

Existence, Enlightenment, and Suicide: The Dilemma of Nanavira Thera

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“The Buddha’s Teaching is quite alien to the European tradition, and a European who adopts it is a rebel.” Nanavira Thera (1964).¹

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,”² 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.”³ 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.”⁴

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,

¹ Anonymous [Samanera Bodhesako], ed., *Clearing the Path: Writings of Nanavira Thera (1960–1965)*, Colombo, Path Press, 1987, 390.

² *The People*, 26.9.65.

³ S. Maugham, *The Razor’s Edge*. London, Mandarin, 1990, 272.

⁴ *ibid.*

“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.”⁵

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.”⁶

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.”⁷

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

⁵ *ibid.*, 73–4.

⁶ *ibid.*, 298.

⁷ *ibid.*, 307.

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.”⁸

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.”⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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.”¹² He finally rejected the arts as

⁸ R. Maugham, *Search For Nirvana*, London, W.H. Allen, 1975, 186.

⁹ *ibid.*, 189.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ J. Evola, *Le Chemin du Cinabre Milan*, Arche-Arktos, 1982, 12.

¹² *ibid.*, 13.

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.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴

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.”¹⁵

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.”¹⁶

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.”¹⁷

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 86.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

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.”¹⁸

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.”¹⁹ 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.”²⁰

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.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 138.

²⁰ *ibid.*

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, 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'."²¹

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"²² 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 Mahāyāna 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."²³

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 deplores the craving for material things, which causes man entirely to overlook mastery over his own mind.²⁴ 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."²⁵

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

²¹ J. Evola, *The Doctrine of Awakening: A Study on the Buddhist Asceticism*, London, Luzac, 1951, 95.

²² *ibid.*, 17.

²³ *ibid.*, 43.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 135.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 129.

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.”²⁶ 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.”²⁷ 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.”²⁸

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.”²⁹ He cites several examples where the Buddha makes analogies between “the qualities of an ascetic and the virtues of a warrior.”³⁰ Of all the Mahāyāna 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.”³¹

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

²⁶ *ibid.*, 16.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 14.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 17.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 20.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*, ix.

of my study.”³² 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.”³³ 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.”³⁴ 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.”³⁵ 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 (*jhāna, samādhi*), 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.”³⁶

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

³² J. Evola, *Le Chemin du Cinabre*, Milan, Arche-Arktos, 1982, 142.

³³ R. Maugham, *Search For Nirvana*, London, W.H. Allen, 1975, 190.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 189.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 190.

³⁶ Anonymous [Samanera Bodhesako], ed., *Clearing the Path: Writings of Nanavira Thera (1960–1965)*, Colombo, 1987, 368.

greatest distance from Western.”³⁷ 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.”³⁸ It also prevented him from attaining anything more than the “low-level results of [the] practice.”³⁹

Unable to pursue the *jhānas* 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.”⁴⁰ 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 *Visuddhimagga*.

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.”⁴¹ 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*.”⁴² He came to view only two of the three “Baskets” (*Piṭaka*) 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.”⁴³

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

³⁷ *ibid.*, 367.

³⁸ R. Maugham, *Search For Nirvana*, 198.

³⁹ Anonymous [Samanera Bodhesako], ed., *Clearing the Path: Writings of Nanavira Thera (1960–1965)*, 440.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 485.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 310.

⁴² *ibid.*, 305.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 5.

don't *want* other people. You've got your centre of gravity within yourself... You become self-contained."⁴⁴ Two years earlier he had confessed: "I am one of those people who think of other people as 'they,' not as 'we.'"⁴⁵ 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."⁴⁶

Thus he claimed to have 'entered the stream' (*sotāpatti*), glimpsed the unconditioned *nirvāṇa*, and become, thereby, an *ārya*.

The Buddha used the term '*ārya*' 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 *ārya* 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

⁴⁴ R. Maugham, *Search For Nirvana*, 194.

⁴⁵ Anonymous [Samanera Bodhesako], ed., *Clearing the Path: Writings of Nanavira Thera (1960–1965)*, 223.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 495.

who are fortunate enough to have the intelligence to grasp it..., and they are most certainly not the majority!”⁴⁷

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.”⁴⁸ 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 *paṭiccasamuppāda* (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.”⁴⁹ 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 *ārya*, the validity of which Nanavira did “not see any reason to doubt.”⁵⁰ 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.”⁵¹

Four months after Vajira’s departure, Nanavira’s chronic indigestion (amoebiasis) was further aggravated by satyriasis—a devastatingly inappropriate

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 396–7.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 386.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 529.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 386.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

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.”⁵² 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”⁵³ and had also resolved not to disrobe. It was simply a question of how long he could “stand the strain.”⁵⁴

While for the ordinary person (*puthujjana*) suicide is ethically equivalent to murder, for an *ārya* it is acceptable under circumstances that prevent further spiritual practice; for the *ārya* 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 *ārya bhikkhus* at the time of the Buddha who had taken their lives and become *arahants* 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.”⁵⁵

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.”⁵⁶

⁵² *ibid.*, 216.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 241.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 276.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 238.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 376.

