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Author(s): Asaf Federman

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His Excellency and the Monk: A Correspondence Between Nyanaponika Thera and David Ben-Gurion

Asaf Federman

Abstract

Between the years 1956 and 1962 the scholar monk Nyanaponika Thera and the first Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion have exchanged eight long letters. These letters – published here for the first time – expose the extent of Ben-Gurion's interest in Buddhism and reveal the Buddhist rhetoric used by one of Sri Lanka's most influential scholars. This rhetoric, which was generally well received by Ben-Gurion, was an exemplar of 'Protestant Buddhism'. It is suggested that Ben-Gurion could relate to this image of Buddhism because it reflected his own vision of Judaism that had 'protestant' characteristics. The letters contain autobiographical notes, unpublished comments on the Buddhist concepts of Suffering and Rebirth, and a curious plan to invite Nyanaponika to Israel.

Asaf Federman graduated Haifa University in 2002 and holds an MA in Buddhist Studies from the University of Bristol. He wrote his PhD thesis in the department of psychology at Warwick University and is currently an Early Career Fellow at the Institute of Advance Study (IAS) in the same university.

Introduction

Between the years 1956 and 1962 the Buddhist monk Nyanaponika Thera and the Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion have met and exchanged numerous letters. Their correspondence is published here for the first time and reveals the nature of their unique intellectual relationship. It shows that the Israeli Prime Minister's was interested in Buddhist matters above and beyond what is usually acknowledged in Israel's historiography, and that Nyanaponika was actively seeking involvement in making Buddhism available in Israel. Publishing these letters is an opportunity to get a glimpse into a rather forgotten aspect of a Buddhist scholar-monk who had an enormous impact on modern Buddhist discourse.

The letters contain chapters, almost Buddhist sermons, on two topics that were important to Ben-Gurion, and are important to many who encounter Buddhism for the first time: the first Noble Truth, and Rebirth. In addition, they contain a curious exchange of letters about a planned visit to Israel, a visit that eventually did not take place due to rather mundane circumstances that are described in the letters themselves (below).

The purpose of this article is to bring the letters more or less as they are, with only a few introductory comments. I would like, however, to acknowledge those who made this work possible. I obtained these documents, and many more, from Mrs. Shobrook (now Dr. Shobrook) when I visited Sri Lanka in 2006. Shobrook, a British psychologist who resided in Kandy for a number of years, convinced the Buddhist Publication Society (BPS) to photocopy for her some documents from Nyanaponika's legacy. As she describes it, some of them are already in a poor condition and may deteriorate in the tropical climate. The photocopies were delivered to her brother in Israel, from whom I received them eventually. Some, but not all, of the letters are also found in the Ben-Gurion Heritage Archive, and other documents from which I quote at the end of this article are kept in Kibbutz Givat Haim Ihud, Israel, in the archive of the Feniger family. I wish to thank Ven. Nyanatusita, the editor in chief of the BPS, Dr. Shobrook and Mrs. Tamar Bar-Ilan Feniger for allowing me to read and reproduce the documents.

Ben-Gurion's interest in Buddhism

The Zionist leader and Israel's first prime minister David Ben-Gurion had complex relations with religion in general and with Judaism in particular. On the one hand he is known as the architect of the *Status Quo*, influencing the passage of laws favorable to the Orthodox-religious community. On the other hand, on a personal and intellectual level, Ben-Gurion rejected the authority of Rabbinical laws, did not observe religious holidays and was proud to have never set a foot in an Israeli synagogue (Zameret, 1999). To that we may now add an engagement with Buddhism, above and beyond what has been acknowledged in Israel's historiography. This engagement is described in some details in a series of letters that Ben-Gurion exchanged with the scholar-monk Nyanaponika Thera between 1956 and 1962. These letters are published here for the first time.

Ben-Gurion himself was not an intellectual although he had close and often charged relations with Israel's intellectual milieu (Keren, 1983). His relations with Buddhism, it is suggested, should be understood in this context. In Buddhism he saw a system very similar to his vision of Judaism, and yet different enough as to articulate the uniqueness of the modern Jewish situation. This was supported by the Theravādin version that Ben-Gurion encountered through Nyanaponika Thera. It was precisely Protestant Buddhism that seemed so familiar to Ben-Gurion whose version of Judaism had 'Protestant' characteristics.

Ben-Gurion saw Judaism as an ancient system of universal ethics that should be learned from direct reading in the old scriptures. He rejected the authority of Rabbinical law (*Halakha*), and famously organized a Bible (*Mikra*) reading group at his house. For him, true religion had nothing to do with ritual and custom, and true spiritual meaning was to be achieved through direct ethical engagement and the study of scripture. He envisioned a new Jewish Man in the land of Israel, disconnected from the irrelevant intellectual setting of Exile, and reconnected to what he saw as the real roots: the teachings of the prophets. In this light, he understood both Judaism and Buddhism as 'teachings' and ethics. It is possible, although this is not explicitly mentioned in the correspondence below, that the rise of Buddhism as national religion, restoring past glories, made it particularly receptive to a modern Jewish mind.

Nyanaponika's Protestant Buddhism is expressed in the letters in several places. He vigorously tries to defend the concept of rebirth by appealing to science and modern philosophy;¹ he presents meditation as a lay practice that brings mundane benefits;² and expresses his wish that Buddhist literature becomes available in Israel's vernacular.³ In his first letter he even expresses the wish that more people in Israel would either adopt the Buddhist religion, or at least find the solace in Buddhist teachings and meditation.⁴ As Gombrich has demonstrated, this duality of religion that also transcends religion, is characteristic of Protestant Buddhism (Gombrich, 1988: 199ff.). Nyanaponika was also a member of the *Amarapura Nikaya*, whose monks originally lead the protesting reaction to Christianity (Gombrich, 1988: 179), and his views betray his background and the *zeit geist* in 1950s Ceylon.

The correspondence between the two is rich and deserves detailed analysis that could not be achieved in this space. The exchange of questions and answers between 'his excellency', as Nyanaponika addresses him, and the scholar-monk, echoes the ancient genre of the *Milinda-pañhā*, or *Ben-Hamelekh ve-Hanazir* ('The Prince and the Monk') – two books that are mentioned in the letters themselves.⁵ The 'king' here, however, did not show signs of full conversion at any time. It is doubtful that Nyanaponika sought to actually *convert* Ben-Gurion, at least not in the Judeo-Christian sense of the term, and Ben-Gurion himself never seems to have thought of abandoning Judaism. Nevertheless, he definitely saw no problem in engaging in Buddhist doctrinal debates, meditation, and did not hesitate to express great admiration for the Buddha.

¹ Buddhist Publication Society Archive (hereafter, BPSA): 26 February 1962 & 25 April 1962 below. Cf. McMahan, 2004

² BPSA: 21 August 1956 below. Cf. Gombrich, 1988: 191

³ BPSA: 21 August 1956 below. Cf. Ibid.: 184

⁴ BPSA: 26 August 1956.

