

# ÑĀNAVĪRA THERA

Ven. Ñānavīra Thera was born Harold Edward Musson, on the 5th of January, 1920, in a military barracks in England. His father, Edward Lionel Musson, was Captain in the 1st Manchester Regiment stationed in the Salamanca Barracks in Aldershot. A career officer, Edward Musson reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, D.S.O., M.C. The father apparently expected his son, an only child, to follow in his footsteps. Some people from his town remembered the youth as a rather solitary teen-ager, living in a duty-bound atmosphere which generated some occasional tendencies toward rebelliousness. He was noticeably inclined to introspection and contemplation. A neighbour of the family recalled his telling her, much to her puzzlement, that he often enjoyed walking alone in the London fogs. She also recalled his marked distaste for a tiger-skin proudly displayed by his father in the foyer of "Wivelrod House", the country residence in the Hampshires. It was a trophy of a hunt in India or Burma. His mother, *née* Laura Emily Mateer, appeared to have been devoted to her son; "possibly over-devoted to him", one person commented, "as her only child". She was deeply sorrowed by her son's departure for Ceylon at the age of 28, and desperately attempted by a visit there to persuade him to forsake his monastic existence and return to England.

The setting of his youth was a greystone mansion, within sight of a fine abbey, in the environs of Alton, a typical and restful English small town in the Hampshiredowns, about an hour southwest of London by road or rail. No doubt the young Musson's life was influenced at least equally by the nearby town of Aldershot, the site of the celebrated military academy. It seems likely, too, that he spent some time during his childhood in India or Southeast Asia. According to an [interview](#) -- perhaps not wholly reliable -- published by the journalist and novelist, Mr. Robin Maugham, in a somewhat sensational newspaper in 1965, the young Musson had been significantly affected by a statue of the Buddha which he had seen when his father was commanding a battalion in Burma.

His schooling was at Wellington college -- traditional for scions of military families. He went up to Magdalene College, Cambridge, in 1938, and spent one summer (probably the same year) studying Italian in Perugia, Italy. In June, 1939, he sat for Mathematics, and in 1940, for Modern Languages (in which he earned a "Class One"). In 1939, immediately after the outbreak of war, he enlisted in the Territorial Royal Artillery. In July, 1941, he was commissioned 2nd Lieutenant in the Intelligence Corps, for which his knowledge of modern languages was doubtless an asset (he was an interrogator). In October, 1942, he was promoted to Lieutenant, and in April, 1944, to Temporary Captain. His overseas service with the British Eighth Army was primarily in Italy, from 1943 to 1946. A family acquaintance spoke of him, however, as having "completely resented warfare". In a [letter](#), written in 1964 in Ceylon, may be found the sardonic comments that he had much enjoyed travel *before* the wartime army, and that he agreed with the classification of intelligence into three classes, "human, animal, and military". He received a B.A. degree in Modern and Medieval Languages from Cambridge University for six terms of university study together with three terms allowed for military service.

Little can be surmised concerning his initial interest in Buddhism. In his university days, James Joyce's novel, *Ulysses*, had exerted a powerful influence on him because (according to a [letter](#) dated 28.ii.1965) Joyce had held up a mirror to the "average sensual Western man" and had shown that "nothing matters". He [wrote](#) of himself (19.v.1964) as having always preferred ideas to images. Poetry, he once noted, only "pleased" him. Alongside this penchant, as one might put it, for the realistic view over fantasy, was a great love of music, especially Mozart, the late Beethoven, Bartok and Stravinsky. The first public indication of an involvement with Buddhist thought was his translation of an Italian study, written in 1943 by J. Evola, and published in English by Luzac (London) in 1951 under the title, *The Doctrine of Awakening -- A Study on the Buddhist Asceticism*. In a [letter](#) written in 1964, Ñānavīra Thera expressed "considerable reserves" about the soundness of the book. Apparently he had chanced upon the Italian work during his wartime assignment in Italy.

