading Buddhist figures of the time and various libraries and institutions. The response was largely one of polite incomprehension.

When Robin Maugham entered the tiny hut at the beginning of 1965, Nanavira had largely completed the revisions to his *Notes on Dhamma*. "I looked round the room with its faded blue walls," Maugham recalls. "There was a table made from a packing-case with an oil-lamp on it, a chair, a chest and a bookcase. There were two straw brooms and two umbrellas - and his plank bed and the straw mat I was sitting on." But he was quite unaware of Nanavira's work. The questions he asked as he squatted uncomfortably on the floor were typical of those a sympathetic but uninformed European would still make today. Maugham's principal interest was to understand Nanavira's character. To this end he asked at length about his relations with his family, the reasons why he became a monk, if he felt lonely and whether he missed the West.

Maugham left the first meeting with a positive impression "I liked his diffident smile and I admired his courage," he reflected. "But I still wondered if he was completely sincere." During the second meeting his doubts were put to rest. Nanavira explained how his mother had come out to Ceylon and tried to persuade her only child to return home. When he refused she suffered a heart-attack. As soon as she recovered she went back to England and died. "His voice was quite impassive as he spoke," explained Maugham. "I find it hard to describe the tone of his voice. Yet if I don't I shall miss the whole point of the man I'd travelled so far to see. There was no harshness in his tone. There was no coldness. There was understanding and gentleness. And it was only these two qualities that made his next remark bearable."

‘My mother’s death didn’t worry me,’ he said. ‘Even now, during this life, every moment we are born and die. But we continue. We take some other shape or form in another life.’

Nanavira fell silent. He was visibly tired. Then he added: "The whole point of Buddhism is to bring an end to this farcical existence. The whole point of our present existence is to reach Nirvana - complete understanding of natural phenomena - thereby ending the chain of re-birth."

In Nanavira’s account of the meeting, however, it is Robin Maugham’s sincerity that is put into question. "The visitors I spoke of in my postcard," he wrote in a letter two days later, came and talked and took photographs and notes for several hours on the afternoon of the eighth. The older one is Robin Maugham, a nephew of the celebrated Somerset Maugham. He is a novelist (third-rate, I suspect) and a writer of travel books. Although they both seemed interested in the Dhamma, I rather think that their principal reason for visiting me was to obtain material for their writings. I had a slightly uncomfortable feeling of being exploited; but, unfortunately, once I start talking, I like going on, without proper regard for the repercussions later on. So probably, in about a year’s time, there will be a new travel book with a chapter (complete with photographs) devoted to yours truly, and the romantic life he is leading in the jungle.

Contrary to his own version, Maugham was not alone. Thus the dramatic encounter between two tormented souls - the man of the world and the hermit - is compromised by the presence of a third man - probably Maugham’s secretary and assistant. Nanavira’s prediction about the outcome of the visit proved entirely accurate except in the timing. Maugham’s sensational account of the meeting was published in the *People* newspaper of September 26, 1965, but it took ten years before the travel book (*Search for Nirvana*, 1975) appeared. This book devotes most of its pages to Maugham’s search for Nirvana in the arms of dusky-skinned youths, but a chapter (complete with photographs) is given to his meeting with Nanavira.

At root, though, Maugham seems sincere. As they were parting, he had the strong impression that Nanavira still wanted to tell him something "of such importance that it would change my whole life." But the monk abruptly averted his "mellow gaze" and simply said goodbye. Maugham and his companion walked away towards the path that led from the jungle glade to the village. Then he turned back: "His lean gaunt figure in a saffron robe was standing motionless on the verandah. Perhaps he knew a truth that would make the existence of millions of men a happier thing. Perhaps he knew the answer. Perhaps he had found the secret of life. But I would never know."

The revision of his *Notes* completed, Nanavira returned to his simple routine of meditation, correspondence and daily chores. His chronic indigestion continued to

be aggravated by satyriasis. Six months (Maugham, presumably for dramatic effect, says two weeks) after their meeting, on the afternoon of July 7, 1965, Nanavira ended his life by putting his head into a cellophane bag containing drops of chloroform. Only a month earlier his letters had been exploring the meaning of humour.

The memory of the English monk from Aldershot continued to haunt Robin Maugham. In 1968 he published *The Second Window*, an autobiographical novel about a journalist who becomes entangled in a child sex-abuse scandal in Kenya. As a digression from the main theme, the protagonist visits Ceylon to track down a certain Leslie Edwin Fletcher who is rumoured to be living there as a Buddhist hermit. While clearly based on Maugham's encounter with Nanavira, the fictionalised version turns him into a gloomy, confused and pathetic figure. A radio-play (*A Question of Retreat*) followed in a similar vein.