⁵ For more information about this text and its complex relation with its Buddhist origin see Gottheil and Jacobs, 1906: 536.

Nyanaponika's Interest in Israel

Nyanaponika Thera was born in Germany in 1901 to a Jewish family with the name Siegmund (Shlomo) Feniger. As he indicates in one of the letters, he lost his job when the Nazis came to power, and managed to leave to Austria with his mother.⁶ Later, he brought her from Austria to Sri-Lanka just before the occupation of Austria in 1939. His childhood and youth communities all disappeared during the war. By the 1950s there were no Jews left in his parent's village, and Nyanaponika, who spent the war years in an internment camp in India, seem to have lost all contacts with his friends and family. There is no reason to doubt that he has lived happily as a monk without too many ties to his past. However, when meeting Ben-Gurion in Rangoon in 1961, he heard from one of the delegates that his cousin Jizchak Feniger lived in Israel. They later exchanged many letters, and Feniger became instrumental in the negotiation around the plan to visit Israel.

Ben Gurion invited Nyanaponika to visit Israel, but committed to covering on part of the expenses. This was certainly a result of his charged relations with Jewish orthodox circles: as the prime minister he could not officially invite a non-Jewish religious delegation. Somewhat ironically to the situation of Buddhism in Ceylon, there was a serious concern that such official invitation to Israel would be interpreted as an invitation of a Buddhist mission. Nyanaponika's visit had to be private. However, his main connection in Israel, his cousin Jizchak Feniger, was a member of a Kibbutz, a collective community which did not allow individual money. The cousins eventually never met.

In his first letter to Ben-Gurion in 1956 Nyanaponika mentions his close friend, Max Kreutzberger, with whom he lost contact during the War. To his delight, in 1960 he receives a letter from the Leo Baeck Institute, gently inquiring if he, the Buddhist monk, had ever been called Feniger.⁷ Shalom Adler-Rudel, the author of that letter, indicates that he was reminded of 'an acquaintance ... a Mr. Feniger who

⁶ BPSA: 26 August 1956.

⁷ BPSA: 27 January 1960. This was a reply to a letter sent by Nyanaponika to Prof. Ernst Simon (then, Prof. of Education in the Hebrew University) that was not found in the archive.

left Berlin for Ceylon in 1935' and later informs him that his old friend Max lives in New York. Between 1968 and 1981 Max's house in Switzerland became the 'base camp' for Nyanaponika's annual visits to Europe (Bodhi, 1995: 16), which was evidently much more tolerant towards Buddhist 'missionaries' than Israel.

What Led to the Correspondence

It is not clear what sparked Ben-Gurion's initial interest in Buddhism. The first mention of Buddhism in his diary is from 1954.⁸ He wrote that he had met Prof. Narendra Deva, and that 'the old man is well versed in Buddhism'. At the time he clearly had some knowledge of Buddhism, because in 1952 he had written to Dr. Emanuel Olsvanger encouraging him to translate the Upaniṣads, and asking whether he knew Pāli as well.⁹

Ben-Gurion was an avid reader, and even more so an avid collector of books. This probably sparked his interest in the first place, as a number of documents suggest. The Burmese Prime Minister U Nu visited Israel in 1955 and the two leaders became close friends. Their friendship certainly influenced Ben-Gurion's interest. U Nu, a dedicated Buddhist himself, sent Ben-Gurion some books on Buddhism from London after his visit. This, apparently, was not enough. In June 1956 he met with an Israeli lieutenant-colonel who was on his way to Japan, and deposited with him a list of books. Another Israeli official who received the list in Japan was unable to locate any of them. He mentioned the problem to the Ceylonese ambassador to Japan, and the latter suggested that Ben-Gurion would approach the Ceylonese Prime Minister directly.¹⁰ At this point this story meets ours. Nyanaponika's first letter to Ben-Gurion

⁸ Ben-Gurion Heritage Archive (hereafter: BGHA), file: Diary, 21 October 1954.

⁹ A short collection of Sanskrit and Pali texts was published in Hebrew in 1960, and was dedicated to Ben-Gurion.

¹⁰ BGHA, file: Correspondence, 5 June 1956.

followed up from that official request to the Ceylonese government, and marks the beginning of a seven-year correspondence.¹¹

The letters are brought here in chronological order, with some necessary omissions, and with minor corrections. The content is divided into two sections, corresponding to two intervals of exchange: **August 1956 to January 1957**, a period that ends with Nyanaponika's 'Notes on the Buddhist Concept of Suffering' which is published here for the first times; and **January 1962 to October 1962**, which contains long comments on the Buddhist concept of 'rebirth' and an account of the unsuccessful attempts to bring Nyanaponika to Israel. In between, the prime minister and the monk have met in Rangoon in December 1961, while Ben-Gurion was visiting U Nu.

1956 to 1957: About the Concept of Suffering

21 August 1956¹²

Your Excellency,

May I first introduce myself as a Buddhist monk of a Jewish origin, born in Germany. My late parents were Eastern Jews, born in Galizia (Austria). I am 55 years of age, and entered the Buddhist Monastic Order (Sangha) in Ceylon 20 years ago under the well-known German monk-scholar Nyanatiloka Mahathera. I am now a citizen of Ceylon.

A few days ago, a Government official told me that his department had received a request of yours for Buddhist literature... I request that you kindly inform me of your wishes, and I shall do my best to obtain these books for you through my lay friends here (we Buddhist monks do not possess or handle money).

In December 1954, when I went to Burma as a delegate to a Buddhist conference, I had the pleasure to meet in Rangoon the then Minister of Israel, Mr. David Hacohen, who received me very friendly. I was very happy, indeed, when he

¹¹ The existence of a Buddhist monk of Jewish decent in Ceylon was probably unknown to Ben-Gurion, although it is possible that U Nu has told him about Nyanaponika. The monk and the Burmese prime minister were both active in the 6th Buddhist council meeting in Burma between 1954 and 1956, and they might have met.

¹² All letters are from the Buddhist Publication Society archive (BPSA) and published with the Society's permission. As some of the letters are in a poor condition, I have occasionally consulted drafts and copies in the Ben Gurion Heritage Archive (BGHA).

told me that you are earnestly interested in the study of Buddhism. ... From Ceylon I had sent you some English books of mine, and a friend had sent you English books of the Venerable Nyanatiloka. This was in the beginning of 1955. I shall be obliged to you for kindly letting me know whether all these books have reached you safely, so that I may inform the senders who have offered them to you.

