



The Golden String

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AN AMERICAN ASHRAM: OSAGE MONASTERY Pascaline Coff

The Background: Monastic Gleanings

At Clyde, Missouri, In the heartland of America, stands an ancient women's monastery, which opened its doors in 1949 to seven of us young women, from various parts of this country, asking to become Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Monastic gleanings imbibed over the years after entering the monastery included a deepening of union and communion with the Divine: Father, Son and Spirit. A monk from Latrobe put it so well: "Monastics center their lives on the entertainment of God's loving presence." (Demetrius Dumm OSB, *Cherish Christ Above All*) Even though we wore white bridal dresses and processed up the adoration chapel aisle to the high altar, indeed, the Bridegroom was present but not seen! Our profession group chose the Feast of the Holy Trinity for our first and final vow celebrations. One of the newly professed was even named Sr. Trinitas. The role of the Trinity became prophetic for me.

Over and above our daily Eucharist, the Divine Office, and adoration hours, everything in the monastery was geared to remind us of the Lord. One of the most effective of the meditation practices taught was *Lectio Divina*, that sacred reading and sipping of the divine Word, pondering it and allowing the effervescence of our hearts to surge up with thanksgiving, forgiveness, love, and more, until we remained in silence: in contemplative stillness beyond word, thought, or image.

We learned obedience, listening with the heart, surrendering with Christ to our Father; poverty, the poverty of

(Continued on page 3)

Inside This Issue

Wayne Teasdale, 1945-2004	2
Muslim-Christian Beginning at Osage Monastery	4
Life at Shantivanam, <i>Rita Morgan</i>	5
Bede Griffiths Trust Meeting	5
Spiritual Maturity (Part II), <i>Wayne Teasdale</i>	6
Coming Events	10

AWAKEN AND SURRENDER! (Part II) Cyprian Consiglio

Eros, this energy within us, according to the Hindu tradition is itself divine; it is really the goddess Shakti herself. Bede always emphasizes that even in the ascetical life we are about the work of transformation through awakening and surrender, not suppression; we need to not only accept but also reverence *eros*, the creative madness within us. This is specifically what we learn from the chakra system—the notion of awakening, reverencing the divine madness of *eros* within us, neither indulging it nor suppressing, but surrendering it, allowing it to be burnt and transformed into another kind of love. It not only seems preferable, it seems inevitable. How then are we to understand the way of renunciation, and the path of the renunciant, of which Bede was a prime example himself?

The Path of the Renunciant

A sex loving monk, you object!

Hot blooded and passionate, totally aroused.

Remember, though, that lust can consume all passion, Transmuting base metal into pure gold.¹

As Bruno notes in his introduction to this section in *The One Light*, Bede understands the development of Tantra as rising in opposition to the *sannyasa* path of renunciation. In the earlier Upanishadic tradition, "the aim had been always to go beyond the physical and beyond the psychological to the Supreme Reality", which in practice entailed a strong tendency toward the asceticism which up to that point had prevailed in Hinduism as a whole, and ought to sound familiar to traditional Catholic teaching on ascetic practice. "Leaving behind the body, the soul, the mind and all its activities, the aim was to unite oneself with the supreme *brahman*, the supreme *atman*."² Bede marvellously traces how historically the Tantric texts, which first begin to appear in the third century CE, rise up out of the indigenous Dravidian Shaivism of south India, where devotion to God as mother is very strong, so the tendency is to assert the values of nature and of the body, of the senses and of sex. Many things which tended to be suppressed in the Aryan Vishnu tradition came to be revered by Tantra. A key doctrine of the Tantras is "that by which we fall is that by which we rise." In other words, as we may fall through the attraction of the senses, through sex, passion and desire, so we have to rise through them, using them as the means of going beyond. "As the Kundalini . . . rises up through the body, the whole being is gradually transformed, from the physical, through

(Continued on page 8)

WAYNE TEASDALE: 1945-2004

Wayne Teasdale, once a student and then a long-time friend of Father Bede, became a spiritual teacher, a well-known author, and a leading participant in interreligious dialogue. A member of the board of trustees of the Parliament of the World's Religions, Wayne had also served on the board of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. He died peacefully in his sleep on October 20, 2004, after a long struggle with cancer.