Shortly afterwards, in 1972, Julius Evola published his autobiography. Towards the end of the war Evola had been injured by a bomb in Vienna and for the remainder of his life was partially paralysed. He returned to Italy and became a focal figure for the far right, receiving in his apartment a steady trickle of those who still admired the values he espoused. Although he died in 1974, he has been resurrected recently as a hero of resurgent neo-fascist groups in Italy.

Recalling *The Doctrine of Awakening*, he wrote in his autobiography: "The person who translated the work [into English], a certain Mutton (sic), found in it an incitant to leave Europe and withdraw to the Orient in the hope of finding there a centre where one still cultivated the disciplines that I recommended; unfortunately, I have had no further news of him." Evola also confessed that he himself was not a Buddhist and his study was intended to balance his earlier work on the Hindu tantras.

He saw Buddhism as the "'dry' and intellectual path of pure detachment" as opposed to that of the tantras which taught "affirmation, engagement, the utilisation and transformation of immanent forces liberated through the awakening of the Shakti, i.e. the root power of all vital energy, particularly that of sex." The only other work of Evola's to have been translated into English was *The Metaphysics of Sex* (London, 1983).

### **Scrupulously edited**

In 1987 a book was published by Path Press, Colombo, with the title *Clearing the Path: Writings of Nanavira Thera* (1960 - 1965). This hard-cover book of nearly six hundred pages contains the text of Nanavira's revised *Notes on Dhamma* (1960 - 1965) together with 149 letters of varying lengths written by Nanavira to nine correspondents, which serve (as the author himself stated) as a commentary on the *Notes*. The texts are scrupulously edited, extensively annotated and cross-

referenced by means of a comprehensive index. The compilation, editing and publication of this book was a labour of love performed (anonymously) by Ven. Bodhesako (Robert Smith), an American *samanera* from Chicago, who died suddenly of gangrene of the intestines in Nepal in 1989, shortly after completing the work. With his death Path Press ceased to function and the book can now only be obtained from a Buddhist distributor (Wisdom Books) in London.

*Clearing the Path* is presented by Bodhesako as a "work book. It's purpose is to help the user to acquire a point of view that is different from his customary frame of reference, and also more satisfactory." As such it is to be used as a tool for inner change. This supports Nanavira's own contention in his preface to the *Notes* that "the reader is presumed to be subjectively engaged with an anxious problem, the problem of his existence, which is also the problem of his suffering." He adds:

There is therefore nothing in these pages to interest the professional scholar, for whom the question of personal existence does not arise; for the scholar's whole concern is to eliminate or ignore the individual point of view in an effort to establish the objective truth - a would-be impersonal synthesis of public facts.

He later remarked that the Notes "were not written to pander to people's tastes" and were made "as unattractive, academically speaking, as possible." He declared that he would be satisfied if only one person were ever to benefit from them.

In their final version, Notes on Dhamma consist of the two essays on "Paticcasamuppada" (conditionality) and "Paramattha Sacca"(higher truth) and twenty shorter notes on a range of key Pali terms, such as "Atta"(self), "Citta" (mind), "Rupa" (form) etc. They are all written in a dense, exact style in numbered sections, most of the key terms remaining in Pali. Nanavira composed them as an explicit critique of the orthodox Theravada position "with the purpose of clearing away a mass of dead matter which is choking the [Buddha's discourses]."

In keeping with Nanavira's wishes, the Notes have not been indexed. This, he felt, would turn the book into a "work of reference." Whereas "it is actually intended to be read and digested as a single whole, with each separate note simply presenting a different facet of the same central theme." Elsewhere he describes his Notes as being like "so many beads inter-connected with numbers of threads, in a kind of three-dimensional network."

This holomorphic character of the Notes is reflected most explicitly in the fourth and final section entitled "Fundamental Structure," which consists of two parts, "Static Aspect" and "Dynamic Aspect." In his usual ironic manner, Nanavira describes this section as "really a remarkably elegant piece of work, almost entirely original, and also quite possibly correct. I am obliged to say this myself, since it is improbable that anybody else will. It is most unlikely that anyone will make anything of it." This is certainly true for the present writer.

