Who Was the Venerable Ñanavira Thera?

He was born Harold Edward Musson on January 5, 1920 in the Aldershot military barracks near Alton, a small, sleepy English town in the Hampshire downs an hour from London. His father, Edward Lionel Musson, held the rank of Captain of the First Manchester Regiment stationed at Aldershot’s Salamanca Barracks. A career officer, Edward Musson later attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and probably expected his son and only child to follow in his footsteps. His wife, nee Laura Emily Mateer, was Harold’s devoted mother.

The family was quite wealthy, with extensive coalmine holdings in Wales. Much of Harold’s youth was spent at a mansion on the outskirt of Alton, within sight of a Benedictine abbey. Townspeople describe the boy as solitary and reflective; one remembered Harold saying that he enjoyed walking alone in the London fogs. The same neighbor recalled Harold’s distaste for a tiger skin displayed in the foyer of the family’s residence, a trophy from one of his father’s hunts in India or Burma.

Between 1927 and 1929 the family was stationed in Burma, in Rangoon, Port Blair, and Maymo, and this experience afforded young Harold his first glimpse of representatives of the way of life he would later adopt: Buddhist monks. In a conversation with interviewer Robin Maugham (the nephew of novelist Somerset Maugham), Harold (by then the Venerable Ñanavira) indicated that what he saw in Burma as a child deeply affected him: “I suppose that my first recollection of Buddhism was when I joined my father in Burma. He was commanding a battalion out there. I’d seen statues of Buddha, and I’d heard people talking about him. I remember asking someone ‘who was the Buddha?’ And I was told: the Buddha was a man who sat under a tree and was enlightened. Then and there… I decided: ‘this is what I want to do.’”

Harold received the typical schooling for scions of military families, attending Wellington College and, afterwards, Cambridge. Before Cambridge, though, he spent six months in Italy in 1938, in Florence and Perugia, to study Italian and, as he wrote later, to “broaden my mind.” At Cambridge he attended Magdalene College, where, in 1939, he sat for Mathematics and then Modern Languages (1940), in which he earned a “Class One.”
By this time the introspective boy had become a young man with a taste for music—he enjoyed Mozart, the late Beethoven, Bartok, and Stravinsky—and a love of literature. He confessed, however, that he was “not a great reader of poetry,” preferring ideas to images, a fact reflected in his natural philosophical bent. A man of his time, he was most drawn both then and later to those writers and thinkers who best characterized the interwar period, the era that became known as Europe’s “Age of Anxiety,” during which the whole of the Western intellectual tradition was questioned and challenged. He read, among others, Kafka, Sartre, and Huxley, from whom he learned that, as he later wrote, “there is no point in life”—a common European sentiment of the day.

But the writer who most drove this lesson home for him was Joyce who, he said, “had a great influence on me.” He later described Joyce’s landmark novel *Ulysses* as “grossly obscene” yet “profoundly moral,” the purpose of which was to “hold a mirror up to the average sensual Western man, in which he can recognize his image.” Speaking of the characters in the book, he said what most affected him was “the ultimate meaninglessness and futility of all their actions and aspirations”—and his recognition of himself in them.

This sense of the purposelessness of life was certainly the driver behind Harold’s eventual career choice, and while there is little evidence beyond the recorded words of the often unreliable Maugham interview, it is possible that even before age twenty the man who later became the monk Ñanavira was considering the contemplative life. According to Maugham, his interviewee remarked that while at Wellington he had attended lectures on Buddhism given by a chaplain, and when in Italy had read a couple books. “During my time at Cambridge I slowly began to realise that…I would certainly end my days as a Buddhist monk.” Whether or not this was Ñanavira’s *ipsissima verba* can’t be known, but it seemed an unlikely outcome in 1940, for with war raging on the continent Harold enlisted in the Territorial Royal Artillery. It was probably not entirely by choice—a family acquaintance spoke of him as having “completely resented warfare,” and in a later letter as Ñanavira he said he agreed with Huxley that “there were three kinds [of intelligence]: human, animal, and military.” Given his family background and the acute need of the times, though, there was probably little else he could have done. In July 1941 he was commissioned Second Lieutenant in the Intelligence Corps, where he became an interrogator of prisoners. In 1942 he was promoted to Lieutenant
and in 1944 to Temporary Captain. Between 1943 and 1946 he served overseas with the British Eighth army, primarily in North Africa (in Algiers) and Italy.

He spent most of 1946 in a hospital in Sorrento, Italy for reasons unknown. During his time there he encountered a book that was to have a decisive influence on him, and which marked his first definite involvement with Buddhism. The book was *La Dottrina del Risveglio* [The Doctrine of Awakening] by Julius Evola. Evola’s case mirrored Harold’s in many ways. Born into a devout Catholic family in 1898, Evola served in an artillery regiment in the First World War, but after the war found it impossible to resume a normal life, being filled with “feelings of the inconsistency and vanity of the aims that usually engage human activities.”

As a result, he sought solace in art, drugs, and, finally, suicide—from which act he was saved by a passage he encountered in the Pali Suttas, the oldest Buddhist scriptures.

Harold began translating the book while still in the hospital in order to brush up on his Italian, a project he continued upon his return to England later that year. He took up residence in London, supported by his share of the family wealth. (His father had passed away sometime during the war.) There he lived—by one account—a “Bohemian lifestyle,” smoking forty cigarettes a day and working on his translation of Evola’s book. In the translator’s forward, Harold noted the book’s most important contributions, specifically that it “recaptured the spirit of Buddhism in its original form” by “its encouragement of a practical application of the doctrine it discusses.”