Born in Hartford, Connecticut, Wayne received his bachelor's degree at St. Anselm College in New Hampshire, an M.A. in philosophy at St. Joseph's University, and his doctorate in theology at Fordham University. His valuable dissertation on the 'contemplative theology' of Bede Griffiths, published in India in 1987 as *Toward a Christian Vedanta*, is available once again as *Bede Griffiths: An Introduction to His Interspiritual Thought*. [See below]

In 1973, Wayne began a correspondence with Bede Griffiths, and later spent two years at Shantivanam, where he received *sannyasa* from Father Bede. Their close friendship continued until Bede's death. While a member of MID, he helped draft the Universal Declaration of Nonviolence. A personal friend of the Dalai Lama, Wayne was passionately committed to the cause of a free Tibet. From his early years, he has valued the teaching of Father Thomas Keating OCSO, the well-known spiritual teacher and author.

Wayne Teasdale was an adjunct professor at DePaul University, at Columbia College, and at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, where he lived. Wayne was dedicated to the expansion of the Christian contemplative tradition both through dialogue with persons of other religious traditions and through the integration of contemplative practice with active work in the world.

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Doubtless Wayne Teasdale's long sojourn in India and his relationship with Father Bede sharpened that intense sense of the Absolute which also burned within Bede and which can be felt everywhere in the writings of both men. And probably his study of Hindu Vedanta and of Buddhism confirmed his conviction of the vital theological core of Christianity:

Spirituality is always meant to make us better by unlocking our potential for divinity, to be like God in some participatory way. This is what the Christian theologians of the early Orthodox Church called *theosis*, or deification: becoming like God. It is what the Eastern traditions mean when they speak of awakening the Buddha-nature within us, or the Atman. If spirituality does not offer access to actualizing our potential for this higher form of life, which is what we are made for, then what ultimate value can it possibly have for us? (*The Mystic Heart*)

As for Bede, however, self-realization was not the sole end of the spiritual life for Wayne; he became more and

more aware of the 'horizontal' dimension of spirituality that reaches out to one's fellow human beings. For him, as for Bede, this sense of spiritual communion among human persons could not be confined within the boundaries of a particular religious tradition. He realized that our present moment in history places us at a critical threshold of *global* spiritual awareness, and he centered his own life and work more and more, during recent years, in what he had come to call "interspirituality."

The rise of community among cultures and religious traditions brings with it a deeply fruitful openness to learning from one another. It makes possible what we can call 'interspirituality': the assimilation of insights, values, and spiritual practices from the various religions and their application to one's own inner life and development. This phenomenon has truly revolutionary implications, especially for the real likelihood of a global culture and civilization forming that is unmistakably universal in more than a geographical sense.

(*The Community of Religions*)

Bede Griffiths could not imagine genuine renewal of the Catholic Church without reunion of the Christian churches, nor could he foresee attainment of this ecumenical goal in isolation from the other world religions. Wayne Teasdale similarly came to think of the Church in universal terms, as a center of convergence, a meeting place, an enveloping *matrix* for the spiritual and existential striving of all humanity.

As matrix, the Church might strive to become a container for all of humanity's noble aspirations. The Church could be a nurturer of interfaith encounter, interreligious dialogue, spirituality, interspirituality, work for justice, the promotion of peace, creating sacred culture, and teaching environmental responsibility and economic sustainability . . . (*A Monk in the World*)

Wayne Teasdale's aspiration to live as "a monk in the world" corresponded to his determination to live as a Christian in the world of religions. For him, as for Bede Griffiths, all boundaries in this world are permeable to the divine Spirit, and it is this Spirit which urges us — as it urged Jesus in the gospels — continually to overcome these limits, to reduce them to their humble place beneath the Sun — the divine Life burning within every human person.

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Wayne Teasdale was the most frequent and generous contributor to The Golden String. Over the years he provided the Bulletin with about twenty articles, numerous book reviews, and reports on the two Parliaments of the World's Religions, in Chicago and in Capetown. The most recent of his essays, "Spiritual Maturity," began in the last issue and continues in this issue. If the consistent central focus of his writing can be truly said to be *mysticism*, the essential qualifier of this mysticism is "crossing boundaries." For Wayne, the contemplative consciousness is

(Continued on page 3)



The Golden String

Wayne Teasdale

(Continued from page 2)

‘transcendent’ particularly in its ability to overcome the divisions that human beings have created in this world, and to bring humanity into divine-human unity for which it was created.