"Fundamental Structure" attempts to describe by means of terse philosophical language and symbolic diagrams the "inherent structure governing the selectivity of consciousness" which is common to both the enlightened and unenlightened person alike. Nanavira compares this fundamental structure to a chessboard on which both "passionate chess," i.e. a game following the rules but complicated by the influence of passion, and its opposite, "dispassionate chess," can both be played. But he admits that these ideas are "only indirectly connected to the Buddha's Teaching proper." He sees them as a possible corrective to certain tendencies in abstract, scientific thinking to distance oneself from a sense of concrete existential location. For someone who does not suffer from this problem, however, he acknowledges that it will serve no purpose to study "Fundamental Structure."

Nanavira recognises a yawning gulf between the world-view of the average Western person and the Teaching of the Buddha. For those uninclined to the somewhat dry and technical approach of "Fundamental Structure" he recommends prior study of Existentialist philosophy, as found in the writings of Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus and, in particular, Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. For these thinkers had also discarded the detached, rationalist approach to philosophy and emphasised immediate questions of personal existence. He also speaks highly of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the early novels of Aldous Huxley, and the writings of Franz Kafka, all of which had a strong influence on him as a young man. Nanavira nonetheless warned against confusing Existentialism with Buddhism. For "one who has understood the Buddha's Teaching no longer asks these questions; he is *arya* 'noble,' and no more a *puthujjana*, and he is beyond the range of the existential philosophies." The Dhamma does not offer answers; it shows "the way leading to the final cessation of all questions about self and the world."

Nanavira also found the very positivism he so deplored in the West infecting the writings of some of the most respected Sri Lankan authorities on Buddhism. K.N. Jayatilleke, O.H. de A. Wijesekera and G.P. Malalasekera are all taken to task on this point. Despite their being professed Buddhists, Nanavira compares the former two unfavourably with the Christian thinker Kierkegaard. He criticises Jayatilleke, for example, for presenting the Four Noble Truths as though they were propositions of fact, thus obscuring their character as imperatives for action. He compares them to the bottle in *Alice in Wonderland* labelled "Drink Me!" From this perspective (also that of the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*),

the Four Noble Truths are the ultimate tasks for a man's performance - Suffering commands "Know me absolutely!", Arising commands "Abandon Me!", Cessation commands "Realize me!", and the Path commands "Develop me!".

Startling images of this kind abound throughout Nanavira's letters, which reveal him both as a rigorous analytical thinker and also a literary stylist of a high order. By reflecting, in addition, the radical seriousness and renunciation he adopted

towards the personal realisation of the Buddha's Teaching, Nanavira's writings stand out as one of the most original and important contributions to Buddhist literature this century.

But why then, if this is true, does Nanavira Thera remain such an obscure figure? The short answer is because he singularly fails to fit the popular stereotype of what a contemporary Buddhist should be.

It is frequently assumed in the West that Buddhists are mystically inclined, liberal, ecologically sensitive, democratic, pacifist, tolerant, life-affirming, compassionate and spiritual. After reading *Clearing the Path*, however, such are not the qualities one would readily ascribe to Nanavira Thera. Since the image he presents is at odds with this stereotype, he is liable to appear to many Western (and modern Asian) Buddhists as instinctively unattractive. What validity then does the stereotype have? Could it be that it is no more than a romantic re-invention of Buddhism, which presents a model of "spirituality" that embodies those values the "materialistic" West feels it has lost? Is the real reason for Nanavira's unattractiveness the challenge he presents to the assumptions on which the stereotype is based? Or, alternatively, is the stereotype valid and Nanavira Thera deluded and misguided?

As the first step in unravelling Nanavira's motives, it is helpful to consider his relation to the book that inspired him to become a bhikkhu and its author Julius Evola. In only one of his published letters (21 February 1964) does he mention (in passing) Evola's *The Doctrine of Awakening*. He adds in parenthesis: "which, however, I cannot now recommend to you without considerable reserves." But nowhere does he state what those reserves are.

While there is no evidence in Nanavira's writings that he subscribed to Evola's political or racist views, there are a number of threads that forge a link between the spiritual outlook of the two men. One of these threads would be Nanavira's privileged military background and somewhat aristocratic bearing, which would have been endorsed by Evola's ideas on the superiority of the warrior caste and the aristocratic nature of Buddhism. While nothing in the content of his writings suggests any conscious promotion of such values, his capacity for self-discipline and his wry, detached tone of voice reflect a person who assumed authority as a right rather than a privilege.