Most of 1963 was taken up with preparing his notes for publication, something he would have considered “an intolerable disturbance”⁵⁷ 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].”)⁵⁸ 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.”⁵⁹ 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.”⁶⁰ 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.”

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 253.

⁵⁸ R. Maugham, *Search For Nirvana*, 198.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 197–8.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 192.

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.”⁶¹

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.”⁶²

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 *nirvāna* 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

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 200.

⁶² Anonymous [Samanera Bodhesako], ed., *Clearing the Path: Writings of Nanavira Thera (1960–1965)*, 403.

millions of men a happier thing. Perhaps he knew the answer. Perhaps he had found the secret of life. But I would never know.”⁶³

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.”⁶⁴ 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.”⁶⁵ The only other work of Evola’s to have been translated into English was *The Metaphysics of Sex* (London, 1983).

⁶³ R. Maugham, *Search For Nirvana*, 202.

⁶⁴ J. Evola, *Le Chemin du Cinabre*, 142.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 143.

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 *samaṇa* 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. Its 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.”⁶⁶ 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.”⁶⁷

He later remarked that the *Notes* “were not written to pander to people’s tastes” and were made “as unattractive, academically speaking, as possible.”⁶⁸ 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 *paṭiccasamuppāda* (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

⁶⁶ Anonymous [Samanera Bodhesako], ed., *Clearing the Path: Writings of Nanavira Thera (1960–1965)*, Colombo, 1987, vii.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 321–3.

clearing away a mass of dead matter which is choking the [Buddha's discourses]."⁶⁹

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."⁷⁰ Elsewhere he describes his *Notes* as being like "so many beads inter-connected with numbers of threads, in a kind of three-dimensional network."⁷¹

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."⁷² 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"⁷³ 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."⁷⁴ 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

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 339.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 254.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 337.

⁷² *ibid.*, 240.

⁷³ *ibid.*, 302.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 261.

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 *ārya* '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."⁷⁵

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!'.⁷⁶

Startling images of this kind abound throughout Nanavira's letters, which reveal him both as a rigorous analytical thinker and also as 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

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 259.

(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.”⁷⁷ 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.”⁷⁸

While Nanavira makes no reference to, and could well have been unfamiliar with, Evola’s Guénonist conception of Tradition, he certainly is a traditionalist, though in a narrower sense than Guénon. 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 Guénon, 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

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 357.

⁷⁸ J. Evola, *The Doctrine of Awakening: A Study of the Buddhist Asceticism*, London, Luzac, 1951, ix.

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."⁷⁹ 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 *āryas*. 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 Mahāyāna Buddhists would criticise as self-centred and uncaring. (It comes as no surprise that he vehemently asserts that the "Mahāyāna is *not* the Buddha's teaching.")⁸⁰ Only once in his writings does he mention the traditional

⁷⁹ Anonymous [Samanera Bodhesako], ed., *Clearing the Path: Writings of Nanavira Thera (1960–1965)*, 397.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 296.

Theravāda meditation of loving-kindness (*mettābhāvanā*), 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.”⁸¹ 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.”⁸² He is quite unequivocal about *nirvāna* 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.”⁸³

Nor should Nanavira’s experience be judged negatively according to Mahāyāna Buddhist standards. A so-called Hīnayāna *ārya* is considered even in the Mahayana traditions as part of the Buddhist Saṅgha, 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 *nirvāna*, 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 *nirvāna*? 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 *sotāpanna* (stream entrant) on a pedestal well out of reach, it can never possibly occur to you that it is your duty to become *sotāpanna* yourself... here and now in this very life.”⁸⁴

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.)”⁸⁵ 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

⁸¹ *ibid.*, 270.

⁸² *ibid.*, 292.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 444.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 282.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 452.

as one.”⁸⁶ 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.”⁸⁷

Towards the end of his life Nanavira was convinced that the Dhamma was “very far from being understood in the West.”⁸⁸ 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”⁸⁹ 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.”*⁹⁰

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 Schweizer to this purpose. For “Schweizer’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.”⁹¹

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.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 466.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 255.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 442.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 307.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 243.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 256.

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."⁹²

How does one decide whether another person really is a stream entrant or whether they are deluding themselves? According to the *suttas*, only an *ārya* can recognise another *ārya*. It would follow, therefore, that only a bona fide *ārya* 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 *ārya*, 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 (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*); (2) doubts about the validity of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Saṅgha, the Training, Conditionality and other key doctrines (*vicikicchā*); and (3) attachment to the efficacy of mere rules and rituals (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*). 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 *ārya*) 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

⁹² *ibid.*, 381.

rather have it said of the *Notes* that the author killed himself as a *bhikkhu* than that he disrobed; for *bhikkhus* have become *arahants* in the act of suicide, but it is not recorded that anyone became *arahant* in the act of disrobing.)”⁹³

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*

⁹³ *ibid.*, 279.

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 pages) 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.