Books by Wayne Teasdale:

- *Essays on Mysticism*, Sunday Publications, 1985.
- *Toward a Christian Vedanta: The Encounter of Hinduism and Christianity according to Bede Griffiths* (with foreword by Bede Griffiths), Asian Trading Corporation, 1987.
- *The Community of Religions: Voices and Images of the Parliament of the World’s Religions* (edited with George F. Cairns), Continuum, 1996.
- *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World’s Religions* (with foreword by the Dalai Lama), New World Library, 2001.
- *A Monk in the World: Cultivating a Spiritual Life* (with foreword by Ken Wilber), New World Library, 2002.
- *Bede Griffiths: An Introduction to His Interspiritual Thought*, [A reprinting of *Toward a Christian Vedanta* with new Preface, Epilogue and Bibliography] Skylight Paths, 2003.
- *Awakening the Spirit, Inspiring the Soul: 30 Stories of Interspiritual Discovery in the Community of Faiths* (edited with Martha Howard), 2004.
- *Catholicism in Dialogue: Conversations across Traditions*.

Audio tapes:

- *Living the Mystical* (2000)
- *Hermitage of the Heart: Contemplative Practices from Hundred Acres Monastery* (True Sounds, 2003).
- *Inner Explorations: Wayne Teasdale and the Mystic Heart*. ■

*On so many occasions in his long and fruitful life, Bede Griffiths had announced the dawning of a new age, which was not the popular notion of the New Age movement but really the opening to an integral humanism that brought together all the religions/spiritualities, science, and mysticism with the concern for the earth and the indigenous wisdom traditions, in a new vision of a reconciled humanity, where community and its gifts of sharing are the focus. Bedeji, as the sage of this new age, granted us, like Gandhi before him, an example of a concrete embodiment of engaged holiness and spirituality, heralding in the interspiritual Age. . . And becoming in the process an intermystical as well as Christian saint. The impact of this gentle prophetic figure will be felt throughout the course of the third millennium and far beyond. (Wayne Teasdale, from the Epilogue to *Bede Griffiths: An Introduction to His Interspiritual Thought*.) ■*

American Ashram

(Continued from page 1)

our human condition fully accepted; we learned humility (the subject of an entire chapter of Benedict’s Rule). We learned hospitality, welcoming the Divine in the other — seeing Christ in the guest, in the superior, in the sick and in one another. This was an anticipation for me of the profound Eastern practice of *Brahma Vidya*, God–realization or God–seeing, finding God in the heart of all things. Our beloved novice director, Sr. Hildelita, though unlettered, was deeply holy and we loved to hear her speak of “living faith.” No one ever asked her why she injected the word “living” before every mention of the word “faith.” Years later, in a treatise of St. Thomas Aquinas on the angels, it became quite clear to me that even the demons believe in God. Their faith is just not enlivened by charity, so it is dead! This insight caused a desire to know more about faith, and eventually it became the topic of a research project for my Ph.D. in theology. After searching through all patristic sources available, biblical commentaries and theological explanations the discovery of my delight was that faith is “surrender to the person of Jesus Christ.” The Bridegroom is present but not seen! My good Dominican theology professor was not thrilled to hear this, since it came from a Scripture commentary. Scripture and theology were not yet wedded, but were beginning to become friends. Many other monastic gleanings were tucked deeply into my heart as the years unfolded.

Monastic Influences — *(In this portion of Sr. Pascaline’s talk, published in the last (Summer 2004) issue of The Golden String, she explained how four spiritual teachers influenced her development: Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths, Sr. Vandana and William Johnston.)*

The Beginning of Osage Monastery

During my year in India, the Spirit had sown the seed. In 1980, the sesquimillennial anniversary of Benedict’s birth, a new monastic ashram was dedicated in Sand Springs, Oklahoma. Osage+Monastery, Forest of Peace began on Corpus Christi in June of that year with some 250 guests participating in the solemn Eucharist and joining in procession with Bishop Eusebius J. Beltran of the Diocese of Tulsa. The Council members of our Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration Congregation also joined us, bringing along the “foundation monstrance” which had been carried by our pioneer sisters from Maria Rickenbach, in the Swiss Alps, in 1874. It had been used for each of our previous foundations and was now carried by our bishop all around the long house, past the eight cabins, stopping at three prepared places for Benediction.