Harold’s subtitle to the book, “A Study of the Buddhist Ascesis” underlined the critical element of applicability that he saw in Buddhism.

Perhaps his labor over Evola’s ideas of Buddhist discipline finally drove home for Harold the contradictions and unsatisfactoriness of the life he was leading. As he later related to Maugham: “I had plenty of time and plenty of money. And I painted the town red. I tried to enjoy myself. I tried to get as much pleasure out of life as I could… But somehow I found that I wasn’t happy… I wasn’t really enjoying myself. I felt that it was all pretty futile…” And so it was that one evening in 1948 he found himself in a bar, where he met a fellow officer whom he’d known from the war, Osbert Moore. Moore was fifteen years Harold’s senior, had graduated from Exeter College at Oxford, and served during the war as a staff officer in Italy where the two men had met. Presently he was working at Bush House as Assistant Head of the
BBC Italian section. Moore too had read some books on Buddhism, including Evola’s, and been affected by them. Their conversation turned to Buddhism, and, as Harold later recounted, he and Moore gradually “came to the conclusion that the lives we were leading… were utterly pointless.”

By the time the pub closed, the two had decided that together they would abandon the world and go to Ceylon to ordain as Buddhist monks.

The Search

Harold settled his affairs in England; most importantly, he took steps to get his by then finished manuscript of Evola’s book to potential publishers. (It finally saw publication by Luzac in 1951, long after the author was already gone.) By one account† the two men went first to India in November 1948 where they spent three months with the Ramakrishna Mission in Calcutta, a religious order founded by Ramakrishna Parahamsa, India’s most popular nineteenth century saint. They left the mission dissatisfied, though, and came to Ceylon on an exploratory venture. They ended up finally at the Island Hermitage in Dodanduwa where, on April 24, 1949, they were ordained as samaneras (novice monks) by the abbot, the famous German monk, Nyanatiloka. Harold received the ordination name of Ñanavira and Moore the name Ñanamoli.

Ñanamoli possessed a scholarly bent, and would live out the remaining years of his life at the Hermitage, his reputation as one of the most renowned translators of Pali literature cemented by his translation of the massive fifth century Sinhalese commentary, the Visuddhimagga (published as The Path of Purification). (In a letter dated December 2, 1954, Ñanavira, recalling Dante as the man who had been to Hell and lived to tell the tale, joked that Ñanamoli would “in time… be regarded with… awe as the man who read the Vissudhi Magga and lived to translate it.”) Ñanavira went to study under Palane Siri Vajirañana Maha Nayaka Thera, the abbot at Vajirarama Temple in Colombo (Ceylon’s largest city and capital). There he received the upasampada, or higher ordination as a fully ordained bhikkhu (monk) the following year. His aspirations were more contemplative than Ñanamoli’s, and when he returned to the Island Hermitage he devoted as much time as possible to the practice of meditation (anapanasati).

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* In a letter dated February 21, 1964, remarking on the book, he wrote “I cannot now recommend [it] to you without considerable reserves.” What those “reserves” were Ñanavira never specified. (Letter to the Hon. Lionel Samaratunga, Clearing the Path, p. 357.)

† This according to Kingsley Heendeniya, a doctor-friend and supporter of Ñanavira, who to this day writes columns on Buddhism in various Sri Lankan publications. However, I was unable to find any confirmation of his version of events.
In 1951 he experienced the first of many notably “third world” complications to his new life: he contracted typhoid. While he eventually recovered, he seems never to have fully regained his health, for not long after he was infected by amoebiasis, a malady that would plague him for the rest of his life.

Amoebiasis, also known as amoebic dysentery, is a type of gastroenteritis caused by the protozoa Entamoeba histolytica, and is typically spread by water contaminated with feces, or (as seems most likely in Ñanavira’s case) by contaminated hands touching food that is then consumed. What is actually transmitted from host to host are cysts of the protozoa that, once they invade the small intestine, release active amoebic parasites which then enter the large intestine, causing tiny ulcers. About ten percent of the world’s population is infected, making it the third most common cause of death by parasitical infection. However, ninety percent of carriers are, fortunately for them, asymptomatic—that is, they don’t even know they have it. For those unfortunates in whom the disease manifests itself, symptoms include abdominal pain, diarrhea, blood and mucus in the stool, and distension of the bowel. In extreme cases the disease can spread to the liver, lungs and brain.

Thanks to this affliction, Ñanavira found that the state of the weather had a direct effect on his bowels and energy level: dry weather energized him, wet weather drained him. The weather at Island Hermitage is typically rainy and humid, so he was forced to seek some other place of residence.

Even while Ñanavira was away from the Hermitage on scouting expeditions for a new dwelling place, he and Ñanamoli maintained a vigorous correspondence wide ranging in its subject matter, including twentieth century philosophy, translation of critical Buddhist terminology, logic, even quantum physics. The point of their efforts was to build a conceptual bridge that would enable them to grasp the meaning of the Buddhist Suttas (discourses of the Buddha), and for this purpose they found the writings of the existentialists (e.g. Jean-Paul Sartre) and phenomenologists (e.g. Edmund Husserl) to be more helpful than anything else they had encountered.