I was deeply moved by the fact that even in these grave days for Eretz Israel and with your great burden of responsibility, your interest in the Buddha's teaching has not slackened, as I conclude from the circumstance of your recent letter to Ceylon. It is my firm conviction that, to one who understands the essence of the Dhamma and tries to apply certain of its methods of mental training, it will bestow an increased inner strength and capacity to deal with the task of every-day life. Insight into reality will bestow detachment. Detachment will bestow greater calm and strength for circumspective action, because it will ward off anxiety and passion which may cloud the mind and lead to wrong decisions. Detachment born of insight will not lessen the devotion and zeal given to any worthwhile work in hand; on the contrary, it will create a reserve of strength, because one will no longer identify oneself entirely with any given situation. In the deepest recesses of one's mind one will stand above it, and that will remove anxiety or fear. As to the practical results of Buddhist mental training, I feel sure that U Nu, the then Prime Minister of Burma, during his visit to Israel, will have mentioned to you "satipaṭṭhāna", the method of developing mindfulness and clarity of consciousness, which is now widely practiced in Burma. That great and lovable leader of Burma had given to it his enthusiastic and active support. It is the same method described in my book "*The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*" of which I had sent to you the first edition. Under separate cover, by boat mail, I am sending you the second edition of it, which has come out recently. I shall gladly send further copies of the book to those in Israel who might be interested.

Among our Jewish people that has undergone and still undergoes so much suffering and yet preserved its inner strength and creativeness, there might be some to whom the Buddha's teaching of the Deliverance from Suffering will appeal. There will be others who are definitely lost to their inherited religion, and to whom Buddhism may offer an alternative to ethical and philosophical materialism. I should therefore greatly welcome it, if the Venerable Nyanatiloka's classic little book "The Word of the Buddha" will find a translator into Hebrew. Should you know of anyone interested in doing it, I shall be greatly obliged to you for passing on my suggestion. To my great regret, my own knowledge of Hebrew is limited to the biblical lessons of childhood, and a short course in modern Hebrew in adolescence when I was a member of the Zionist movement. I may have forgotten most of it. I shall also be obliged, if one of your friends, perhaps from the University, could kindly inform me what literature on Buddhism has been published in Israel in Hebrew or any other language, books or articles.

May I finally be allowed to indulge in some reminiscences which may serve to you as information about my "Jewish connection". Having chosen the book trade as my profession, I was working in the "Jüdischer Verlag" in Berlin, in the early twenties, at the time of Dr. Victor Jacobson and Dr. Kaznelson.¹³ ... I was a member

¹³ Siegmund Kaznelson, born in Warsaw 1893, founded the Jewish press that was closed when the Nazis came to power. He emigrated to Israel in 1937.

of “Hapoel Hatzair”, at the time of Arlosoroff. I left it when Buddhism became a dominant influence upon me, because I felt that I should give undivided devotion to one of these great causes: Zionism or Buddhism. I continued to pay my Shekel. When Hitler came to power, I worked in the “Reichsvertretung der deutschen Juden”, under Dr. Max Kreutzberger, a friend of my school years. (I did not hear from him for more than 10 years. I wonder whether he is still alive.¹⁴). In December 1935, I left Germany together with my widowed mother whom I left in Vienna with her brother and sister, and I proceeded to Ceylon with her permission, to enter the Buddhist Order. When the Nazis invaded Austria, I obtained a permit to Ceylon for her, and she arrived here timely before the outbreak of the war.

It would be wrong to intrude your scanty leisure time still longer by this letter, and I shall conclude.

This is a fateful time for Eretz Israel. I shall remember Israel and you in my meditation. May the peace and prosperity of Israel be preserved, and your efforts to that end be successful!

May you be happy,
Nyanaponika Thera.

1 October 1956

Dear Nyanaponika,

I am most grateful for your letter of 21 August. I had heard from friends of mine that you were formerly a member of Hapoel Hatzair in Germany.¹⁵ And while I am myself deeply interested in Buddhism, it is still not easy for me to understand the stages of the long road that has brought you from Socialist Zionism in Germany to the contemplative life of a Buddhist Thera. Truly, the ways of the spirit are unfathomable. I am glad to see that you still take an interest in Eretz Israel (we have now dropped the “Eretz”), and that we have many friends in common. We share also our veneration for one of the noblest of humanity’s teachers – the Buddha – though I do not go as far as you do.

When U Nu was here, he told me about the mental training practiced in Burma, and invited me to spend at least 45 days at the Contemplative Centre in Burma – which I may still do some time in the future. What I cannot accept, though, is the first noble truth of the Buddha, that life is suffering. There is certainly suffering

¹⁴ Max Kreutzberger was still alive. A letter from 27 January 1960 (BPSA) tells Nyanaponika that Max is the director of the Leo Baeck Institute and lives in New York.

¹⁵ Hapoel Hatzair, literally ‘the young labour’, was a Zionist socialist (though not communist) political movement founded in Israel in 1905. It emphasized the importance of agriculture, and recruited young European Jews. It was not exactly a Jewish “self-defence movements” as some have had it (Bodhi, 1995: 16)

in life; but to me life is joy and creative effort as well. This remark is in no way meant to detract from the greatness of the Buddha of his lofty teaching.

I did receive from Germany a large parcel of Buddhist literature, and I thank you, and the friends who sent it, most warmly. I know only very little German, and my Buddhist reading has been done mainly in English. But unfortunately, I have not been able to obtain, in England or America, all the books on the subject for which I am looking. If it is not too much trouble for you, I would be immensely grateful if you could help me to get some of the following:

From the Pali Text Translation Society series:

1. Compendium of philosophy (abhidhammatha saghaha)¹⁶
5. Points of Controversy (Kattha vattha)
6. Manual of Mystic (Yayavanara's Manual)
9. The Expositor (athasalini Vol. II)
11. The path of purity (visuddhi magga, vol . I)
13. Samyutta Nikhaya, Vol. III
14. “ “ “ IV
16. “ “ “ V
17. Visuddhimagga Vol. II
18. Cula wamsa, Vol III
26. Anguttara Nikaya, Vol. IV.
27. “ “ Vol. V.
28. Debates on Controversy.

Also, from the series “Sacred Books of the Buddhists”:

7. Minor Anthologies, Vol. I
9. “ “ Vol. III
14. Duyavadana [correction in BG handwriting].

I have the rest of these two collections.

Same time, when I relinquish (or am thrown out of) office, I hope to visit Burma and Ceylon. May a Buddhist monk visit Israel? It would give me the greatest pleasure to receive you here – any time you can come.

Yours sincerely,

David Ben-Gurion.

¹⁶ Typos here and elsewhere on the list are in the original.

26 January 1957

Your Excellency,

... I postponed my reply until the political situation had settled to some extent, allowing you to pay attention to personal affairs.¹⁷ ...

It is a great happiness to me that our common bond is not only that of race, but also veneration for the Buddha. The fact that his personality and teaching can be appreciated by men of so different position and aims in life, illustrates its world-wide significance and its undogmatic character. Your remark that to you “life is joy and creative effort as well”, is not contradicted by the First Noble Truth where the term “suffering” has a much wider compass than physical and mental pain. I take the liberty of offering a few additional comments on that subject, in the enclosure.