After the war, Musson found himself, according to his own [account](#), in no special need of money (19.xi.1964) and highly dissatisfied with his life. In 1948, he ran into a sometime fellow-officer and friend, Osbert Moore, who felt similarly dissatisfied. Osbert Moore was born on the 25th of June, 1905, in England and graduated at Exeter College, Oxford. His interest in Buddhism was roused by reading Evola's book, later translated into English by his friend Musson, during his time as an army staff-officer in Italy. After the war he held the post of Assistant head of the BBC Italian section at Bush House. In 1948, they both decided to settle their few affairs in England, put the Western milieu behind them, and go to Ceylon to become Buddhist monks. In 1949 both received Novice

Ordination at the Island Hermitage, Dodanduwa (from Ven. Ñānatiloka), and in 1950 the Higher Ordination as *bhikkhus* at the Vajirārāma monastery, Colombo. Osbert Moore was given the monastic name of Ñānamoli, and Harold Musson that of Ñānavīra. Both returned soon to the Island Hermitage (an island monastery situated in a lagoon of south Ceylon), where the Ven. Ñānamoli spent almost his entire monk life of 11 years, until his sudden death on the 8th of March, 1960, due to heart failure (coronary thrombosis). He is remembered for his outstanding scholarly work in translating from the Pali into lucid English some of the most difficult texts of Theravāda Buddhism.

Ven. Ñānavīra was more solitary and moved from the Island Hermitage to a remote section of southeast Ceylon, where he lived alone for the rest of his life in a one-room, brick-and-plaster *kuti* (hut) with a tile roof, about a mile from the village of Bundala, on the edge of a large game-preserve. It was an all-day, uncomfortable bus-ride from Colombo, where he had to repair at times for medical treatment. The change of life was not physically easy. Not long after arriving in Ceylon, he contracted a severe case of amoebiasis which continued to plague him for the next fifteen years. The tropical climate and the local food must have been taxing for the physically ailing Westerner. *Bhikkhus* accept food which is offered to them by laypeople, and this custom often leaves them with few options concerning their diet. Some indication of the harsh physical effects of the amoebiasis may be glimpsed in the observation of Ven. Ñānasumana, an American *bhikkhu* who had met Ven. Ñānavīra in October, 1963, and began regular study with him. In a letter dated 30.x.1964, Ñānasumana wrote of "a man of about 60 years.... He speaks and I learn". In 1964, Ven. Ñānavīra was only 44 years old. He died a year later, on the 5th of July, 1965, by his own hand and deliberate decision. Suicide is of course regarded with peculiar horror and condemnation in our Judaeo-Christian civilisation, as an offence against God, perhaps incurring eternal torture in Hell, and even as a legal offence against the proprietary State. Ñānavīra Thera wrote extensively and carefully on the question of suicide, which arose for him because of the severity of the amoebiasis and other health problems. He [mentioned](#) the occurrence of a nervous disorder associated with the chronic amoebiasis and the prescribed medication, which combined to "leave me with little hope of making any further progress in the Buddhasāsana in this life". But it is doubtless best to allow the late Thera to speak for himself in his [letters](#). Only after a careful reading of them should the reader form his own opinion.

Ven. Ñānavīra's writings fall into two periods: from 1950 till 1960 (the *Early Writings*), and from 1960 till 1965 (included in *Clearing the Path*). On 22.iii.1963, the author wrote in a [letter](#):

...With regard to any of my past writings that you may come across..., I would ask you to treat with great reserve anything dated before 1960, about which time certain of my views underwent a modification. If this is forgotten you may be puzzled by inconsistencies between earlier and later writings....

Before use is made of the *Early Writings*, the reader should be familiar with *Clearing the Path*, which sets the former collection (serving as a supplement to the latter) in the proper perspective.

