

The Life of Osbert Moore,

Also Known As Ñanamoli Thera

Having a brief life sketch by Maurice Cardiff as fuel for thought, supplemented by the subject's own words in the form of a posthumously published Note Book of his thoughts, it becomes obvious that the man who became known to the Buddhist world as Bhikkhu Ñanamoli was a complex and ambiguous person.

On the one hand, a deep and careful thinker, always seeking a more complete understanding of whatever subject he was examining, and on the other, a playful and merry mischief-maker, someone who delighted in coming up with word puns and other playful tricks which kept his always curious mind in motion.

He was at once, a very capable person -- able to learn new languages, or just about anything, without much study at all -- and just the right person for the important work he eventually undertook as his life's work, that of a tireless translator of the Buddhist Pali scriptures and commentarial works into the English language.

Because he possessed an extreme intelligence and displayed a skill with language, he was able to accomplish in half the time what lesser men accomplish in a whole lifetime of similar work, and to do it with a scholarship and accuracy that has stood the test of time.

Osbert Moore, or Bertie as he was apparently known by his closest friends, was viewed as a quiet and unassuming man in his civilian life. He never seemed to like to take center stage, but was content to remain on the sidelines, unobtrusively observing the goings on. Early in his life, this penchant for introspection was viewed as being

introverted, and, indeed, he was later known to acknowledge this trait in his letters home to friends.

Yet, he was also acknowledged by his friends, at one point after the war, as having outgrown his inclination toward introversion and to having developed a less withdrawn self assuredness with a tendency to be more open in conversation.

But whatever persona he portrayed to the outside world, on the inside he had become quietly confident of his opinions and a man whose integrity was to become beyond reproach.

Not having any ties in the civilian world after World War II, and having developed his mind through an interest in philosophy, mysticism, and mental self-control, he was given to making swift and life-changing decisions without consulting (or feeling the need to) with anyone close to him.

And he was not above taking risks with his life and career. Or at least, this is how the outside world would perceive him. On one occasion his unusual reserve left him as he insisted on leaving his then current position as an intelligence officer in "counter-espionage duties and followed this up with a refusal to divulge evidence, known only to himself, with regard to investigations already in hand ... cynics might see in his conduct a gamble which paid off. Gamble or not it required courage, for it could have easily led to a court-martial and a harsh sentence. According to Basil, for some time this was a real possibility,...

Having developed a certainty within himself about the moral and ethical consequences of the life he was being forced to live due to his involvement with the military, he apparently was willing to give up whatever position or career advancement he might have gained from the exclusivity and sensitivity of the work he was doing in order to follow his own inner resolve in the matter. The threat of court-martial loomed large and might have left a lesser man in the

throes of conflict over the decision he had made, forcing him to rescind a decision which seemed to be throwing caution to the wind.

As it turned out, though, "...either by a fortunate coincidence or due to manipulations by superiors well-disposed towards him and convinced of his sincerity, his release [from the Army] requested by the BBC was granted, and he was allowed to leave for London to take up his appointment in the Italian section."

The influence on him from time spent in introspection and personal reflection on the realities of his life were beginning to attest to the profound changes that were taking place in Osbert's inner life, convincing him that there were some things worth standing up for no matter what the social consequences.

He was beginning to become the independent thinking and self assured person who would eventually take up with a friend and leave, virtually over night and without prior warning, for Ceylon in order to pursue a study and practice of Buddhism.

Already given to moods of contemplation and silences, the prospects of the possibility of living the life of a hermit, detached from the ugliness of the world around him (a world that had just come through a second world war), must have been a strong draw on his conviction to explore this hitherto unexplored aspect of life.

The resolve he showed in the incident with the military requesting his release from a sensitive position as a "spy-catcher" so that he might accept a position with the BBC and thus relieve himself of the increasing burden of his military duty, was only the first of the decisions that were to dramatically change the course of his life. Later on, he would leave the BBC in just as dramatic a fashion, tendering his resignation with a simple note left on his desk one day and leaving, for all practical purposes, the next for the Asian subcontinent.

Osbert Moore and his friend, Harold Musson, who was fifteen years

his junior, left for Ceylon in the autumn of 1948 with the intention of becoming Buddhist monks. Once there, they hoped to join a monastic settlement in which, as they had learned, there were a number of European monks.

There was no assurance of their becoming monks until they surveyed the situation in Ceylon and it met with their approval. They might well have been two casual tourists sight seeing on the island and checking the locals out for all anyone else knew. But after seven weeks spent at the monastery at Dodanduwa, Osbert writes a friend in England that he is finally leading "the life I have always wanted to lead," that being the "hermit[']s] life, in the right circumstances."