Perhaps the strongest thread is the fact that Harold Musson's foreword to *The Doctrine of Awakening* could, with minor adjustments, have served as a foreword fifteen years later to Nanavira Thera's *Notes on Dhamma*. For the aim of the two works is essentially the same. To summarise Musson's foreword, these are: (1) "to recapture the spirit of Buddhism in its essential form;" (2) "to clear away some of the woolly ideas" (the preface to *Notes on Dhamma* says "dead matter") which

have gathered around the Buddha's Teaching; and (3), and most importantly: the "encouragement of a practical application of the doctrine.

While Nanavira makes no reference to, and could well have been unfamiliar with, Evola's Gu'nonist conception of Tradition, he certainly is a traditionalist, though in a narrower sense than Gu'non. He says at one point that there is nothing he dislikes more than someone who declares that the aim of all religions is the same. While Gu'non, who spent the last twenty years of his life as a convert to Islam in Cairo, eventually came to include Buddhism as part of the revelation that lies at the heart of all religions, Nanavira came to regard any view that did not accord with his reading of the early Buddhist Canon as deficient. He is dismissive of theistic belief and religion in general and Christianity in particular.

Nanavira likewise shares Evola's contempt for the modern world. He is scathing about evolutionary and relativist conceptions of ethics and regards the Buddha's ethical code as an absolute and invariable truth. He also has little sympathy for the Western devotion to democracy, which he describes as "a general inadequacy in modern European thought - the growing view that the majority must be right, that truth is to be decided by appeal to the ballot-box." For Nanavira the majority are simply a majority in delusion and therefore unlikely to arrive at the kinds of conclusions which would be reached by an enlightened minority of arya. He would disagree with Evola, though, in the value of pursuing any course of political action. For Nanavira it is not the modern world that is flawed, but existence as such.

A real but rarely acknowledged problem lies in the Buddhist conception of a "superior" person, one who has gained privileged insight into the nature of existence. This view is held in common by all Buddhist schools and is pivotal to the oft-repeated argument that Buddhism, unlike other traditions, offers a practical way of personal transformation through spiritual practice. As Evola was aware, this doctrine plays into the hands of the political right. This principle was the basis for the government of old Tibet, which believed that the best way to run a country was by an enlightened elite, particularly an elite motivated by boundless compassion for all beings.

As soon as one seriously introduces Buddhist values into the arena of politics, one will encounter difficulties in reconciling them not only with capitalism and consumerism, but also with liberal democracy. While it may be fashionable to draw on Buddhist doctrines such as interconnectedness to support a Green political ideology, for example, one needs to be aware that the body of doctrine that enshrines such a notion could also be used to support a Green totalitarianism, a society governed by an enlightened minority who would compassionately dictate what would be best for the survival of the planet.

Not that any of these questions would have been of concern to Nanavira. For in many ways Nanavira represents the kind of Theravada Buddhist monk that Mahayana Buddhists would criticise as self-centred and uncaring. (It comes as no surprise that he vehemently asserts that the "Mahayana is not the Buddha's teaching.") Only once in his writings does he mention the traditional Theravada meditation of loving-kindness (*mettabhavana*), only to say that he has never formally practised it. His tendency to physical isolation could arguably reflect a philosophical tendency to solipsism; in one letter he describes the appearance of another person as merely "a certain modification of my experience that requires elaborate description." And elsewhere he writes: "I am far more strongly moved by episodes in books than by those in real life, which usually leave me cold." He is quite unequivocal about Nirvana being the cessation of existence in any form. "There is a way out," he insists, "there is a way to put a stop to existence, if only we have the courage to let go of our cherished humanity."

Nor should Nanavira's experience be judged negatively according to Mahayana Buddhist standards. A so-called "Hinayana" *arya* is considered even in the Mahayana traditions as part of the Buddhist Sangha, and, as such, an object of respect and refuge. Nanavira may not have been motivated by great compassion, but he did claim to have experienced directly the unconditioned reality of Nirvana, which is the central truth of all Buddhist traditions.

Is a right-wing misogynist with uncontrollable lusts and a penchant for suicide thereby automatically disqualified from experiencing Nirvana? Nanavira points to passages in the Pali Canon where the stream entrant is shown to be capable of anger, jealousy, deceit and drunkenness, transgressing the lesser monastic rules, even disrobing on account of sensual desire, and, as a layman, breaking the five precepts. "Unless you bring the [practitioner] down to earth," he writes, "the Buddha's Teaching can never be a reality for you. So long as you are content to put the sotopanna (stream entrant) on a pedestal well out of reach, it can never possibly occur to you that it is your duty to become sotapanna yourself ... here and now in this very life."