What emerges from this correspondence (the bulk of which is dated between 1954 and 1959) is a picture of Ñanavira as a man intensely wrestling with the views and practices the Buddhist texts presented him with, trying to clarify them in terms he could understand. At first—“in those innocent days” as he later told it—he looked to the traditional commentaries on
the Suttas for clarification, but as he compared what the Suttas said to what the commentaries said about the Suttas, he came more and more to doubt their accuracy. Thus by 1955 he would write to Ēnanamoli that “the Vissudhi Magga (or so I consider) is not the Buddha’s Teaching”—an opinion that in Ceylon (both then and now), was practically heretical, that text being the most comprehensive single commentarial work, and written in Ceylon to boot. By that time too he had begun to doubt the commentarial “three life” interpretation of one of the most important of Buddhist teachings: paticcasamuppada, or “dependent arising.” However, as late as February 1959 he was still uncertain as to what extent he agreed—or disagreed—with the commentaries on this point. These uncertainties, however, would shortly come to an abrupt end.

A letter to Ēnanamoli dated February 2, 1955 indicates an initial foray into the hot southern “dry zone” region of the island, an area known as Hambantota. He remarked to Ēnanamoli: “I don’t like this kind of weather, but apparently it likes me…” The next two years were spent mostly at various caves and hermitages in the area, none of which particularly pleased him. (He described one as “a nightmare” and “a mockery of the monk’s life.”) Finally, by no later than June of ’57, he settled into a kuti (a small house) at Bundala in Hambantota, an ancient village whose inhabitants were, according to local lore, descended from the washerwomen of a certain king of Sri Lanka who reigned some fifteen hundred years earlier. The kuti, built by lay supporters, nestled in the Bundala forest reserve (now a national park), a wilderness inhabited by elephants, leopards, boar, monkeys and, of course, plenty of snakes (especially Russell’s vipers, or polonga as they are locally called, and cobras). It consisted of a single room, eight feet square, and entered by a twelve foot long corridor built for walking meditation. A stone bed, a table, a chair and some books furnished the room. A latrine and earthen water storage structure were built nearby.

Thus it happened that the young man who had grown up wealthy in an English mansion would spend the rest of his life in this little wilderness retreat, supported by lay supporters (dayakas) in Colombo and by the alms offerings (dana) of faithful villagers. In a later letter to one of his Colombo dayakas, he wrote of his abode: “Compared with the senasana or resting place of bhikkhus in former days, this kuti is a well-appointed and luxurious bungalow, and the conditions of life here easy and soft. As regards solitude, however, this place seems to accord with the Buddha’s recommendations…that it should be neither too near nor too far from a village, that it should be easily approachable…, and that it should be free from mosquitoes and
snakes and other such creatures. I do not think it would be easy to find a better place for practice of the Buddhadhamma—but for that, alas! it also needs good health.”

Ñanavira’s health at this point was never good even on the best of days, and due to the now chronic affliction of his bowels, he found seated meditation difficult. Despite apparently undergoing frequent treatments for the disorder (his letters after 1960 detail some of the treatments and discussions with his doctors concerning his condition) recoveries were typically short-lived and often interrupted by poor weather or reinfections. He therefore took to walking meditation for the development of mindfulness. In this he made progress—so much so that, on the 27th of June 1959, something extraordinary occurred. Writing in the language of the scriptures, Pali, and imitating their characteristically repetitive cadence, he described the event that permanently altered him:

At one time the monk Ñánavíra 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 Ñánavíra 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. Then, while the monk Ñánavíra was thus engaged in 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. (27.6.59)

Accompanying this paragraph were several texts, also in Pali, from the Canon itself. One, from the Sutta Nipata (verse 55), bears repeating:

“I have gone beyond the writhing of views.  
With the path gained, I have arrived at assurance.  
Knowledge has arisen in me and I am no longer to be guided by another.”

[Knowing this,] let him fare lonely as a rhinoceros horn!

Five days later, he wrote to Ñanamoli: “I have now entered one of my non-letter-writing moods, and so I shall not reply in detail at present to your rather meaty letter.” Nowhere else in the course of their correspondence (as we have it) had he written anything like this, and Ñanamoli was never to know the reason for it. The letters from Ñanavira petered out, the last dated January 11, 1960. As he remarked in a later letter to a supporter, he found continuation of the correspondence “pointless. There was no longer anything for me to discuss with him, since

* Translation by the original editors of Clearing the Path. I have slightly modified their sutta verse translation (below) for the sake of clarity.
the former relationship of parity between us regarding the Dhamma had suddenly come to an end.”

The correspondence never resumed.

On March 8, 1960, Ñanamoli, having completed his magnum opus translation of the Visuddhimagga, went on a walking tour with the abbot of Island Hermitage. In some little back of beyond he passed away from coronary thrombosis. His body was transported by bullock cart to a hospital, and later to Colombo for the funeral.

Stream Enterer

At this point a pause from our until now strictly chronological narrative is in order. For the obvious question has to be asked, and answered: What happened? What was this event that, simply judging by the content of the letters previously (to Ñanamoli) and subsequently (to various lay people), wrought such an interior transformation as to be the defining moment of Ñanavira’s life?