Apparently, after seven weeks on the island, he and Musson are becoming acclimated to the monastic regimen, though they have not yet assented to becoming monks. In this same correspondence, he admits to his friend that he had planned "to retire into the unknown and stay," bringing up once again a desire for anonymity and retreat from the world.

If he wasn't a recluse before, this stay at the Island Hermitage monastery in Ceylon was fast becoming evidence of his deeply held conviction for living a life in seclusion, or at least in renunciation of the world around him.

In this same letter, Osbert tells his correspondent about his days, how they are spent in meditation and leisurely study, living for perhaps the first time since childhood by virtue of the benefit of others, lay people who bring the monks food and perform manual labor in deference to the monks. As he writes, "I spend the morning between learning Pali, meditation or cooking." He goes on to recount, "In the afternoon one sleeps for a bit, bathes in the lake and meditates afterwards. At seven or so there is tea in the refectory for anyone who wants to go there. Here one has cups of tea and lemon and talks of doctrine with the monks, or Pali discourses are recited."

From this description it sounds as though he could be living in paradise, and compared to the war he had just endured, it might very well have been. But there was work being done there also, most of it from the inside out, and Osbert was busy learning and studying the Pali language so as to be able to read the Buddhist scriptures in their native language.

After seven weeks on the island, he writes that he and Harold Musson "have decided to join the order," the first of the two prescribed initiation ceremonies to be held within a few weeks. They are favorably impressed by the character of the monks there who he says are "Sinhalese, German and Burmese," and who are kind, solicitous, and cheerful.

He also states: "that there are no subjects [here] which are taboo for discussion or anything which you have to take on trust." This last is obviously a drawing card conducive to the general atmosphere there, no doubt imploring them to stay on. If there was anything that Osbert Moore and Harold Musson were not, it is blind followers.

Both had been highly educated in England, and Bertie, for his part, being the elder of the two, was not given at this stage of his life to giving in to the demands of authority figures. He had already proven that by his general disdain and dismissal of the Army's intelligence division which he had insisted on leaving in order to take a position in the civilian world.

Maurice Cardiff points out in his sketch, referring to Osbert, that "He had found the hermits life 'under the right circumstances' which he had been looking for, but the circumstances were such and so far from solitary, that as a hermit's life, strictly speaking, it hardly qualified. Despite its name, the Island Hermitage was, in fact, a small monastic community much revered for its strict adherence to Buddhist doctrine. From his own account, it had many visitors including lay supporters, Sinhalese dignitaries both religious and

political, foreign monks, especially Burmese, and world-traveling seekers after truth, some of whose eccentricities he gently derides.

He does, however, in the interest of his own seclusion, make the path of some twenty yards or so from the refectory to his hut sufficiently maze-like to deter all but the most persistent of unsolicited intruders."

Whether by design or blind fortune, Osbert now found himself becoming firmly established within the Theravadin school of Buddhism. This meant laying aside his interest in mysticism, as the Theravadin tradition is not given to discussion of metaphysics in the same way, for instance, that Tibetan Buddhism is.

He seems not to have suffered much from having discarded this aspect of his interest in yielding to the ways of the Theravadins, as he describes to a friend regarding the difference between the two main traditions of Buddhism: "As to the origin of the terms Mahayana and Hinayana (Theravada) in the former the doctrine of how to act to reach Nirvana became overshadowed by a fantastic theology..."

Continuing he says, "This northern Buddhism styled itself Mahayana, or the 'greater vehicle' and invented the name Hinayana, or the 'Lower Vehicle' for the southern form according to which no one gets to Nirvana unless they do something about it, and which holds that one should go straight ahead and not bother about anything or anyone ... the object of living a monk's life here is to practice renunciation and meditation in order to get out of the endless round of becoming and making some headway towards Nirvana ... good works, it is held, are all very well but are best practiced by laymen who are better fitted to perform them ... this seems sensible."

Apparently, it also seemed sensible to him that a person should adhere to a practice for his own personal deliverance from the

suffering of the world, and that to think otherwise was only to delude oneself.

It wasn't until 1952 that Osbert, now Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, began the work that was to leave his mark in the history of Western Buddhism. From the account given by Mr. Cardiff, it is uncertain whether or not the work of translation that Ñānamoli had embarked upon was begun for posterity's sake or whether it was something he was doing for the benefit of the monks and himself.