It is very kind of you to suggest my visiting Israel. It would certainly give me the greatest pleasure to meet you and to see Israel. There is no objection against doing so, from the point of view of our monastic rules; though some of our observances might create some “technical” difficulties which, however, will not be impossible of solution. As present, however, I hesitate to leave Ceylon, since my Teacher and Abbot, the Venerable Nyanatiloka, is old and ailing. I shall have to watch his condition for some time, before I can decide.¹⁸

I was happy to note that you consider to visit Ceylone and Burma in the future, when your time permits. Should that happen before I can visit Israel, I shall be grateful to you for having me informed of your coming. I believe that, also for a non-Buddhist, a period of meditative training in Burma as suggested to you by U Nu, will be profitable. A “strict course of practice”, extending over several weeks, is, however, rather strenuous and taxes the patience. The appendix in my book “The Hearth of Buddhist Meditation” will give you an idea of it.

As to a Hebrew translation of Buddhist scriptures: there might be no person available who knows both Pali and Hebrew. But, I believe, it will be quite sufficient for a first publication of that nature, if translation of, let us say, the *Dhammapada* and the “*Word of the Buddha*” (Nyanatiloka) are based on the English and German versions of these books. If that is ever considered, myself (and surely U Nu) will certainly be glad to give any assistance that should be required.

I happen to remember a link between medieval Hebrew literature and Buddhism which might be of interest (or already known) to you. It was in the very first time of my Buddhist studies, more than 30 years ago, that I read a German book by Dr. Nathan Weislovits, “*Prinz und Derwisch. Ein indischer Roman enthaltend die Jugendgeschichte Buddha’s in hebraischer Darstellung aus dem Mittelalter, nebst einer Vergleichung der arabischen und griech. Paralleltexte*” (München 1890). I have still my old but rather sketchy notes on it. The book deals with Ibn Chisdai’s “*Ben-Hamelech we-hanasir*” [The Prince and the Monk], which is based on the stories

¹⁷ He refers to the Suez Channel war. UK and France withdrew their troops four days earlier on the 22 January 1957.

¹⁸ Nyanatiloka Mahathera died eight months later in 28 May 1957.

brought by Arabic travelers from India. These again had led, as is well known, to the creation of those fictive Catholic saints, Barlaam and Josaphat. As far as I can make out from my notes, there is in the Hebrew book more and clearer allusions to Buddhist doctrines (apart from the life story) than in other versions. Even the way of expression reminds in some cases of the *Dhammapada* and other Buddhist texts. When I read Weislovits' book I had not yet had a very wide knowledge of Buddhist literature. Now I might find more parallels.

May I, in conclusion, express my hope that recent political events may have brought to Israel greater security against full-fledged war, so that the country may turn wholeheartedly to his peaceful tasks.

With my best wishes for Your Excellency's well-being and work,

Nyanponika Mahathera.

*

Notes on the Buddhist Concept of Suffering

The first of the four Noble Truth proclaimed by the Buddha, deals with the fact of Suffering. It is quite frequent that the term "suffering" is taken in too narrow a sense, as extending to physical and mental pain only. Therefore the Buddha is thought to have ignored or minimized the existence of joy and happiness in the world. But actually these too are included, as it may be seen from the formula of the first Noble Truth which concludes: "in brief, the five groups of existence as objects of clinging (*upādāna-kkhandha*) are suffering". These five groups comprise the entire world, and one of them, the Group of Feeling, includes all types of feeling, pleasant, painful and indifferent. The meaning intended by the term "Suffering" with the First Noble Truth, is unsatisfactoriness. The Ven. Nyanatiloka writes in his "*Word of the Buddha*" (11th ed., p.14):

In one of the books of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, the *Yamaka*, which is chiefly devoted to a clarification and demarcation of terms, Suffering as a feeling or sensation, is expressly differentiated from the Suffering meant in the First Truth which is the wider term comprising the former.

In two discourses, included in the *Anguttara-Nikāya* ("gradual Sayings"), the Buddha expressly stated that the fact of happiness was not ignored by him:

"I went in quest of the gratification* which the world (can give) what there is of gratification in the world, I obtain, and to what extent there is gratification in the world, I have well understood in wisdom." ... "I went in the quest of the world's inadequacy **... in quest of the world's (chances of) escape (continuation as before)."

Anguttara-Nikāya (Gradual sayings), book of the threes, Discourse 101

* alternative reading: satisfaction, enjoyment.

** alternative reading: misery

“If there would not be gratification in the world, beings in the world would not have greed for it, but because there is gratification in it, therefore beings in the world have greed for it.

“If there would not be inadequacy (misery) beings in the world, beings in the world would not be disgusted with (or turn away from) it; but because...

“If there would be not be an escape from the world, beings in the world could not escape.”

Id., Discourse 102.

Three kinds of sufferings (*dukkha*) are mentioned in the texts:

1. Suffering proper (*dukkha-dukkha*): suffering as a feeling of physical and mental pain. Mental pain includes: grief, regrets, disappointment, displeasure, anger etc. but also emotional compassion in individual cases and concerning the world's suffering in general; the bitterness of feeling that arises when confronted again and again with the stupidity and selfishness in the world.
2. Suffering through change (*vipariṇāma-dukkha*) refers to pleasant feeling which is subject to impermanence.
3. Suffering inherent in all formations (*saṅkhāra-dukkha*), i.e., in all conditioned phenomena. It refers to all perceptions and mental processes connected with indifferent feelings, and to the fact that all conditioned things (*saṅkhāra*) are subject to the Law of Rise and Fall. This law applies not only to personal experiences and achievements, but to the destiny of races, nations, cultures, and of planets and world-systems. Any disenchantment, sadness, or frustration arising from the contemplation, or experience of, that fact will partake all three types of suffering.

The nobler the mind, the greater will be the awareness of, and the sensitivity for, universal suffering. The keener that awareness becomes, the more weight will the second and third type of suffering receive in one's mind. It will become increasingly clearer that the basic causes of that threefold Suffering are Greed, Hatred and Ignorance, in all their degrees of intensity and variety of aspects. They are called by the Buddha “the roots of evil” (*akusala-mūla*).

If one contemplates “suffering through change”, one will naturally first think of the fact that pleasures and happiness are short-lived, that all of us are subject to illness, old-age and death. But there is another aspect which is of, at least, equal importance: also our own moral and intellectual level is subject to change. Here to, there is no security. That change may happen already during life-time. We notice it sometimes in the case of old friends or acquaintances, though they themselves may not be aware of it (and it is one of the more poignant kinds of pain: seeing old friends coarsening or deteriorating). But, by necessity, such a change will happen to us at some time or another, in the course of our future lives, unless we reach the stage where relapse into certain faults have become impossible and final liberation is assured. Until then, there will be in man the god and the beast, the angel and the devil, the sage and the fool – all of which wait for an opportunity of “self-expression”! It is for this reason, that this world of ours is such a dangerous place, making it advisable to work for final liberation without delay. Only when attaining to the first stage towards final liberation (Holiness: *arahatta*) i.e., beginning from so-called Stream-

entry (*sotāpatti*), the fundamental defilements of our mind are not merely temporarily suppressed, coveted or weakened, but finally uprooted. (See “Word of the Buddha”, page 5)¹⁹ Until then, our moral and intellectual character may well deteriorate, gradually or suddenly.