A little history behind this oddly written document is first in order. The manuscript, a single page, was from the time of its writing kept in a sealed envelope in the kuti. That it was written in Pali indicates its intended audience—other monks. On the envelope exterior the following was written: “In the event of my death, this envelope should be delivered to, and opened by, the senior bhikkhu of the Island Hermitage, Dodanduwa. Ñanavira Bhikkhu. 20th September 1960.” However, in July 1964, while in Colombo for medical treatment, Ñanavira turned the envelope over to the new abbot of Vajirarama Temple and, for some reason, the letter was opened not long after and its contents read and discussed. Thus, as Ñanavira described it later, “this rather awkward cat” got “out of the bag”—unintentionally, it seems—and became “semi-public property.” The public (such as it was) immediately began to debate the validity of the author’s claim.

To understand exactly what that claim was, a clarification of terms is obviously in order, for at this point even readers familiar with the terminology and stock phrases of the Suttas might be unsure exactly what was being claimed, and those entirely new to the subject are likely to be at least moderately bewildered. The activity the author was engaged in that fateful night—“walking up and down”—was walking meditation, a practice used especially in the Theravadan tradition for the development of the four “foundations of mindfulness” (satipatthana) as
prescribed by the Buddha in the Satipatthana Sutta (M:10) and elsewhere. In that *sutta*, the Buddha is quoted as saying:

…a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating feelings as feelings… He abides contemplating mind as mind… He abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects…

This passage refers to the development of moment-to-moment awareness of 1) postures (standing, sitting, lying down, and, of course, walking), 2) sensations on and in the body, 3) mood states (happy, sad, attentive, dull, etc.), and 4) mental phenomena such as thoughts, images, memories, etc. Thus, referring specifically to the mindfulness of postures, the Buddha says that “a bhikkhu is one who acts in full awareness when going forward and returning; …when looking ahead and looking away; …when flexing and extending his limbs…” etc. All activities should be encompassed by *satisampajañña*—“mindfulness and clear comprehension”—even defecating, urinating, and falling asleep. Walking meditation is specifically for the development of this faculty *in action*.

The author’s saying he “made his mind quite pure of constraining things” will be readily understandable to those readers who have some significant practice of meditation under their belts. For after a while of practice there comes a time when the mind no longer wanders from its subject of meditation—it becomes firmly fixed in, absorbed by, that object. This is a unitive state, highly pleasurable, in which self-consciousness is lost and there is only the act of attention. At that point the mind is bright, supple, and very awake. Ñanavira, obviously, had practiced assiduously and his mindfulness had attained a pitch sufficient for a breakthrough.

The critical passage here—and what amounts to a *very* bold claim—is “the clear and stainless Eye of the Dhamma arose in him,” a phrase found in various rewordings throughout the Suttas and Vinaya. Thus, when Kolita (Mogallana), later one of the Buddha’s two chief disciples, heard the Dhamma from his friend Upatissa (Sariputta, the other chief disciple), and understood it, “there arose [in him] the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye.” The awakening of many other disciples is so described.

This “Eye of Dhamma” (*dhammacakkhu*) is almost always linked with the phrase: *Yam kiñci samudaya dhammam sabbam tam nirodhadhammanti.* (“Whatever has the nature of arising, all that has the nature of ceasing.”) This is a stock phrase in the canon and is invariably associated with the direct seeing by the individual of *paticcasamuppada* (“dependent arising”),
the arising and ceasing of self-consciousness, and the extinguishing (at least for an instant) of personally contrived experience.

In short, Ñanavira claimed to have become a *sotapanna*, or “stream enterer.”*  

More subtle details emerge from the sentence after the main paragraph: “Having been a teaching follower (*dhammanusarin*) for a month, he became one attained to right view (*ditthipatta*).” A *dhammanusarin* is one in whom the faculty of insight (*paññindriya*) is most pronounced and who, having reflected upon the Teaching, has sufficiently understood it and has developed the meditative faculties (concentration, energy, etc.) necessary to enter upon the Path (*magga*). On that Path, one becomes *sotapanna*; upon attainment of the “fruit” (*phala*) of the Path one is *sotapanna*. Through that attainment, the *dhammanusarin* becomes *ditthipatta*. The time between entering the path and attainment of the fruit varies from individual to individual. It can be in a succession of moments, or, as in Ñanavira’s case, a month (or more).†

Ñanavira’s quote from the Sutta Nipata serves as a reminder of what his singular achievement meant: the *ariya* (noble disciple) is no longer affected by the “writhing of views”; that is, he has no longer attachment to the beliefs and ideologies that the ordinary person, secular or religious, requires to support and define his or her personal world. He has “arrived at assurance,” meaning his attainment is indubitable, a direct, reflective certainty. Finally, the noble disciple no longer requires the guidance or teaching of another—not even the Buddha. He has become, to a degree, an embodiment of the Teaching, having understood and seen it directly. While with the *sotapanna* that embodiment is still mostly incomplete, it is sufficient to guarantee his knowledge of what is the Path and what is not, and to insure his practice accordingly.

That Ñanavira was fundamentally altered by his experience there can be no doubt. In his writings afterward, in the formal *Notes* and informal correspondence dating from 1960 on, there is no longer the wavering of opinion, the expressed doubts, the searching that so characterized his epistles to Ñanamoli. While acknowledging the necessity for further work, he had found something so fundamental and definite that henceforth there could, for him, be no uncertainty as to what the Buddha had meant. And thus, quoting from the Suttas, he could write with confidence: “There is… a path, there is a way by following which one will come to know and

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* Please see the glossary for further explanation of this and other Pali terms.  
† It should be noted that this language—“path,” “fruit,” etc.—while perhaps seemingly picturesque, refers in fact to precise psychological states. Indeed, the Suttas, in one way or another, are mostly devoted to the description of
see for oneself: ‘Indeed, the recluse Gotama speaks at the proper time, speaks on what is, speaks on the purpose, speaks on Dhamma [“Truth”], speaks on Vinaya [“Discipline”].’”