The earliest known piece of writing by Ven. Ñānavīra Thera on the Dhamma is found in his "Translator's Foreword" to *The Doctrine of Awakening -- A Study on the Buddhist Asceticism* (translated from the Italian -- *La Dottrina Del Risveglio* by J. Evola -- by H. E. Musson and published by Luzac & Company, London, 1951):

Of the many books published in Italy and Germany by J. Evola, this is the first to be translated into English. The book needs no apology; the subject -- Buddhism -- is sufficient guarantee of that. But the author has, it seems to me, recaptured the spirit of Buddhism in its original form, and his schematic and uncompromising approach will have rendered an inestimable service even if it does no more than clear away some of the woolly ideas that have gathered round the central figure, Prince Siddhattha, and round the doctrine that he disclosed.

The real significance of the book, however, lies not in its value as a weapon in a dusty battle between scholars, but in its encouragement of a practical application of the doctrine it discusses. The author has not only examined the principles on which Buddhism was originally based, but he has also described in some detail the actual process of "asceticism" or self-training that was practised by the early Buddhists. This Study, moreover, does not stop here; it maintains throughout that the doctrine of the Buddha is capable of application even to-day by any Western man who really has the vocation. But the undertaking was never easy, and the number who, in this modern world, will succeed in pursuing it to its conclusion is not likely to be large.

H. E. M.

London  
April, 1948.

Having come to Ceylon and after acquainting themselves thoroughly with the Pali Suttas, the two English monks also explored many modes of Western thought -- even quantum mechanics! -- through reading and discussion. When Ven. Ñānavīra left Ven. Ñānamoli at the Island Hermitage to live on his own, the two friends continued their discussions through voluminous [correspondence](#) which lasted until 1960, the year of the Ven. Ñānamoli's death. Increasingly they found that the Western thinkers most relevant to their interests were those belonging to the closely allied schools of phenomenology and existentialism, to whom they found themselves indebted for clearing away a lot of mistaken notions with which they had burdened themselves. These letters make clear the nature of that debt; they also make clear the limitations which the Ven. Ñānavīra saw in those thinkers. He is insistent that although for certain individuals their value may be great, yet eventually one must go beyond them if one is to arrive at the essence of the Buddha's Teaching. Existentialism, then, is in his view an approach to the Buddha's Teaching and not a substitute for it.

The major portion of the *Early Writings* consists of [letters](#) written to the late Ven. Ñānamoli Thera. With the manuscript letters, which were preserved by the recipient (tied up in bundles, one of which, containing letters written between August and December 1958, was not found), were found draft copies of some of the replies which were sent to Ven. Ñānavīra Thera. These have been included here; it should be remembered, however, that they are only draft copies and not final versions. Following these are a few [letters](#) written to Ven. Ñānavīra Thera's chief supporters, Mr. and Mrs. P. The two essays following the letters were published (the [Sketch](#) was reprinted several times) in abbreviated form: the texts reproduced here are taken from the author's typescripts, which may be regarded as the definitive versions. Following these two essays are the contents of the author's [Commonplace Book](#), and then [Marginalia](#), being the comments the author made in the margins of various books which engaged him (together with the text commented upon, where useful). Finally there is a [collection](#) of various papers discovered after their author's death: notes, translations, etc. Apart from the two essays, the other texts have been edited, but hopefully all the important passages are included here.

The difference between Ven. Ñānavīra's early writings and those included in *Clearing the Path* is very marked and striking. The early texts show a man who, in his own thinking and discussion with others, earnestly seeks a way of approach to the heart of the Buddha's Teaching, by repeated trial-and-error. This seeking has eventually yielded its fruit when, though suffering from amoebiasis (which prevented him to a great degree from practising *samādhi*, or mental concentration), Ven. Ñānavīra apparently attained *sotāpatti*, or Stream-entry, on 26.vi.1959, which he has himself described in a [letter](#) "to be opened in the event of my death". A person who has "entered the stream" has *ipso facto* abandoned personality-view (*sakkāya-ditthi*), which is the self-view implicit in the experience of an ordinary ignorant worldling, and understood the essential meaning of the Buddha's teaching on the Four Noble Truths. Ven. Ñānavīra's writings after 1960 express just this kind of certainty: no more groping in the dark, no more doubt or speculative guessing.