But, from the Buddhist point of view, the insight into these three kinds of Suffering, does not invalidate or discourage an active life directed by selflessness and wisdom. On the contrary, an understanding of the Truth of Suffering, in the way briefly indicated here, will give additional strength and courage. If there is no illusion as to what extent gratification of one’s desires is possible in this world (see the quotation above), there will be less discouragement, if one’s effort fail, and more courage to start anew.

The Buddha was called “one who teaches the efficacy of action” (*kammavādi*, *kiriya-vādi*). In the *Dhammapada*, he warns against belittling the importance of good action; it has accumulative effect on the mind (Dhp. 122). He was also called “one who praises energy and manly effort”. Once he spoke to his monks:

“It behoves a man of good family who has gone forth with confidence, to endeavour, thinking: ‘let skin, sinew, and bone remain, let flesh and blood dry up in this body of mine, but there will be no stopping of endeavour in me before I attain what is attainable by manly strength, endeavour and power.’ Infected with evil the indolent man lives unhappy, and he fails to reach his goal. But the man of energy lives happily, free from evil, and reaches his goal ... Endeavour therefore to attain what you have not yet attained, and to realize what you have not yet realized. ... Monks, you should train yourselves thinking thus: ‘Through regard for a person’s own good, it is proper to strive diligently; through regards for other’s own good, it is proper to strive diligently; through regard to both a person’s own good and the good of others, it is proper to strive diligently.’” (*Samyutta-Nikāya* XII, 22)

With that spirit, it is not surprising that Zen Buddhism influenced for some time strongly the knightly class of the Samurai in Japan.

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The doctrine of Kamma offers the basis for an autonomous ethic of self-responsibility. So, on the one hand, it is “aristocratic”, in the noblest sense (“tamed by Truth, protected by shame and self-respect”); on the other hand, it is in accordance with the true spirit of democracy, by educating man towards voluntary observance of the postulates of individual and social ethics.

¹⁹ In another draft of this page, found in the BPSA, Nyanaponika indicates that this point is connected to issues discussed in his article *Why We Should Make an End of Suffering* which was sent to Ben-Gurion by ‘registered sea mail’. The article appears in Nyanaponika, 1994.

*

Buddhism has stimulated creative work in all spheres of culture and in all countries reached by it. Art, literature and science flourished wherever it went: in India, China, Japan, Tibet, Indonesia, Siam, Burma, and Ceylon.

*

As to the place of joy and happiness in the Buddhist psychology: against doctrines of self-mortification saying that happiness (of liberation) has to be reached through pain, the Buddha maintained that the happiness of *Nibbāna* is to be won through happiness (*sukhena sukhṃ adhigantabbam*). Sadness, grief, etc. are regarded as karmically unwholesome states of mind (*akusala*). Happiness is said to be a condition for successful concentration of the mind. Happiness (*sukha*) and joyful interest (*pīti*) are mental factors present in meditative absorption (*jhāna*) and they are Factor of Enlightenment (*bojjhaṅga*).

1961 to 1962: Visiting Israel and the Concept of Rebirth

Ben-Gurion did not reply to Nyanaponika's letter about the concept of suffering (above), and it seems that communication between the two was lost.²⁰ In 29 October 1957 Ben-Gurion and other members of the government were wounded by a hand grenade thrown in the Israeli parliament. Nyanaponika heard the news, and on 1 November sent another letter wishing Ben-Gurion quick recovery, and reminding him about the books he had sent. He received no reply from Ben-Gurion himself, but an acknowledgment of receipt from his secretary.

Communication between them has nevertheless been resumed when Ben-Gurion had his much longed for visit to Burma in December 1961. As Nyanaponika describes it, their meeting in Rangoon was an "unplanned coincidence",²¹ although they were both invited to dinner parties and held private meetings. Ben-Gurion's dryly describes these events in his diary as follows: "9:00 meeting at my residence with Francis and Nyanaponika (arguing about Buddhism)... 19:00 Dinner at the ambassador's – arguing with U Nu about Buddhism (rebirth)".²² 'Francis' is the

²⁰ Ben-Gurion also did not entirely internalize Nyanaponika's explanation as in 1959 he expressed again a similar view – that Buddhism is pessimistic – in a television broadcast of a debate with U Nu. But this, of course, could have been part of his unspoken obligation to publicly 'prove' that Judaism was superior. The broadcast was part of the television series "Small World" by Edward R. Morrow. It was filmed on 26 May 1959 and was broadcasted in October 1959. A Hebrew transcript of that conversation is available in print in BGHA, file: protocols, 1 January 1960.

²¹ BGHA, File: Correspondence, 24 February 1962.

²² BGHA, File: Diary, 7 December 1961.

Buddhist activist Francis Story, who will become central to the discussion of Nyanaponika's visit: he was instrumental for attending the monk while travelling, but his presence would increase the risk of them being seen as a religious mission.

A few days after meeting with Nyanaponika in Rangoon, Ben-Gurion began his 8 days meditation course, which was held in U Nu's residence, while the Burmese prime minister left to Mount Popa. Presumably, the visit to Burma, the meditation, and the meeting with Buddhist scholars, sparked again his interest in Buddhism. In 17 January 1962 Nyanaponika receives two Israeli officials in the Forest Hermitage in Kandy: Mr. Elath and Mr. Barnea. He tells them about his meeting with Ben-Gurion, and sends with them a copy of the newly published *Vimuttimaga*, two books by Francis Story and 38 issues of *The Wheel*. They also discuss the invitation to visit Israel.

In order to keep the visit as private as possible, the prime minister refused to make an official invitation, and promised to cover only the cost of travelling back from Israel to Ceylon. Ben-Gurion alludes to the reasons behind his decision in his letter of 23 March 1962 in which he mentions 'zealots' who 'do not scruple to disseminate slanders'. He refers to Orthodox Jews in Israel who hurried to criticize his 'religious' activities in Burma. For them, there was nothing scientific, intellectual or secular in Ben-Gurion's meditation. The Israeli press too 'celebrated' the prime minister's seclusion in a Buddhist monastery²³ to the extent that his office had to publish an official denial of the allegations.²⁴

Details about the 'argument' that Ben-Gurion had mentioned in his diary are explained in his letter of 9 February 1962 (below). In a nutshell, it was about whether the teaching of rebirth was compatible with the teaching on impermanence. Ben-Gurion's initial argument – that it was not – contained a classic Protestant Buddhist move: 'according to the original teachings of the Buddha, Rebirth is impossible'.²⁵ But the discussion soon diverged from that into the meaning of impermanence and self-identity. Nyanaponika's reply is detailed, and so is the counter reply by Ben-Gurion.