Notes On Dhamma

Sometime in 1960 Ñanavira began work on two formal writings that became “A Note on Paticcasamuppada” and “Paramattha Sacca.” (These reside in chapters six and nine respectively of the present volume.) Many shorter pieces followed, and by 1963 Ñanavira had, with the help of a number of lay people (particularly the Honorable Lionel Samaratunga), privately published a work entitled Notes on Dhamma (1960-1963). Two hundred and fifty matt black, hardbound volumes were printed and distributed to universities, some bhikkhus and laity in Ceylon, and to a number of Buddhist societies in Germany, France, and the UK. The response, overwhelmingly, was polite incomprehension, though a few discerning individuals expressed strong reactions—positively or negatively, or both together. One was “provoked to a fit of indiscriminate xenophobic fury.” Various others described the book as “a fantastic system,” as “arrogant, scathing, and condescending,” and as “the most important book to be written in this century.” Ñanavira described it as “both unpopular (learned) and unpopular (unorthodox)” and admitted it was “vain to hope that it is going to win general approval.” He invoked Robert Graves, indicating that what Graves had said of his book, White Goddess, could be said of the Notes: “…a very difficult book, as well as a very queer one, to be avoided by anyone with a distracted, tired, or rigidly scientific mind.”

The book’s intent was twofold: First, to preserve the Buddha’s Teaching from the accumulated misunderstanding of centuries by pointing out texts and traditions that misinterpreted it. “The Notes,” he said, “have been written with the purpose of clearing away a mass of dead matter which is choking the Suttas…” Its second aim was “to indicate (what for purposes of argument may be called) the proper interpretation of the Suttas.” This interpretation was, by its nature, practical, in that the Notes were “concerned only with the essential application of the Buddha’s Teaching…” The book was therefore not intended as a scholarly rendition, or mere description, of the contents of the Suttas. If the first goal was psychological states and the practical methods used to obtain and master these states. The Buddha’s Teaching is, fundamentally, an applied psychology.
negative—the elimination of needless, confusing baggage—the second then was positive—an indication of the correct way of understanding.

The book did not make for casual or light reading, and Ñanavira readily acknowledged its difficulties, especially for “‘objective’ or positivist thinkers [i.e., the “rigidly scientific”] who will not easily see what the book is driving at.”\textsuperscript{36} Ñanavira defended this aspect, however, by arguing that “the teaching contained in the Pali Suttas is (to say the least) a great deal more difficult—even if also a great deal more rewarding—than is commonly supposed; and the author is not of the opinion that Notes on Dhamma makes the subject more difficult than it actually is.”\textsuperscript{37}

Inevitably, there were questions. A number of those who read the book wrote to Ñanavira seeking clarification and further elaboration. A voluminous correspondence between the author and his readers ensued. Among these correspondents were a businessman, a British diplomat, a barrister, Ñanavira’s doctor, and a British Buddhist. Tellingly, no monks either from Ceylon or abroad ever made a response.

In reading the correspondence once cannot help but be reminded of the old epistolary tradition, such as what is found in the New Testament, in which much personal reflection (philosophy, if you will) was carried on among small groups of sympathetic individuals, who thrashed out their visions of the world using a shared language of symbols and psychological terminology. There is also, at times, something akin to a Buddhist apologetics in Ñanavira’s writings. Like the early Christian apologists, who wrote to the pagan culture of ancient Rome, Ñanavira, in his letters, strove to build conceptual bridges from twentieth century secular thought to the more rarified and timeless world of the Buddhist Suttas.

\textbf{Two Visitors}

In the summer of 1959 and on into the fall, Ñanavira’s health was much improved. The improvement did not last, however, and by October he was suffering from “the local colitis that is common in dry weather.”\textsuperscript{38} Then in January of the following year, he was treated for symptoms of lymphatic filariasis, a mosquito-borne disease caused by microscopic worms that infect the human lymph system. Fortunately, it turned out to be nothing more than a temporary distraction, and after an apparently successful treatment in Colombo, Ñanavira returned to Bundala.
Sometime during 1960* Ńanavira’s mother came to see him. Her husband having passed away she was alone and wanted her son to come back to England. Through Ńanavira’s lay supporters it was arranged for her to come to Sri Lanka, where she stayed at the Mt. Lavinia Hotel outside Colombo. She and Ńanavira met somewhere in the city, probably at Vajirarama Temple. By one account, she was “devastated by his pagan life” and shocked to see him as he ate with his hands from his alms bowl. She pleaded with him to return to England; he refused. She left and two weeks later in England she died of a heart attack. When Robin Maugham, in early 1965, interviewed Ńanavira, he recorded Ńanavira’s recollection of his mother’s death:

His voice was quite impassive as he spoke. 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 traveled 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.’*  

In 1961 his kuti received yet another visitor. Sister Vajira (the religious name of Hannelore Wolfe) had been in the country since 1955, living most of her time, like Ńanavira, as a hermit. Ńanavira later described her as “an extremely passionate and self-willed person, with strong emotions, and, apparently, something of a visionary.” She had read a 1956 article written by Ńanavira entitled “Sketch for a Proof of Rebirth” that had been printed in the Buddha Jayanti and been impressed. A correspondence ensued, but this lapsed after a short while. In 1961 she asked to come see him to discuss Dhamma, and after the meeting the correspondence resumed. Ńanavira sent her “A Note on Paticcasamuppada” and “Paramattha Sacca,” as well as several of the shorter notes he had written by that time. In a later letter to a supporter, Ńanavira confessed that he “did not expect anything very much” to come of the correspondence, but he “found that she was giving attention to what [he] was saying.” Finally, by January 1962, her letters gave indication “that something might happen.”