For Nanavira, Buddhism offers a radical and uncompromising praxis as a response to the deepest questions of human existence. As such it avoids the extremes of rationalism and romanticism. A scholar of Buddhism, he comments, can only feel safe as long as his subject "is not one day going to get up and look him between the eyes. ... (Quite the last thing that a professor of Buddhism would dream of doing is to profess Buddhism - that is left to mere amateurs like myself.)" He is likewise aware of how his solitary life in the Ceylonese jungle is liable to be interpreted romantically: "The British public wants romance," he complains, "and I am not a romantic figure, and have no desire to be portrayed as one." As in the Buddha's famous parable of the raft, Buddhism is a means to an end and not an end in itself. For Nanavira even the terms "Buddhism" and "Buddhist" carry "a slightly

displeasing air about them - they are too much like labels one sticks on the outside of packages regardless of what the packages contain."

Towards the end of his life Nanavira was convinced that the Dhamma was "very far from being understood in the West." For whether aware of it or not, Europeans were still fundamentally preoccupied with the question of God, the very idea of a "moral but Godless universe" being utterly alien. Yet behind the belief in God lies the even more deeply entrenched sense that the universe has a meaning or purpose. He approvingly quotes Nietzsche:

Has existence then a significance at all? - the question that will require a couple of centuries even to be heard in all its profundity.

Nietzsche's question disturbs in the same way as Nanavira's suicide. For such statements challenge those collectively held, Christian-based views about the nature of life which still dominate our instinctive ethical sense of good and evil. For Buddhism to penetrate deeply into the European psyche it will have to reach such pre-articulate strata of experience. Otherwise it is liable to become merely a consoling set of beliefs and views still founded on a Theistic ethos. Enlightenment is not a transcendent mystical rapture but an ethical experience that reveals the nature of the existential dilemma and the way to its resolution.

Nanavira firmly challenges the idea that the Buddha's Teaching is in any way life-affirming. He condemns the fairly common practice at his time among Buddhists to call upon the good authority of notable non-Buddhists to attest to the Buddha's good character. He finds it particularly galling that a certain Sri Lankan professor would recruit Albert Schweitzer to this purpose. For "Schweitzer's philosophy is 'Reverence for Life', whereas the Buddha has said that just as even the smallest piece of excrement has a foul smell so even the smallest piece of existence is not to be commended."

This scatological view of existence is for many Western people very difficult to swallow. Yet Nanavira feels justified in making such statements not merely on the basis of Canonical authority, but on the authority of his own enlightenment, his stream entry. And it is this authority that he likewise calls upon to justify his final act of suicide.

The debate over the validity of Nanavira's claim to be a stream entrant had already begun in Sri Lanka before he died. It is an offence deserving expulsion from the order for a bhikkhu to declare himself to have a spiritual attainment that he in fact does not have. Even if he does have the attainment, he is forbidden to tell of it to anyone except a fellow bhikkhu. Nanavira's claim to stream entry was recorded in a letter in a sealed envelope that was only to be opened by the senior bhikkhu of the Island Hermitage in the event of his death. For some reason (perhaps a rumour of suicide?), the letter was opened in 1964 and the contents became known. To

defuse the matter, Nanavira spoke openly about it for the first time to a fellow bhikkhu in Colombo, thus letting "this rather awkward cat ... out of the bag."

How does one decide whether another person really is a stream entrant or whether they are deluding themselves? According to the suttas, only an arya can recognise another arya. It would follow, therefore, that only a bona fide arya would have the authority to deny Nanavira's claim. But then the same questions would arise with regard to that person, which would require the authority of yet another bona fide arya, and so on ad infinitum.

Subjectively, however, the attainment of stream entry can be validated by a discernible and definitive psychological change. For upon attaining stream entry three "fetters" (samyojana) disappear for good: (1) views that a self abides either in or apart from the psycho-physical aggregates (sakkaya-ditthi); (2) doubts about the validity of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, the Training, Conditionality and other key doctrines (vicikiccha); and (3) attachment to the efficacy of mere rules and rituals (silabbata-paramasa). For Nanavira to have made the claim he did implies that he actually experienced the disappearance of these tendencies from his own mind. But only he (or another clairvoyant arya) would have been able to know this. Although his writings bear no trace of these attitudes, that alone would be insufficient evidence to conclude anything about the degree of the author's attainment; for it could reflect merely a commitment to doctrinal orthodoxy.