²³ 'Ben Gurion will stay in a Buddhist monastery' (*Ha'aretz*: 25 October 1961); 'Ben Gurion will study in a Buddhist Monastery in Burma' (*Ha'aretz*: 2 November 1961); 'Ben Gurion will study the Buddhist "observation" technique under the supervision of the Burmese prime minister U Nu' (*Ha'aretz*: 5 December 1961).

²⁴ 'The Prime Minister's Office wishes to announce that the reports of Ben Gurion's seclusion in a monastery, as published in some newspapers, are mere fabrications. Ben-Gurion did not seclude himself in a monastery but resided throughout his stay in Rangoon in the Burmese prime minister's house. There, for one week, Ben-Gurion has met three Buddhist scholars and discussed with them matters of Buddhist philosophy and ethics.' (*Davar*: 24 December 1961). The truth, of course, was somewhere in between the reports and the official announcement.

²⁵ BPSA: 9 February 1962. Original underline.

24 January 1962

Your Excellency,

...

It was very great pleasure to me and to Mr. Francis Story to have met you in Rangoon. I hope that you found your spell of meditation a beneficial and stimulating experience. I can hardly hope that you will find the leisure to write me about it.

I greatly value your very kind invitation to me to visit Israel. I would certainly and sincerely be happy to do so (from personal liking and objective interest) but among the handicaps is also the fact that, as a Buddhist monk, I am dependent on my lay supporters for any expenditure, also that of travel costs. Yet I shall try my best to make at least a short visit possible.

With my very best wishes for your well-being and for Israel's peace and progress,

Yours very sincerely,

Nynaponika Thera.

9 February 1962

Dear Nyanaponika Thera,

I have received the booklets and the book which you mentioned in your letter of 24.1.62 and I have no words with which to express to you my profound thanks.

Now I must tell you about the discussion which I had with U Nu after I met you in Rangoon. What surprised me was the conclusion of the argument; this is what took place:

One evening after a dinner given by the Israel Ambassador, I discussed several principles of Buddhism, and in particular that of Rebirth, with U Nu. I claimed that according to the original²⁶ teachings of the Buddha, Rebirth is impossible since one of the principles of the Buddha is Non-permanence (*anicca*), and since man changes from time to time – how is it possible for him to be reborn? U Nu gave me no answer. I said to him “Since you are going away for eight days and I shall remain in your house for eight days with free time at my disposal, I shall pursue the Suttas of the Buddha again and if I find a basis for your opinion, I shall tell you when you return from Mount Popa.”

During my days of meditation, I pursued Buddha's discourse and I found that he says at the end of the Dhamma-Kakka-Ppavatana-Sutta – “This is my last

²⁶ Underline in origin

existence. There will now be no rebirth for me.”²⁷ This proves that he believes in Rebirth, and this is the first Sutta after the Buddha’s Enlightenment.

When U Nu returned he came to see me immediately, and I told him that in the Buddha’s discourses I had found proof that he was right and that the Buddha believed in Rebirth. U Nu cut me short and said that it had become clear to him that there is, in fact, no Rebirth. How could Rebirth be possible, said U Nu, if Ben-Gurion and U Nu were different an hour ago to what they are now – it is impossible that they should be “reborn”. The English translator said U Nu – did not understand the Pali source, and, therefore, translates it incorrectly. In Pali, Rebirth is not mentioned and the word Rebirth in Buddha’s discourses is an incorrect translation. This is U Nu’s opinion.

Now I am completely confused.

Was U Nu right as regards the Sutta when he said that the translation is incorrect, or not? In the meantime I have read the booklet by Francis Story on “The Case for Rebirth” in which he endeavours to prove rebirth by scientific facts and arguments.

I myself do not believe in Rebirth, but I am very interested to know what the opinion of the Buddha was in this matter. It is clear to me that the Indians in Buddha’s time, and before and after him, believed in Rebirth. But I know that the Buddha refuted many things that were accepted among the Indians. What, in your opinion, was the Buddha’s position on the question of Rebirth?

And finally permit me to say that I should be very happy if you were to visit Israel, and that we should take upon ourselves the arrangements for the expenses of your stay and your return to Ceylon.

Please convey my regards to Mr. Francis Story.

With esteem, yours sincerely,

D. Ben-Gurion

26 February 1962

Your Excellency,

Many thanks for your very kind letter of Feb.9.

When reading in it of Prime Minister U Nu's opinion that "there is no rebirth" according to the Buddha's teachings, I was first as surprised as you were, or even more so. But from his reference to the fact that individuals "were different an hour ago to what they are now", I think we can safely conclude that his objection is against the term "rebirth" which he seems to identify (and wrongly so) with the

²⁷ Ben-Gurion read the translation of T.W. Rhys Davids in the *Sacred Books of the East* series ed. By Max Müller (1881) Vol.11. Later translations do not use the capital letter K in transcribing the Pali c.

"transmigration of a soul", or any other concept of an abiding Ego-entity. This, of course, is rejected by the Buddha and all schools of Buddhism. But the word 'rebirth' is an accepted, and quite acceptable, label for the Buddhist teachings concerned, and it should be understood, as all technical terms, "by definition", i.e. not by interpretation alien to the teaching concerned. Hence, if it is understood what "birth", pure and simple, without a "re-", means in Buddhism, there is no objection to rendering the Pāli word for it (*jāti*) by "rebirth" where it helps clarification. But in the "*Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta*", the Meaning is quite clear without adding the "re-" to "birth" and this first discourse of the Buddha certainly proves, as you rightly said, that the Buddha did teach rebirth (as defined by him). In the text the word "birth" is followed by the other term most frequently used in the early discourses for the doctrine of rebirth: "punabbhavo (= *puna + bhavo*), i.e., "again-becoming" or "renewed existence". Here is the literal translation:

Ayam antimā jāti; natthi dāni punabbhavo

This(is) last birth; There is not now again-becoming.

I feel pretty sure that U Nu's objection is against the idea of "transmigration" (and rightly so, but not against "rebirth without a soul" to which, as he certainly knows, there are hundreds of references in the Buddhist scriptures. A few relevant quotes are given, e.g., in *The Wheel No.9: Nyanatiloka, "Karma and Rebirth"*, pp.13-15. In the same booklet, on pp.7-12, the subject "rebirth without a soul", is dealt with; and also in Francis Story's "*Case for Rebirth*" on p.9f. - Important texts for the clarification of that subject are also "*Kindred Sayings*", Vol.II (*Nidāna-Samyutta*), *Suttas* 12, 17, 18.

Perhaps you will have occasion to pass on these references and the gist of my remarks to Prime Minister U Nu, without mentioning me. I would find it awkward to write to him about it, myself since my information about this "point of controversy" had come from you.