It would seem, from the account, that it started out as the latter and became, over time, the former, as there are passages alluding to the reputation that Ñānamoli was gaining in the Buddhist world for his translations of the Pali Canon. It was in 1955 that he was approached by "somebody [who] wants to publish one book he has translated, originally for his own edification." This, of course, was the *Visuddhimagga, The Path of Purification*, a commentarial work by a fifth century former Brahman (Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa) ostensibly turned Buddhist monk and chief commentator.

In an aside in a letter to a friend, Ñānamoli writes about this venture of having to rearrange his translation for the benefit of publication, saying, "Now someone is reading through it and I have got to compose an introduction. I can no longer hide behind the author translated but have to come, as it were, off my fence and actually say something, myself."

Even at this late date, he was showing his diffidence in making any kind of public emergence from his cherished preference for "obscurity." Regarding this preference, we have the author's own words from a Note Book entry made in January of 1952 where he writes, "It is my ambition to attain to obscurity." This abhorrence for the limelight was to stick with him throughout his life, adding to his growing legendary status as being, at least in public, a modest and self-effacing monk.

There are several other references in his Note Book owing to this same ideal of eschewing public recognition. Publicity and a public life, apparently, was something that he wanted to avoid at all costs as he seemed to view this as an encroachment on his personal solitude.

Mr. Cardiff then writes of the mischievous side of Ñānamoli, of the intellectual who likes to test his reader to see if he's really paying attention. Cardiff writes of Ñānamoli: "Later he writes that he has put his name in the first letters of each sentence in the preface [of the *Visuddhimagga*]. It amuses him to see if anyone will notice. 'It represents partly the getting past an obstacle and partly some rather abstruse literary amusement for myself.'

Two years later when translating various texts has become his primary undertaking, he describes it as 'a particular kind of soothing occupation like playing a musical instrument and solving mathematical problems.'

"Cardiff continues by saying: "Despite his declared ambition to 'obtain to obscurity' he is clearly not too put out when someone writes to tell him that 'my remaining here, coupled with translating Pali, is a sort of legendary reputation in Colombo. Now if that were so, I think it would be fine, for then I might travel even further by letting my legendary, or otherwise, self go and live in, say, Colombo while I stay here without it. I think we could get on very well at a distance, we could write to each other, of course, occasionally, but not depend on each other in the rather futile way we do.'" It would seem that these small amusements and speculations kept Ñānamoli's expansive mind otherwise entertained while he was not engaged in some other work.

Cardiff further speculates about the extracurricular work that Ñānamoli has set up for himself in the form of his translations and how this may have affected his original intentions: "Although from

1952 onwards his translation work so absorbed him (one rather wonders how much time was left for the meditation which took up most of his early days at the Hermitage and which he had declared along with the practice of renunciation, to be the object of living a monk's life)..."

It is interesting to note that it was during these very years that one of the senior monks, Nyanaponika Thera (a German monk only four years Ñānamoli's senior who had arrived at the Island Hermitage in 1936) had, in 1952, been invited to travel to Burma with his preceptor (and founder of the Island Hermitage) Nyanatiloka Thera for consultation in preparation for the Sixth Buddhist Council to be convened in 1954.

What is interesting about this is that after the conclusion of the consultations, Nyanaponika Thera stayed on in Burma for a period of training in Insight Meditation under the renowned meditation teacher Mahasi Sayadaw. It was this training that inspired the book, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, that Nyanaponika was to eventually write which became a famous training manual in Buddhist meditation.

What is interesting to speculate about is whether or not Nyanaponika Thera had any opportunity to teach this same training to Ñānamoli, and if so, how far Ñānamoli took it. From the entries made in his note book, it would seem that Ñānamoli continued on his own path of an intellectual pursuit of the Dhamma as there are no entries describing any of his meditative pursuits.

However this may all have washed out in actuality, there are indications in Ñānamoli's notes as late as 1957 that he was beginning to think more reflectively about the mind and how it observed phenomena. The following entry was made in September of 1957: "How does the body come to be apprehended as a body? Why does it not fall apart into the seen and the heard, the smelt, the tasted and the

touched?"

Here, this seems to indicate that he was working on this problem of seeing only the seen in what is viewed, hearing only the heard in what is listened to, tasting only the tasted etcetera. These insights, when fully developed, contain the essence of the Buddha's Dhamma. And yet in order to more easily develop these insights it is advisable that one have an active and abundant meditative practice, and be especially proficient in the meditative absorptions. But there is no indication in either the notes or his letters that such was the case.

There is an indication from the notes left by Ñānamoli that he maintained an intellectual pursuit of his understanding of the Dhamma through comparison with contemporary and ancient philosophical thinkers up until his death. There are also the voluminous written exchanges of his with his friend Musson (now Bhikkhu Ñānavira) who was by then living in a different section of the island several miles away. They exchanged correspondences up until Ñānamoli's untimely death in March of 1960.