Something did.

Shortly before the 21st of January, Sister Vajira, guided by Ńanavira’s letters and Notes, experienced an ecstatic breakthrough culminating in her attainment of sotapatti—she, too, became a sotapanna. To Ńanavira she wrote: “I have lost a dimension of thought, at least to the degree [necessary] to grasp this matter…” In reference to this curious statement, Ńanavira

* This according to Robin Maugham, op. cit. p. 184.
remarked to a supporter “I am unable to see that it could have been written by a puthujjana, even if he were trying to deceive. It would never occur to him to add the part about ‘losing a dimension of thought.’ One must actually have had the experience to know how exactly this describes it.”

Sister Vajira’s later letters confirmed Ñanavira’s suspicion concerning her transformation. On the 23rd she wrote “…the moment I realized what it really means to be puthujjana, I ceased to be one.” In the margin of the letter Ñanavira scrawled: “This claim can be accepted.”

She went on: “I won a victory over myself; and when I awoke this morning I had found refuge in the Dhamma, and I realized everything (or a great many things) that we had been discussing… I begin now to discover the Dhamma. I can just stay in one place and see everything passing before my eyes that I knew without knowing. It is an entirely new landscape.”

Sister Vajira’s experience, however, was so potent as to be at least temporarily destabilizing. She went “off her head for a fortnight of joy”—to use Ñanavira’s words—during which she lost a degree of self-control; a situation she herself had anticipated in her last letter. As Ñanavira described the episode:

Things were now happening much too fast for me to keep up with them. (It seemed—and seems—to me that she went through in about five days what took me three months and a half—though of course our circumstances were different—and I was quite unprepared for her subsequent behaviour, though she gave me notice of it at the end of the letter of the 23rd.) Evidently what happened was that with the sudden release of the central tension all her compensating tensions found themselves out of work and began aimlessly expending themselves this way and that, and some time was required before she found a new position of stable equilibrium. I asked the Ven. Thera for a report, and he replied (as I hoped he would) that although she had recovered she ‘seemed to be a changed person’.

On February 22, 1962 “she was bundled out of the country”—deported—and returned to Hamburg Germany. There reports indicated she remained “a changed person,” but no longer had interest in the Dhamma or her Buddhist friends, something Ñanavira interpreted as “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.” Ñanavira concluded:

For my part I am satisfied (judging solely from the letters) that, however strange her behaviour may have seemed to her well-wishers in Colombo, there was nothing in it to contradict my opinion. What you speak of as the ‘breaking point’ was (as I see it) no more than the entry into a particularly strong (and pleasurable) emotional state consequent upon the realization (which, at the beginning especially, can be breath-taking) that ‘nothing matters any more’. I don’t suppose she was within a hundred miles of telling the people who were caring for her what the reason was for her condition. Certainly, her last letter, for all its
emotional colouring, gives no suggestion that she is in any way unhappy or distressed, or even that she has any doubts about her new state. And you will observe that I am quietly but firmly dismissed at the end of the letter. Whatever else happened, one thing is certain—she no longer finds herself in any way dependent upon me. A psycho-analyst, at least, would be gratified with that result!  

Last Years  

In the month after Sister Vajira’s departure, Ēnanavira’s health took a definite turn for the worse. He suffered a fresh attack of amoebiasis, with “increased abdominal discomfort, ‘hungry’ feeling in the afternoon…, specific tenderness about the region of the left end of the transverse colon, abdominal distension, increased quantity of mucus…, thick opaque mucus with traces of blood…, slightly increased constipation.” His symptoms included as well more general “lassitude and debility, especially in bad weather.” While he received treatment in April 1962, this apparently was inadequate, for the symptoms recurred in June and he was treated with a different drug, Entamide (Diloxanide). This time the treatment was not only ineffective but also resulted in bizarre and unforeseen side effects. He wrote to his doctor:

“I have the impression that there is a continuous, though variable, specific stimulation, which, though no doubt neutral in itself (it is, indeed, disagreeable when observed dispassionately), is a pressing invitation to sensual thoughts. I have never experienced anything like this before.”

It got worse—much worse.  

After two or three days [of taking the medication] I began experiencing a violent erotic stimulation, as if I had taken a very strong aphrodisiac. If I lay down on the bed I at once started to enter upon an orgasm that could only be checked by a prodigious effort of attention to the breath, or else by standing up. Even after stopping the course of treatment this persisted…

This new affliction was satyriasis (the male equivalent of nymphomania)—defined by Webster’s as the “abnormal and uncontrollable desire by a man for sexual intercourse,” and aptly described by Stephen Batchelor as “a devastatingly inappropriate malady for a celibate hermit.” Three months later this erotic stimulation had decreased, “but it was still very far from normal” and not improving. Ēnanavira’s plight had devolved into a Catch-22. He noted: “This erotic stimulation can be overcome by successful samatha practice (mental concentration), but my chronic amoebiasis makes this particularly difficult for me. So for me it is simply a question of how long I can stand the strain.”
In November, the strain having become more than he could bear, he unsuccessfully attempted suicide by self-asphyxiation. He remarked after the fact: “I should not have attempted suicide, nor still be regarding it (intermittently) as an immediate possibility, were it not for the additional strain of the erotic stimulation.” He wrote further:

I find that, under the pressure of this affliction, I am oscillating between two poles. On the one hand, if I indulge the sensual images that offer themselves, my thought turns towards the state of a layman; if, on the other hand, I resist them, my thought turns towards suicide. Wife or knife, as one might say.