As to "rebirth without a soul", may I quote from Prof. C. J. Ducasse (who is regarded by some as the foremost contemporary American philosopher:

Thus to the question: What is it that could be supposed to be reborn? An intelligible answer may be returned by saying that it might be the core of positive and negative capacities and tendencies which we have called a man's individuality, as distinguished from his personality. And the fact might further be that, perhaps, as a result of persistent striving to acquire a skill or trait he desires, but for which he now has but little gift, aptitude for it, in future births would be generated and incorporated into his individuality. (*Is a Life after Death possible?* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1948)

Also his latest book has several references to that subject: "*The Belief in a Life after Death* (Charles C Thomas, Springfield, Ill. 1961), p.44 (last sentence) 55f., 122f. This book deserves to be recommended warmly also for its exceptionally thorough and lucid examinations of questions which are basic to the problem of Survival e.g., what is material, what is mental?

Again my thanks for so graciously extending to me your invitation to visit Israel, and for your kind willingness to make arrangements for my stay and return. At present I am not yet able to say when I can come, but shall inform you in time. From your letter I gather that I shall have to pay the travel cost from Ceylon to Israel, and shall meanwhile take inquiries about the expenses. If these are not too high, it is quite possible that friends here might see to it, though, as a monk, I cannot be fully sure on it. If, as you so kindly indicated to Mr. Francis Story personally, your invitation could also be extended to him, I would appreciate it for the following reasons: firstly, if he as a layman goes along with me, it will be easier for me to adhere to my monastic rules during travel to and stay in Israel; secondly, Francis Story is a much better speaker than I am ...

I wonder whether it may not be good that I come to Israel at a time when both the English translation of "*Ben hamelekh ve-Hanazir*" and the Hebrew translation of Pali texts (mentioned by you) have made some progress; in that case, I could perhaps give a bit of help in both undertakings, if required. But, of course, my visit need not wait for that.

Just to-day I had a letter from my cousin Jizchak Feniger of Givath Chajim, of whose existence I only learned in Rangoon, from a member of your party. This contact certainly adds another reason for my visit to Israel.

With my sincere esteem and my best wishes for your well-being,

Yours sincerely,

Nyanaponika Mahathera

p.s.

May I, in conclusion, relate a small but remarkable incident, Last year I had in my Hermitage the visit of one Dr. Shoshkes of New York. From a short talk it, appeared that, quite recently he had visited my parents' birth town, Bochnia in Galicia. There were no Jews left there, by the way. It is certainly a remarkable concatenation that he of all people should have found his way to Ceylon, in and a remote Hermitage met one who has family connections to that tiny town of Bochnia!

A reader of our Buddhist Publication Society, a Polish Jew living In Canada, and an enthusiastic Buddhist, wrote to me recently saying that Dr. Shoshkes had Written a nice article on his visit to Ceylon and to my hermitage, in the Yiddish paper "Der Tug" (New York).

It does seem to be significant and not a mere 'coincidence' that there was an accumulation of events that, linked me again to my Jewish past and foremost among those events, my meeting you in Rangoon by an unplanned coincidence of our visits to that city! I certainly welcome this re-linking with a past that had not been forgotten but had receded.

NP.

23 March 1962

Dear Nyanaponika Mahathera,

Thank you for your reply of 24 February. I read what you had to say about rebirth with great interest, but I must admit that I could not quite follow your explanations. Even if we assume that there is rebirth without a soul, it is inconceivable that there should not be some kind of identity between the person who is reborn and the person who has caused a new person to be born in his image. If there is no identity between the two, the words *gati* or *puna-bhava* become utterly meaningless. In Story's pamphlet on rebirth, he mentions a case of a child born in one place in Burma knowing the life-story of a man who lived elsewhere and died before his birth, which shows that the child is "that man". "That man" implies identity, and it makes no difference whether we say that he has been reborn with a "soul" or without a "soul". If the identity of the man who died is renewed in the person born, subsequently there is a continuity of identity, and it does not matter whether we call it "soul" or not.

In both these persons there is something existing, identical and abiding. Without something "abiding" there is no meaning in the words *puna-bhava* (again-becoming) and it seems to me that U Nu's argument which I myself used in my first discussion with him, the argument from the Buddhist principle of *anicca* (non-permanence), denies the possibility of rebirth. If the entity in question has no continuity of existence, but is subject to unceasing change, how can it return to its first state, so that the child who is born has the memory and the knowledge of the man who died before him?

Of course, I should be glad to see Mr. Francis Story in Israel, and I should undoubtedly enjoy a talk with him; perhaps he would succeed in bringing me to a clearer understanding of the problem of rebirth, which, in my humble opinion, is a contradiction of the original conception of the Buddha as I understand it. I am afraid, however, that a double visit would create the mistaken impression in this country that I was bringing you here to make converts to the Buddhist faith. Unfortunately, we have zealots in our midst who do not scruple to disseminate slanders, and in connection with my visit to Burma all sorts of absurd allegations were published, that I had abandoned my Jewish faith for Buddhism, had worshipped idolatrously in Buddhist temples, etc. If I were a private person, I would treat those foolish tales with the scorn and disgust they deserve, but to my regret I still hold an official position as a representative of my country and I have no desire to add oil to the flames. You will have every opportunity to address intimate gatherings on the doctrines of the Buddha, and I am confident that your cousin Yitzhak Feniger, will be of great assistance to you. You will also be able to meet scholars interested in the subject, like Professor Martin Buber and Professor Hugo Bergman.

The Hebrew translations of Buddhist texts in Pali will not be published in the near future, and I should not like you to postpone your visit until they appear.

I should be grateful if you could let me know as soon as possible the approximate date when you expect to come, so that I can plan my time accordingly.

Hoping to hear from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

David Ben-Gurion

25 April 1962

Your Excellency,

Many thanks for your kind letter of March 23. In this letter you say that “some kind of identity” and a “continuity of existence” (p.2) are necessary for the conception of rebirth. With that statement the Buddhist can only fully agree, since it is not in contradiction with the Buddhist teaching on Impermanence (*anicca*) as you seem to believe.

Impermanent or Change does not exclude the continuity of the processes concerned. The conditioned nature of change even requires casual continuity. Continuity, on its part, does not imply nor necessitate any underlying entity that endures unchanged. There is continuity of conditioned and conditioning processes. Similarly, ‘relative identity’ (“some kind of identity”, as you called it), does not imply the endurance of any abiding entity. Here I cannot do better than quote from prof. C.J. Ducasse’s “Nature, Mind, and Death” (the Open Court Publ. Company La Salle, Ill.):

“That the sense of identity depends on a gradualness of change in ourselves rather than on preservation unchanged of any specific part of ourselves, strikes one forcibly when he chances to find letters, perhaps, which he wrote thirty or forty years before. Many of them awaken no recollection whatsoever, even of the existence of the person to whom they were addressed or whom they mentioned, and it sometimes seems incredible also that the person who wrote the things they contain should be the same in any strict sense, but only continuous with the former person. The fact, as the Buddha insisted, is that one’s personality like everything else that exists in time, changes as time passes – some constituents of it remaining for shorter or longer periods, while others are being lost and other acquired. Yet because of the gradualness [2] and diverse speed of the changes between one’s earlier and one’s present personality, the sense of identity is at no time lacking.” (p.498)

Rebirth is due to the causal continuity effected by the rebirth-producing Karma(=volitional action) responsible for the rebirth, together with the secondary features (bodily and mental) associated with it, accounts for the relative identity with the subsequent rebirth; enables spontaneous or hypnotically induced recollections of former lives; and justifies declarations in Buddhist scriptures couched in conventional language, like “formerly, I was such and such a person”.