In these letters we find evidence of (at least in Ñānavira's view) a distaste for at least some of the ideas about the meditation practice that Nyanaponika Thera has proposed in his book. There seem to be some indications in these letters that Ñānamoli agrees with this assessment.

What does seem to be indicated about the way that these two bhikkhus lived within the order is that they were pretty much on their own to research and discover whatever it is they wanted about the Buddha's teachings. There doesn't seem to be much of a monastic curriculum (other than learning Pali in order to be able to read the Canon in its native language and the occasional sutta recitations and discussions) that they are following, or at least none is mentioned in these written pieces. They can accept or reject any teaching, even

that given them by the senior monks.

There is one entry in the note book that was made in November of 1956 which seems to sum up the stages of his life as he himself saw them first hand. He says: "I seem to have lived my life in three modes: up till the outbreak of war in 1939 I lived it in a very pleasant and mainly graceful rock-pool. The financial insecurity beginning in 1937 silted the pool up. 1939-1948 was lived in the midst of History: Anti-aircraft volunteer gunner to G.S.O. III, I.B. in Caserta, and afterwards Assistant head of the B.B.C. Italian section at Bush House. From then on it has been lived as an observer, withdrawn and watching." It was this last aspiration that he had assiduously aspired to and in the end obtained on his own terms.

One of the most telling statements that Ñanamoli made in his note book was the following, made in August of 1955: "One shares some public preferences with an acquaintance. One shares many public and some private prides and preferences with a friend. One shares these and some private hates and shames with an intimate."

His next entry tells the tale: "Those who lead public religious lives honestly can have no intimates." This seems to hint at a deep seated fear of sharing the private details of one's most intimate thoughts ("hates and shames") about the relative world with a specified other, an intimate. It seems to capture quite eloquently Ñanamoli's state of mind during this period of time and the role he had designated for himself as being an observer.

It further suggests a self-protective mechanism employed by someone who was not all that self assured, who still had doubts about the nature of his existence and was still searching for answers. It would seem that he hadn't yet developed the open palm of his Teacher, the Buddha, who mentioned on one occasion that "the Tathagata has no 'teacher's fist' in respect of doctrines," implying that

there was no esoteric teaching in the Dhamma. But here, in reference to Ñānamoli, meaning that there was still a sense of self needing to be overcome, otherwise, why the closed fist.

One of his more prescient observations about the two cultures he was most familiar with at the time was also dated August of 1955: "The Indian mind being brought up in an atmosphere of tropical amorphous jungle, expresses itself in patterns, which repeat. The European mind, being brought up in an atmosphere of open, orderly-patterned vistas, experiences itself in things, regarded as individuals."

This shows a little of what his experience of the Dhamma had taught him, because if one examines the statements of the Buddha in earnest, one notices his ability to recognize the patterns of the mind and to explain them in great detail to his listeners. Ñānamoli's observation of the European mind seems to indicate his awareness of the mental conditioning in identity (personality view) that Westerners are faced with. This conditioning, no doubt, reinforced by Western religious upbringing within a Judeo-Christian culture with its emphasis on a Father Creator god whose children are made in his image. Quite a bit of baggage to carry around with one just arriving into this world.

When it came to understanding the finer points of the Dhamma, Ñānamoli had developed a precise eye for comprehending the mountain of detail present in the Buddha's descriptions. Here, following, is one of his more subtle observations focusing on an aspect of Dhamma that is most profound indeed: "The destruction of ignorance destroys the illusion of being. When ignorance is no more, then consciousness no longer can attribute being (*pahoti*) at all. But that is not all; for when consciousness is predicated on one who has no more ignorance, then it is no more indicatable [as a separate and distinct substantial entity] (as it was indicated in MN Sutta 38)."

Here, Ñānamoli demonstrates a clear comprehension of the complex teaching of *paticca-samuppada* or dependent origination, noting its applicability down to the aspect of its application for breaking up the conception of an individual being.

There are in his notes several striking observations of the Dhamma that indicate a highly developed knowledge and appreciation of some of the more obscure parts of the teachings. What follows are a particularly forceful and revealing sampling of those observations. All but the last entry stand without comment.

"Theistic contemplation seems to be inseparable from disguised narcissism. Advaita Vedanta tries to escape from that by postulating absolute unity and absolute loss of the individual in the whole. But in order to lose personal identity and at the same time save the whole that opposes it, the Advaita Vedanta cheats. Both Christian and other theism and Advaita Vedanta are haunted by the spectre of Nothingness which they cannot cope with."