While for most readers this dilemma would appear the easiest and most natural to resolve, disrobing being the obvious and, in this case, a not dishonorable course of action, to Ñanavira that was “a layman’s view.” He noted that “whereas it is known that monks have become arahats in the act of suicide, it is nowhere recorded that anyone has ever become arahat in the act of disrobing.” He cited specific instances in the Suttas of monks who due to various problems had chosen suicide as opposed to disrobing. He wrote:

It is hard for laymen (and even, these days, for the majority of bhikkhus, I fear) to understand that when a bhikkhu devotes his entire life to one single aim, there may come a time when he can no longer turn back—lay life has become incomprehensible to him. If he cannot reach his goal there is only one thing for him to do—to die (perhaps you are not aware that the Buddha has said that ‘death’ for a bhikkhu means a return to lay life…)

Ñanavira’s suicidal tendencies were, it appears, strictly determined by his physical circumstances and not by the usual motives. He says as much: “It is extremely depressing to be accredited with all sorts of motives—resentment, remorse, grief (‘a secret sorrow’), despair, and so on—that are totally absent.” He wrote extensively on the subject of suicide and was emphatic about why he felt it was a justifiable—perhaps even necessary—option for him. “[F]or me the Dhamma is real, and it is the only thing that I take seriously: if I cannot practise the Dhamma as I wish, I have no further desire to live.” Moreover, he saw his attitude—and the course of action it might lead him to—as being “a necessary corrective to the prevalent blindly complacent view of the Dhamma as something to be taken for granted—that is to say, as a dead letter—; and I regard it almost as a duty to reflect this attitude in my writing, even at the risk of giving offence.”

The reference here is to S.20.10: “For this, bhikkhus, is death in the Noble One’s Discipline: that one gives up the training and returns to the lower life” (Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya, p. 711).
Ñanavira was certainly cognizant of the effect his words and the course of action he contemplated had—or might have—on others.

People [he remarked] find it scandalous (though they cannot say so openly) that anyone should take the Buddha’s Teaching so seriously as actually to be willing to ‘lose his sense of proportion’ by living in solitude, and perhaps also to lose his life. People want their Dhamma on easier terms, 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 one concern (unconscious, no doubt) is to bring things back to a healthy, reassuring, normality.65

He noted, too, the particular horror that most cultures—especially Western—had of suicide:

Such a gesture threatens to undermine the precarious security of Society, which is based on the convention that ‘life is worth living’. Suicide puts in question this unquestionable axiom, and Society inevitably regards it with fear and suspicion as an act of treachery. (It is customary, in England at least, for Coroners’ courts to give the verdict ‘Suicide while the balance of his mind was disturbed’. This insult automatically puts the victim in the wrong and reassures Society that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds…) If the victim should fail in his attempt, Society takes its revenge upon his temerity by putting him in prison (where, presumably, he is expected to learn that, actually, life really is worth living). Those, on the other hand, who can show good reason for ending their lives (the man, for example, with a political grievance) do not by their act put this convention in question, and they are therefore regarded as safe and perfectly respectable.66

But for many people, he speculated, his suicide (if it came to that) might not be the most controversial element of the situation. The reality of the Buddha’s Teaching might be far more disturbing:

Though a suicide for the sake of the Buddha’s Teaching would be bad enough, the real scandal would be if it became known that some person or other still living had reached one of the stages [i.e., sotapanna, sakadagami, anagami, or arahat]. People do not, in their heart of hearts, like to think it possible—the shock to their comfortable conventional ideas would be intolerable.67

This of course comes back again to his theme, oft repeated throughout the letters, of “the present total divorce of the Dhamma from reality”,68 of the refusal of too many people—even self-acknowledged Buddhists—to authentically examine their lives in the light of the Teaching, and then to act on the basis of that examination.

There are also the obvious ethical issues that suicide raises—would it not be akin to committing murder? On this Ñanavira was less vocal simply because the ethics of suicide (in terms of the Buddha’s Teaching) are determined by one’s status as a puthujjana, sekha, or asekha (arahat), and it is not allowable under the Buddhist monastic discipline for a bhikkhu to make claims (even if true) of a higher status to anyone except another monk, preferably his
teacher. There is, thus, in many of Ñanavira’s discussions with his correspondents, a necessary
degree of ambiguity regarding the ethical nature of his possible choice. He did note, however,
“that though [suicide] is never encouraged [in the Suttas] it is not the heinous offense it is
sometimes popularly thought to be, and... the consequences of the act will vary according to
circumstances—for the puthujjana [which Ñanavira was not] they can be disastrous, but for the
arahat... they are nil.”69 This passage highlights Ñanavira’s in-between status as a sotapanna—
i.e., as a sekha bhikkhu who was neither puthujjana nor arahat. The Buddha, however, was not
ambiguous about such a one’s destiny: “he is freed from [the possibility of] hell, the animal
realm, and the domain of ghosts, freed from the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether
world.”70 According to the Suttas then, a sotapanna committing suicide could expect human
rebirth at worst, and his eventual destiny was not in doubt: “Bhikkhus, a noble disciple...is a
stream-enterer, no longer bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment [i.e.
arahatta] as his destination.”71