May I now elaborate some of my earlier remarks.

The Buddhist concept of Impermanence does not signify the disappearance of disconnected, separate particles or entities (in which Buddhism does not believe); such a notion would require a special creation or a miraculous origin of each new event. Nor does Buddhism accept the view that changes occur on an underlying substratum unchangeable in itself. No such substratum has been shown to exist. You say that “without something ‘abiding’ there is no meaning in the words *punabhava*

(again-becoming)”. But ‘becoming’ (as the word itself implies) is not static but dynamic; hence also ‘re-becoming’ or rebirth.

Though the dynamic conception of the world is as old as the Buddha and Herakleitos, and though it is the dominant feature of modern science and psychology, I fully appreciate that it is not easy to remain constantly aware of it in all one’s considerations since our language chiefly meant for the practical purpose of orientation and communication, is full of static terms.

Identity. It is only relative identity and relative diversity that we find in animate and inanimate nature. With regards to our very subject “rebirth”, this has been formulated in the “Questions of King Milinda” (*Milinda-pañhā*) as follows. Concerning him who is reborn it is said that “he is not the same nor another” (*na ca so na c’añño*).

There is a constant process of identifying and diversifying, assimilating and dissimilating. The relative identity in flux and the relative fluidity in the apparently compact has found classical exemplification in the modern theory of light which, for a full description of the facts involved, requires the concepts of both corpuscle and wave. It is this very mode of explaining reality by two complementary terms of relative validity, which appears in the above quote from the *Milinda-pañhā*. This illustrates how very “modern” the Buddhist world view is.

In conclusion, I wish to repeat that Buddhism does not deny relative identity in the present life time or an individual, nor in the process of rebirth.

As to my visit to Israel, to my regret it is still uncertain when or whether I can come. I expect here shortly the visit of a German monk from Burma who wanted to have my help and advice in literary work of his. He will stay with me for 1-2 months and return to Burma before the beginning of the monastic Rainy-season Retreat (in July).

... but there is the additional problem of financing that trip (i.e., the fare Ceylon-Israel). I meanwhile learned that the cost of the air ticket to Israel is Rupees 1467.50 (cca. 325 dollars), which is much more than I expected. It is uncertain when or whether I can obtain that amount. My lay friends here are few and most of them are already generous supporters of our 'Buddhist Publication Society', which requires quite a lot of funds. So I can hardly approach them for an amount that is fairly high for Ceylon standards. ... But there might be a chance for my paying the ticket, if the American rights of my book "*The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*" (3rd enlarged ed.) are sold by the English publishers (Rider & Co.). But so far I have not yet heard about it. The small amount paid as advance for royalties of the English edition was transferred by me to the “Buddhist Pub.Soc’y.”, at the conclusion of the contract. So I cannot go back on my donation to that Society and I generally would not like to use the income from Buddhist books for private purposes.

If I can come to Israel, I shall in any case, inform you cca.six weeks before the date.

Yours sincerely,

Nynaponika Mahathera

On the same day Nyanaponika also writes to the Israeli envoy in Ceylon, Mr. Barnea, explaining that he was not quite sure whether he could obtain the funds necessary for travelling to Israel.²⁸ After the retreat, by the end of September, he writes again to Ben-Gurion. This letter contains mostly information about books, and did not yield any practical fruit.²⁹ A few days later he received a letter from his cousin Jizchak Feniger saying that Ben-Gurion mentioned that he had not heard from Nyanaponika about the trip in Israel.³⁰ Nyanaponika assumes that Ben-Gurion did not receive his previous letter of 25 April 1962 (above), and thus writes again and quotes that letter extensively. He explains, again, that he wishes to visit Israel but does not have sufficient funds. He adds that he would welcome Francis Story's coming along, but that his presence is "certainly not conditional" to the visit.³¹ As the BGHA indicates, both letters have arrived, but remained unanswered.³²

Nevertheless, it seems that Ben-Gurion did not entirely forsake the idea of bringing Nyanaponika to Israel. In November 1962 Nyanaponika's cousin Jizchak Feniger writes to him (in German):

12 November 1962.

My Dear Cousin,

I have received your first letter including a copy of the letter sent to Ben-Gurion. Two weeks ago I met Ben-Gurion again and we talked about you and your journey to Israel. Since B.G. had made notes of my conversation, I suppose that he will write to you as soon as possible. It is important that in the letter to Ben-Gurion and myself you explain why you want to bring Francis Story with you to Israel. You appear to be extremely orthodox in your way of life. But as I am not able to make a judgment about the position of orthodoxy in the Buddhist religion, I am sorry that I cannot possibly assess your situation.³³

There is no record of a reply letter. In February 1963 Ben-Gurion notes in his diary that he met with Feniger, who now were going to the US to promote Jewish emigration. He writes:

²⁸ BPSA: 25 April 1962 (to Barnea)

²⁹ Nyanaponika asks Ben-Gurion to send him literature on 'philosophy, psychology and religion, in English and German, issued in Israel or elsewhere,' and particularly mentions his interest in philosophical and religious currents in Israel. BPSA: 22 September 1962.

³⁰ Letter not found, but mentioned in BPSA: 9 October 1962.

³¹ BPSA: 9 October 1962.

³² BGHA, File: Correspondence, 25 April 1962 & 22 September 1962.

³³ BPSA: 12 November 1962 (Feniger to Nyanaponika)

13:00: Feniger. ... I asked him about his Buddhist (Nyana-ponika) [and Feniger replies that] yes, he receives his letters and asks if the book about *Ben-Hamelekh ve-Hanazir* [the prince and the monk] is out. The book exists, under a different title in Greek, and there is an English translation. I will inform Feniger after I search in my library.³⁴

This was the last time Nyanaponika was mentioned in either the diaries of Ben-Gurion or his letters. In June 1963, at the age of 77, Ben-Gurion resigned from the Israeli government and retired to his small house – also known as ‘the shed’ – in Sde Boker in the Negev Desert. Nyanaponika continued to correspond with his cousin Jizchak Feniger in Israel, but the latter, being a member of a communal farming village (Kibbutz), could not invite him on the communal fund. The window of opportunity for inviting the monk on the Israeli government’s expense was closed with Ben-Gurion’s retirement and the Fenigers never met.

³⁴ BGHA, File: Diary: 28 February 1963.

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