One also cannot rule out the possibility that Nanavira Thera was suffering from a delusion, that he was driven to suicide by unconscious fears and desires over which he had no awareness or control. The clearest statement of his own views on the matter appears in a letter of 16 May, 1963. "Do not think," he writes,

that I regard suicide as praiseworthy - that there can easily be an element of weakness in it, I am the first to admit... -, but I certainly regard it as preferable to a number of other possibilities. (I would a hundred times rather have it said of the Notes that the author killed himself as a bhikkhu than that he disrobed; for bhikkhus have become arahats in the act of suicide, but it is not recorded that anyone became arahat in the act of disrobing.)

It might help overcome the unease about the stigma of suicide if one described Nanavira's act as one of "enlightened euthanasia."

The greatest irony of this story is how a passage from a sutta saved an Italian fascist from committing suicide, in gratitude for which he wrote a book that impelled an English army officer to become a bhikkhu, who eventually committed suicide with the conviction that it was fully justified by the suttas.

The value of Nanavira Thera's life lies not so much in the answers it gives but in the questions it raises about what it means for a European to be a practising

Buddhist. His writings clear away many woolly ideas about the Buddha's Teaching (at least as found in the Pali Canon) and force one to address uncomfortable questions that are usually ignored. Are either Evola's fascist or Nanavira's life-denying interpretations of the Buddha's Teaching any more or less tenable than the liberal-democratic and life-affirming readings of the tradition that abound in the West today? Even if Nanavira's work only forces us to recognise the sub-conscious and culturally biased assumptions we project onto Buddhism, then it will have provided an important service. This does not mean that we would then have to adopt his (or, heaven forbid, Evola's) views rather than our own, but simply that we would have stepped free of one more "thicket of views," thus enabling a clearer vision of how to proceed along a path whose ultimate destination we cannot know.

Whatever reservations one may have about Nanavira Thera, one has to acknowledge that he was the first European to have left such a vivid and rigorous account of a life dedicated to realising the truths disclosed by the Dhamma. Of course, it is impossible to say whether other Western Buddhists have not accomplished the same or more. But their published writings tend not to discuss these matters. Nanavira's uniqueness lies in his having embraced the Dhamma with wholehearted confidence, having sought to clear away with reason much of the confusion surrounding its orthodox interpretation, having practised it relentlessly, having recorded his experience of it in detail, and ultimately having sacrificed his life for it.

## POSTSCRIPT

Since completing this essay (an earlier version of which was originally intended as a chapter in my book *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* [London, Thorsons/ Berkeley, Parallax, 1994]) further writings by and concerning Nanavira Thera have come to my attention.

By far the most significant of these is an unpublished volume of 638 typewritten pages entitled *Early Writings (1950 - 1960)*, likewise compiled by Samanera Bodhesako. The bulk of this volume (426 pp.) consists of Nanavira's extensive correspondence with Nanamoli Thera from 1954-1959. Unfortunately, only fragments of Nanamoli's side of the correspondence have been found. These letters shed considerable light on the relations between the two men and provide a wealth of material on the formation of Nanavira's thought prior to his "stream entry." The remainder of the volume includes two early essays (*Nibbana and Anatta and Sketch for a Proof of Rebirth*) as well as notes from a *Commonplace Book* and *Marginalia* from books owned by Nanavira.

I hope at some later date to be able to incorporate this additional material into a more detailed and critical study of Nanavira, Nanamoli and their times.

Stephen Batchelor

June, 1995.

Ven. Nyanawimala Thera

"Ven. Nyanawimala Thera, formerly known as Friedrich Moller, was a teacher of Rackow College, Hamburg. He was the first German recruit of the German Dharmadutha Society for Buddhist Dharmadutha training having personally met Asoka Weeraratna while the latter was on an exploratory visit to Germany in early 1953 surveying the potential for propagation of Buddhism. Friedrich Moller arrived in the island on the 5th of June, 1953. He was a pupil of Ven. Nyanatiloka Maha Thera. Ven. Nyanawimala Thera, who is over 85 years of age, is currently resident at the Island Hermitage at Polgasduwa, Dodanduwa."

Senaka Weeraratna

## **Ayya Nyanasiri – a woman who lived the Dhamma**

*People and Events 2004 05 23*

It was Ayya (Sister) Nyanasiri's sympathetic smile when listening to a woman's difficulties trying to meditate; or her happy, beaming smile when someone inquired after her health that was most striking about this American professor of English who devoted more than three decades of her life to the study of Buddhism and twenty of these years to living the Buddhist life of renunciation and meditation.