Father Bede had come for a visit soon after the land was purchased by our motherhouse and, during a Eucharist on the forest floor before the building began, he offered the bread and wine, praying for all who were entering the ancient practice of forest dwellers, and for all who would ever come to O+M. He delighted with us in the fact that the monastic ashram in the U.S.A. had actually begun, and he af-

(Continued on page 4)

American Ashram

(Continued from page 3)

fectionately called it the “Shantivanam of the West.” The logo O+M which forms the sacred word for the Divine in the East was created from the initials of Osage Monastery, named for the Osage Indians among whom we now lived.

The Principles

From the beginning, we five Benedictine sisters and a Trappist monk from Gethsemani, Fr. James Conner, agreed on four goals which we have faithfully reviewed during each Lent, to keep them in the center of our consciousness.

1. top priority is given to contemplative prayer and its atmosphere with a special focus on silence, stillness and inwardness;
2. a small monastic ashram community is maintained;
3. adoration is practiced as integral to our way of life (corresponding to the charism of our Congregation);
4. Peace and justice are realistically pursued.

Monastic life is highly structured. Ashram life is mostly unstructured. To live these two lifestyles and spiritualities at the same time is highly challenging, as one or the other from time to time attempts to become the center. But in the coincidence of opposites, a cross is formed and Christ is always found if one searches. The Bridegroom is present, but not seen! In the West, discipline is linked with the word *disciple*: that is, usually, one who learns from a teacher, whereas in the East a teacher is one who draws forth or uncovers what is already here! Ashrams originated with the Indian soul, and so we have much to learn from our Hindu brothers and sisters.

An ashram, according to Fr. Bede, must have these qualities:

- a simple lifestyle
- openness to all religions
- intensive spiritual exercises.

In India, most ashrams have a profoundly simple lifestyle — permanent ashramites usually take the monastic initiation called *sannyasa diksha*, i.e., total renunciation, especially renunciation of one’s self. In monastic life in the West it is extremely difficult to live simply, in our affluent American culture. In our western monastic Rule, Benedict did not legislate for poverty as a vow, but he insured the practice of it throughout the Rule and under the larger umbrella of *conversatio morum*, the monastic vow.

The Ashram Life

Our day has always begun at about 5:15 a.m. with an hour of common meditation in silence and stillness followed by Lauds, sung before breakfast. Eucharist or communion service is usually at 8 a.m., and we meet afterwards to share needs, information, arrangements for trips to the airport and for shopping, and so on. We take turns cooking; otherwise, assigned tasks are fairly regular: care of retreatants and hospitality, shopping, cabin preparation, bookkeeping, maintenance, gardening, correspondence, etc. We meet again at noon for twenty minutes of silent meditation, an Eastern

reading and a Psalm before dinner, which is our main meal.

In the afternoon each is free to practice *lectio*, study, hike, rest, or listen to audio tapes, and at 4:30 we come together again for another hour of contemplative sitting. At 5:30 the news is on for those who wish to view it, and at 6:00 the gong is rung for Vespers. Supper follows. The evenings are variegated: a community meeting, a *satsang* with ashramites and retreatants, a video, or just Compline, sung early so that all are free to retire to their cabins. On Sundays and feast days the *Arati*, the ancient Eastern fire blessing, is incorporated into our celebration before our morning meditation and again at the conclusion of Vespers. Sacred texts from the East are also utilized in our daily Vesper prayer together with a western commentary or patristic reading.

In our effort to be open to all religions, we have been blessed with guests and visitors from many parts of the U.S. and many other countries, religious traditions and cultures. We have welcomed Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns; the nuns stayed with us for three months. We have hosted local Hindus and some Hindu people from South India. There have been Islamic teachers from nearby universities and Christian Zen teachers from Germany, Korea, the Philippines and Dallas, Texas. The cross-fertilization has been a gift. We have been blessed with fifteen annual Christian Zen retreats at Osage shared with many others. When lecturers come to O+M, we try to share their offerings with our Friends of the Forest.