No later than February 1963, the Ven. Ñānavīra Thera completed a book called *Notes on Dhamma (1960-1963)*, which was privately published by the Honourable Lionel Samarasinghe in the same year. Following production of that volume, the author amended and added to the text, leaving at his death an expanded typescript, indicated by the titular expansion of its dates, *(1960-1965)*. *Notes on Dhamma* has been variously described as "arrogant, scathing, and condescending", as "a fantastic system", and as "the most important book to be written in this century". The Ven. Ñānavīra Thera himself remarked of the book that "it is vain to hope that it is going to win general approval... but I do allow myself to hope that a few individuals... will have private transformations of their way of thinking as a result of reading them".

And indeed, the influence of *Notes on Dhamma* on Buddhist thinkers continues to increase more than three decades after its publication. Inasmuch as the first edition, long out of print, consisted of only 250 copies, how is it that this book has aroused such extraordinary interest and controversy? The answer, it seems, is to be discovered not only in the specific content of the *Notes* but in their general attitude, their view and direction. In describing that attitude their author wrote of the *Notes* that they "attempt to provide an intellectual basis for the understanding of the Suttas without abandoning *saddhā*"; that they "have been written with the purpose of clearing away a mass of dead matter which is choking the Suttas"; and that, above all, "the *Notes* are designed to be an invitation to the reader to come and share the author's point of view".

That point of view -- achieved by the Ven. Ñānavīra through dedicated self-investigation using the Buddha's Teaching as a guide -- is described unflinchingly in the *Notes*, which assume that "the reader's sole interest in the

Pali Suttas is a concern for his own welfare". However, the *Notes*, with their admitted intellectual and conceptual difficulties, are not the only way to discuss right view or to offer right-view guidance. The [letters](#) which are collected here are not only "something of a commentary on the *Notes*"; they are, independently, a lucid discussion of how an individual concerned fundamentally with self-disclosure deals with the dilemma of finding himself in an intolerable situation, where the least undesirable alternative is suicide.

With openness, calmness, and considerable wit the Ven. Ñānavīra discusses with his correspondents (including his doctor, a judge, a provincial businessman, a barrister, a British diplomat, and another British citizen) the illnesses that plague him and what he can and cannot do about them, and about his own existence. His life as a Buddhist monk in a remote jungle abode is not incidental to the philosophy he expounds: the two are different aspects of the same thing, namely a vision that penetrates into the human situation both as universal and as particular, and recognizes that it is this situation which it is the business of each of us to resolve for ourselves. In presenting this view the Ven. Ñānavīra offers a contemporary exposition of the Teaching of the Buddha. In living this view he evokes a dramatic situation wherein an individual resolutely faces those questions which every lucid person must eventually face.

Most of the editorial work connected with Ven. Ñānavīra Thera's writings was performed -- as a labour of love -- by the late Sāmanera Bodhesako (Robert Smith), who died in Kathmandu in 1988, aged 49, from a sudden intestinal hernia while on a return journey to the United States to join his father for the latter's eightieth birthday celebration. During the last years of his life in Sri Lanka he founded Path Press which published *Clearing the Path: Writings of Ñānavīra Thera (1960-1965)*. He also worked as editor for the [Buddhist Publication Society](#) in Kandy which published *The Tragic, The Comic & The Personal: Selected Letters of Ñānavīra Thera (Wheel 339/341)* in 1987. Prof. Forrest Williams of the University of Colorado also participated as the co-editor of *Clearing the Path*.

*Clearing the Path* has so far been translated into Czech, Dutch, and Serbo-Croatian (only *Notes on Dhamma*). There are also plans for a second revised edition of the English original, which seems to be out of print now, although a few copies should still be available from [Wisdom Books](#).

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