"Every act is an act of forgetting -- forgetting some constituent state and composing some new one."

"Feeling as the ruins of past actions, and Craving as the jungle that overgrows them -- clear the jungle and the 3 feelings will become clearer."

"Religion is derived by the Concise Oxford Dictionary from **re-ligo**, to bind (esp. to God). Consequently, **Religion** (which under the question 'Is the Dhamma a Religion or a Philosophy' I had equated provisionally with *silabbataparamasa*, 'adherence to rites and rituals') should rightly be translated by *yoga* (= bondage), but the Dhamma is the way to the *anuttarayoga-kkhema*, 'the incomparable safety from bondage.' "

"To be is to be contingent: nothing, of which it can be said that 'it is', can be said to be alone and independent."

"The Buddha's teaching does not require belief in the development of new faculties to perceive outward worlds hitherto unperceived. It is not concerned with new outward worlds but with the clear vision of the world of experience as instable and unsatisfactory, and that this is due to craving. The assertion made is that a line of conduct will reduce the craving and the suffering consequent on it (which can be tested) and the belief required is that that line of action can be carried to the point at which craving ends and suffering ends."

The second half of this quote could do with some clarification. From Ñānamoli's point of view at this time, he seems to be indicating that conduct, through the force of will, will somehow "reduce craving and the suffering consequent on it."

While this is true in the limited sense that he means it, it is also true that such conduct can arise from insight into the true nature of reality and that such insight can be developed by the use of the meditation technology which the Buddha taught. In this latter case, there is less exertion on the will than might be necessary for one to expend without such insight. Consequently, for one who develops insight there is no necessity for the "belief" he speaks about in the second half of the sentence, as craving and suffering will end by themselves as a result of the insight. This whole sentence would seem to be an indication of the fact that Ñānamoli had not developed such insight at this time, otherwise he may have amended the sentence to reflect that.

In considering the life of Ñānamoli Thera and the significance it had on the development of the Dhamma in the West, it is safe to say that his translations, which were his major contribution to the Buddhasasana in the West, helped to get into the hands of serious practitioners needed information from the voluminous writings on hand in the Pali Canon.

What is important here is that his translations were based upon his

understanding as a fellow practitioner, an ordained member of the Sangha who was fluent in English and was able to communicate the nuances of the scripture and commentarial writings without the usual difficulties that non-native speakers of English have in making this attempt. The tremendous importance of this cannot be over-emphasized.

It is also interesting to note that Osbert Moore was born at about the same time as two other Western writers on spiritual matters who held quite a bit of influence over the reading public during this time period (the 1950s and 1960s) and that while perhaps being just as insightful if not more so, he was the lesser known of these writers.

The other two writers I have in mind were Thomas Merton and Alan Watts, both of whom were born in 1915, ten years after Moore was born. Now, granted, these other two writers were writing and expressing their own ideas in this field while Moore was only translating the Buddha's discourses and other commentarial writings, yet those translations had not been available before in such lucid and readily understandable form as he was able to render them in, which is quite a feat in itself, especially when we consider how many translations there have been of texts like the *Tao Te Ching* which has shown itself to be a particularly difficult text to translate properly.

So Moore's contributions in this case are all the more impressive in that his translations (especially those of the commentarial books like the *Patisambhidamagga* and the *Visuddhimagga*) have stood the test of time and are still being used by contemporary readers more than fifty years after the fact of their publication.

Although he was recognized within the Buddhist world at the time for the work he was doing (hence the reputation he gained as an English translator of Pali texts), the greater world of those interested in spirituality were perhaps unaware of his contributions. In his own quiet way, Ñānamoli Thera was able to stay in the background and to

let the fruit of his toils do the speaking for him. He ably accomplished his goal of "attain[ing] to obscurity" while never having had the opportunity to "compose [his] biography."

Not that he ever would have. Yet in one thing he *was* mistaken, the thought expressed, almost as an afterthought in one of his note book entries, that no one would "think of" writing his biography. The thought has undoubtedly crossed a few minds; otherwise, the publication of his note books might never have been made. He apparently touched many lives while he was alive and impressed nearly everyone who met him. And perhaps fittingly, he should have the last say here, as it was, in fact, *his* life.

In the Addenda to *A Thinker's Note Book*, there is the following written in 1949, the same year as his ordination into the Buddhist monastic colony, attesting to the high ideal by which it becomes apparent he had lived his life: "If I must live like an amateur, let me die like a professional."

Source : Ñānavīra Thera Dhamma Page