Ashrams have always been places conducive to the dialogue because of the community’s openness to all religions, their hospitality — welcoming the Divine in the other, and their in-depth striving for the contemplative dimension of life, for it is at that level that we are one.

(This is a second excerpt from “Monastic Spirituality for the 21st Century: Creating Bridges,” an address given by Sr. Pascaline during a gathering at Glastonbury Abbey, Hingham, Massachusetts.). ■

**BEGINNING A MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN
DIALOGUE AT OSAGE MONASTERY**

On Sunday, January 16th 2005, the community of Osage+Monastery held its first informal Christian-Muslim dialogue. Through friends who have been attending local dialogue meetings, we invited a Muslim couple for the evening: Dr. Ali Siddiqui and Mrs. Sheryl Siddiqui. Sheryl is the spokesperson for the Islamic community in Tulsa, is very knowledgeable of things Islamic, and had just returned from a dialogue conference in Turkey. After preparing a few days earlier with a reading of *Nostra Aetate* and some of Thomas Merton’s rules for dialogue, we invited the Siddiqui’s for our Sunday Vespers service, and then we all remained present for their sundown Islamic prayers, before sharing supper and, afterwards, continuing our exchange. The couple remained until 8:30 pm, and it was mutually agreed that we want to do this again. ■

LIFE AT SHANTIVANAM

(A letter to the community of Osage Monastery from a temporary member who was staying at Bede Griffiths' ashram in South India and will return to Osage for another year)

Thinking of you with much gratitude in my heart as I soak in the Divine atmosphere here at Shantivanam. J. and I arrived on October 16 and we both have appreciated the peaceful atmosphere and the all-embracing attitude of the brothers.

Morning begins with prayer at 5 a.m., followed by an hour of meditation. This is usually practiced in one's room now, during the monsoon season, and the mosquitoes are very friendly! Morning prayer is followed by celebration of the Eucharist is at 6:30 a.m. I appreciate very much the daily readings from the Upanishads and selected passages from scriptures of the world religions and from the sages of Tamil Nadu. Noon prayer is followed by lunch, and there is meditation and evening prayer at 6 p.m., followed by supper.

Every day at 4 p.m., Brother Martin meets with visitors to answer questions and to offer a talk. Interreligious dialogue, particularly Hindu-Christian dialogue, is his passion. I find his sharings very interesting and thought-provoking. I'm finding that, as anticipated, my time here at Shantivanam is indeed a good space wherein one can reflect upon and embrace Hinduism, and indeed the essence of all religions, from a Christian perspective which is forward-thinking and deeply centered in the Divine Mystery.

Language and food is completely different from that experienced in Orissa — all except for the availability of rice! People here enjoy their food hot — as you do. I continue to be in good health, thank God, and my appetite is good — enjoying each new taste and experience.

I will join J. later, and am presently reading Abshik-tananda's *Arunachala* in preparation for our visit there. The brothers have encouraged the trip, speaking highly of the spiritual atmosphere at Tiruvanamali-Ramana Ashram. J. very much enjoyed being at Shantivanam, appreciating the stillness and sacredness of this place. . .

Rita (Morgan) ■

*Bede was able to assimilate the insights of the Asian traditions . . . by distinguishing between cosmic and historical revelation. In Christian theology the stress has always been on historical revelation as the only valid form . . . All revelation culminates in Christ, but the cosmic revelation is itself an ongoing process of the Divine Reality revealing itself in the universe, nature, and in all beings. Cosmic revelation is theophanically dynamic, that is, it is by its very nature based on an outpouring theophanic function of the created or mediated universe. The cosmos itself is the outward thrust of the cosmic revelation. There is also an inward or subjective thrust in this revelatory process in which the divine is discovered in the depths of the heart, the most inward center of consciousness. (from Wayne Teasdale's Introduction to *The Other Half of My Soul*, p.9-10.) ■*

BEDE GRIFFITHS TRUST MEETING

The Bede Griffiths Trust Board held its third annual electronic meeting from November 18th to 28th, 2004.