The news of Ayya's death was very sad, but with it was a feeling of equanimity which she would have approved of thoroughly. Also there was joy in having known her and seen the joy she always had in living, though her life was austere that of a ten preceptor.

### ***Content to be a dasasil matha***

Not for her the desire to get higher ordination, call herself a nun, pose off as holier than thou. She was very happy being a yellow robed *dasasil matha*. Though foreign, she was completely traditional and abided by the rules and norms of Theravada Buddhism. Her American emancipation and university professorship and having lived a life of perfect parity and companionship with her husband, also a professor, never gave her any trace of aspiring for higher ordination. She always respected the ruling of the high prelates of Sri Lanka who said a bhikkuni order could not be restored unless an ordained Theravada nun came here from remote wherever. Ayya Nyanasiri was completely happy to be a ten preceptor since she lived her Buddhism and knew higher ordination was not necessary for the goal she was aiming at — final liberation from the Samsaric cycle. She also helped others to follow the correct path.

### ***Inspiring nuns***

I have had the great good fortune of knowing very well, more or less on easy friendship terms, three foreign nuns: the German Ayya Khema, the Australian and much younger Ayya Vayama and Ayya Nyanasiri. Very sadly Ayya Khema died a couple of years ago after settling down in Germany consequent to JVP problems in Sri Lanka which drove her away from her island meditation centre at Parappuduwa. Ayya Vayama I knew when she was a white clad novice at Parappuduwa. Two other friends and I were very close to her and kept in constant touch as she obtained ordination as a ten preceptor, left Parappuduwa, had problems and finally returned to Australia to take charge of a rapidly growing

nuns' retreat in remote Perth. She is Ajahn Vayama now, and head abbess of Dharmasara Nuns Monastery, Gidgegannup.

### *Accepts Buddhism*

Ayya Nyanasiri's rites of passage, as it were, was while touring India with her husband. They'd gone sightseeing to a remote spot when both she and her husband experienced the uncanny feeling they were returning to a well-known place. It had to be in a previous birth since this was their first visit to India. Later that evening, she told us, seated on the balcony of their hotel, she went into deep meditative absorption, the first experience of meditation she had had. The two experiences, strong and inspiring, turned her mind to Buddhism, which she had academically got familiar with. Her husband too became Buddhist but died soon after. It was inevitable, as she said, that she came to Sri Lanka and stayed on year after year with visa renewals.

Bhikku Bodhi's beautiful appreciation of her in the *Sunday Times* of May 16 details how she, Helen Wilder, came under the influence of Ven Nyanaponika Thera residing in Udawattakele, Kandy. It was a mutually symbiotic relationship that the very old monk and middle aged nun forged; he giving her spiritual instruction and guidance and she being proof reader and helper to him as Buddhist Publication Society editor. Later she came to care for him too, bed ridden as he was.

This caring was extended to many other monks, particularly if they lived austere lives in *kutis* perched on rocks or in jungles. She wanted to extend her caring to hospital patients and people in need and so formed an organisation of local nuns with lay women to guide, sustain and help. This was in Kandy about 10 years ago. The push-start by her was dynamic, but when she left progress to the locals, the organisation died a fairly rapid death. She never faulted anyone but we laywomen who were involved realized the local nuns were happier in their villages, chanting *pirit* and receiving *dane* from their *dayikawas*, instead of helping the sick in hospitals and teaching the marginalised.

So Ayya retired to greater solitude and introspection. She moved to a small house on Primrose Hill, in Anniewatte, Kandy, just below the Vajiraramaya temple that perches itself on the summit of the hill. She always welcomed visitors, particularly if they needed help in their meditation practice, but one felt one was encroaching on her precious solitude. She did trek twice a week all the way across town to Udawattakele to see Ven Nyanaponika Thera, and later to do editorial work for Bhikku Bodhi.

General Fernando and his wife Chandrani very generously built Ayya an annexe to their house in Gurudeniya, when she had to leave the Anniewatte house. Here too, in quiet and serene rusticity, she looked down on the river at closer quarters,

clinging as her little one bedroomed abode did to the sharp incline behind the main house. Very soon the entire hillside was blooming with flowers and her garden boasted tamed trees that bore fruit luxuriantly avacado, papaw and guava. Her Man Friday was gardener Siva, always at hand to save her dogs from strays who climbed up from the road running alongside the river, and to chase away snakes and once to bundle up and fling far away an albino cobra that was found on her bed when she returned after a stroll by the river, surrounded by her four dogs. She was completely unafraid. The snake would not harm me since I did it no harm. Maybe he sensed the metta I instinctively felt for him. He was such a handsome creature!