Finally, it should be noted that while Ñanavira could hardly have been content with his
predicament, he was not unhappy with what life had dealt him. In an undated letter (written
sometime in 1964), to the new abbot of Vajirarama Temple in Colombo, he clarified his more
general feelings about his life:

…I have no reason for dissatisfaction. I have done what I did not expect to do, and so I
am content. Certainly, the age of forty-four is rather early to close the account, but when
I left England at the time of the first Berlin crisis I told myself that if I managed to
practise the Dhamma for even one year I should count myself fortunate.72

The beginning of 1963 found his amoebiasis “appreciably worse than three years ago”73
and the nervous condition still with him. He wrote, “it is distasteful for me to think of even a
week more of this, and a year or over is out of the question.”74 However, he did manage a year,
and more, during which he experienced one or two temporary revivals in his health, only to be
followed by inevitable declines. For a brief spell, he was plagued by heart palpitations, and then
“ash skin” (a dry, scaly, itchy skin condition). Only the ups and downs of his bowel condition—
as the weather determined—seemed to be constant, along with the nervous affliction. A mid-
1964 Colombo visit to treat his skin and other conditions cured the former but “brought about no
improvement”75 in the latter. Ñanavira’s morale, through all this, was “precarious,” and he felt
himself sustained chiefly by his ushering Notes on Dhamma through its publication process and
by his answering of inquiries into the issues his writings raised. In response to those questions, he set about revising the Notes, and this too helped him pass the time.

By 1965, Ñanavira had aged beyond his years. Maugham, visiting him that January, said “[h]e looked tired and ill.” In a late 1964 letter to a friend, a monk who for a brief time lived nearby and studied with Ñanavira wrote: “This is an old man of 60. He is in constant physical pain but he never shows it nor does the peace in his eyes ever change. We spend many hours talking—rather he speaks and I learn.” Ñanavira was at the time a mere forty-four years old.

On July 5, 1965, some time after 2:45 in the afternoon, a Bundala local brought Ñanavira an afternoon beverage. The kuti was silent. Its occupant lay still on the cement bed, in the traditional “lion posture”—lying on the right side, the right hand tucked under the head. His other hand dangled to the floor, an empty vial beside it.

Making one last use of his typical ingenuity, Ñanavira had rigged a cellophane facemask and then filled it with a sufficient quantity of ethyl chloride, an anesthetic given him to dull the pain of insect bites. His passing would have been quick and painless.

The villagers were devastated. On the following day, they built him a funeral pyre eight feet high. Women draped it with their finest saris. Ñanavira’s ashes were interred by the kuti.

In the months before his passing, Ñanavira had prepared his papers. He left behind, among other things, an amended and expanded typescript of Notes on Dhamma, marked with the dates 1960-1965. Two decades later, this manuscript would form the nucleus of a book of Ñanavira’s gathered correspondence and would be published by Path Press in Colombo in 1987 under the title of Clearing the Path: Writings of Ñanavira Thera 1960-1965. The anonymous editors, Samanera Bodhesako (Robert Smith), a former editor at the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy, Sri Lanka, and Professor Forrest William of the University of Colorado, were supported in their meticulous and pain-staking labors by a grant from the Council on Research and Creative Work at the University of Colorado. Sadly, Ven. Bodhesako died the next year, age forty-nine, from a sudden intestinal hernia. With his demise, Path Press ceased to exist in any functional form, and Ñanavira’s book went out of print.

Afterword: Like a phoenix from the ashes, Path Press lives again, stronger than ever. Moreover, Notes on Dhamma has been reissued, and the complete Clearing the Path is in process of
reissuance. It’s about time: my copy, in addition to a significant printer’s error, suffers from a broken spine from over use. I need a new one.

2 *Clearing the Path*, p. 378.
3 Ibid, p. 379.
6 Ibid, p. 304 and ibid, p. 292 fn. (d) respectively.
7 Ibid, p. 407.
9 Robin Maugham, *op. cit.*
10 *Clearing the Path*, L. 134. (Due to a printer’s error, pages 451-466 are absent in the present editor’s edition of CTP.)
14 Ibid, p. 190.
18 Letter to Nanamoli, undated. Probably March or April of 1954. (http://www.geocities.com/Athens/9366/el54-1.htm#1-1).
19 *Clearing the Path*, p. 287.
20 Ibid, p. 495.
22 *Clearing the Path*, p. 386.
23 Ibid, p. 528, L. 97, n. 2.
24 Ibid, p. 381.
29 Ibid, p. 166.
32 Ibid, L.131 (See note 10 above.)
34 Ibid, p. 338.
37 Ibid.
40 *Clearing the Path*, p. 386.
41 Ibid, p. 385.
42 Ibid, p. 530.
44 Ibid, p. 531.
46 Ibid.
49 Ibid, p. 386.
50 Ibid, p. 388.
51 Ibid, p. 209.
54 Ibid, p. 522.
55 Stephen Batchelor, *op. cit.*
56 *Clearing the Path*, p. 522.
60 Ibid, p. 524.
63 Ibid, p. 283.
65 Ibid, p. 376.
72 *Clearing the Path*, p. 525.
73 Ibid, p. 225.
74 Ibid, p. 233.