We used to, once in a while, occupy the main house, a couple of friends and I. Ayya liked it though we were a disturbance. She was ever the gracious hostess, making us feel happy and delightfully relaxed just being in her presence. We would squat on the spotless floor though she would wave us to chairs and, while pushing aside her adored, far too exuberantly loving canines, spill out our problems, share our joys with her, pester her with questions and thoroughly enjoy her intellectual interpretations of the Dhamma and her deep, practiced understanding of it.

This was after she stopped coming to Colombo. She used to travel by bus or train, stay with a friend in Bagatelle Road, have her eyes or teeth attended to, renew her visa by going to the Buddha Sasana office and then the passport office. She would hold meditation sessions with anyone who wished to come join her. Her methods, to me, had a tinge of the American too abundant confidence and enthusiasm making her believe instant meditative absorption was possible if only one relaxed completely in body but had the mind alert and body and breath watching, living just that moment and then to the next. We sinners struggled with straying attention and aching muscles!

She advocated mindfulness in every thing one did, which she said would train the mind to be in the moment and thus ready to be absorbed in meditation, proceeding from samatha to *vipassana*

With hindsight, I reflect with inward joy the pleasure I gave her by sending her copies of the *International Herald Tribune* from a library that discarded them. She thirsted for information but would not buy herself newspapers or magazines. She had the means but did not want to be too involved with the world. I also passed on my copies of TIME. How she enjoyed the feel of the outside world just academically as it were, with not a trace of regret at having left all that. Saying that sounds sacrilegious. She had completely renounced the world and was glad about it, but liked to be kept informed of what was going on. She said she cut out articles and snippets that would interest this monk or that and post them. A nun operated current awareness service on backdated newspapers! I am sorry now that carelessness and thoughtlessness thinned out my trickle of news. I stopped sending her even the magazine. Nary a word from her or reminder.

I visited her though, once in a while admittedly, but each time she made me feel as if I had been to see her lately. She was so happy to see old friends and would remember family by name to inquire after. Although the Colombo women trickled down their visits, the Kandy friends of hers were constant in their concern and care of her.

When I visited her about two months ago she looked very different: thin and full of age wrinkles, submerged when her full smile shone through. She very matter-of-factly told me she'd had a massive heart attack and been in the ICU for two weeks. "Siva saved my life," she said. "Discovering me seated helplessly in bed, with this severe pain, he alerted the neighbours and I was rushed to hospital. The doctors and nursing staff were so very good to me."

"What are you going to do now, Ayya?" I asked.

"Just stay here in my usual way. Siva is at hand and the girl comes daily. I am completely unafraid of death. In fact when it comes I shall welcome it as a friend. I am now not even sorry or worried to leave these dogs of mine. I've arranged friends to take them in. They will miss me but if they have good homes, they will soon get on fine." I wonder! Could any home or person replace the complete devotion, love and care she gave the dogs, some strays who had been thrust on her, and one who just followed her as she walked home from Udawattakele. Hence its name Kele.

I have the outline of a sort of will she sent me in reply to a question I had asked about the legality of not wanting life supports, of some sort of doctor aided end-to-life that would be merciful to the incurable sufferer and family, and dignified. She said one could write such a document: "I want no life supports, induced prolongation of life, interference with the natural onset of death etc" which others would have to respect.

### ***The end — surely happy in her case***

I am sure she was happy when dying. She may have been in her late 70s or very early 80s. She surely would have seen the tunnel one is supposed to see with a bright welcoming light at the end of it. Happiness is supposed to suffuse the gently, willingly dying person. Ayya Nyanasiri would surely have been such a one — completely happy and probably smiling her lovely smile in death, conscious of death and willing to let go completely. She is, one can assume, assured of a good human life again which would further help her to shorten her life in Samsara. Nibbana she will attain without being tossed through very many more lives of *dhukka*.. She had faith in her ability to finally gain deliverance from repeated births; led a pure life, was contented and happy and full of the four noble qualities of *metta*, *karuna*, *muditha* and *uppekkha* — the last most difficult but abundant in

her. She would also surely have gained some amount of wisdom and thus her life of joy and piety.

- Nan