The meeting began with four status/progress reports:

- Efforts to publish Bede Griffiths books in India.
- Bede Griffiths books on tape or CD. At present the estimated cost for having one of Bede's books read onto an audio recording medium and made available is prohibitive. Further possibilities will be pursued by Douglas Conlan, who has been conferring with Thomas Garvey of Templegate Publishers.
- The Bede Griffiths website. The website is in the process of being re-designed by the new webmaster, Susan Crothers. Attention was called to the page offering a memorial for Wayne Teasdale.
- Financial status of the BG Trust.

Since the hundredth anniversary of Bede Griffiths' birth will occur on December 17, 2006, it was proposed that three or four prominent authors be invited to write articles commemorating Fr. Bede in leading journals and/or newspapers, to appear between May 2005 and May 2006. Fr. Robert Hale agreed to pursue this project by making the necessary contacts.

It was proposed that the B.G. Trust co-sponsor the Bede centennial Conference of the Camaldolese Institute for East-West Dialogue, to be held in June, 2006. [See 'Coming Events' on p. 10] The proposal was accepted by the Board.

Various possible means of advertising the books of Fr. Bede were discussed.

Concern was expressed about preservation of the papers still kept in Fr. Bede's hut at Shantivanam. Bro. John Martin was asked to look into this and to make sure that originals of any writings of Fr. Bede are sent to the B.G. Archives in Berkeley.

A discussion was opened on the future of the Bede Griffiths Trust/Association. It was proposed that two executive directors be appointed for the Association: one in the U.S. and one in Australia., with the function of building a spiritual network to promote and implement the ideals of Father Bede. An alternative proposal was that a single executive director be appointed for the whole Association. After Board members had exchanged views on the advantages and the possible drawbacks to creating the new positions, the discussion was ended without a vote.

The wider discussion largely moved around the basic question whether the Trust/Association should attempt to enlarge the scope and magnitude of its activities, or should continue along the same basic lines as at present.

It was proposed that two new members be elected to the Board to fill the vacancies created by the deaths of Judson Trapnell and Wayne Teasdale. After several possible candidates had been named, a vote was taken. Dr. Michael von Brück and Fr. Cyprian Consiglio were elected to the Board. Both have accepted. ■

SPIRITUAL MATURITY (*Part II*) Wayne Teasdale

Human and Spiritual Maturity

Human and spiritual maturity are completely actualized in the mystical journey. In this journey human nature is perfected in the acquisition of maturity in the spiritual life. The human is fulfilled in the spiritual, and this means acquiring the divine nature, which we all have, though obscured by mundane concerns. Spiritual maturity is incarnated in the nine elements¹ of a practical universal spirituality and mysticism: (1) an actualized moral capacity, (2) solidarity with all life, (3) deep nonviolence, (4) humility of heart, (5) spiritual practice, (6) mature self-knowledge, (7) simplicity of life and lifestyle, (8) loving action and compassionate service, and (9) prophetic witness and action. If one is living these fundamental dispositions and is guided by these subtle activities there is then a human and spiritual maturity. It also involves an evolved awareness and a final integration, which will be taken up in the final sections below.

Every truly awake man or woman on the spiritual journey is *morally actualized*. Their capacity to be moral is operative, and they have become so governed by love, compassion, mercy, kindness and sensitivity that what ethics and moral law seek to inculcate in us is unnecessary for them, since their very beings reflect the essence of morality. An individual cannot be a mystic or a saint without the moral capacity operative in their life. This is a very basic condition that has to be actualized if the spiritual life is to have any chance at all.

Every mature mystic knows that we are all interdependent, that there is a web of interconnection that binds us all up into a vast community extending over countless universes and realms. Part of spiritual (and human) maturity is the actual realization of the *solidarity of all life* with the Earth and the cosmos in God. This knowledge of the larger community of life, this understanding of our essential interdependence is found in all traditions, and it is quite natural to the budding mystic, the one who takes his or her spirituality seriously. It is not possible to be a mystic without acting from this deep knowledge of solidarity, the interconnectedness of everything.

The third element in a mystical spirituality, and so, characteristic of the spiritually mature person, is the voluntary commitment to *deep nonviolence*. The realization of the necessity for nonviolence and one's commitment to it follows from the profound understanding that we are all interconnected essentially and intrinsically. If we are all part of the same cosmic family, how can we countenance violence of any sort, since this is ultimately violence against ourselves? A gentleness of being is characteristic of the enlightened, the spiritually enlightened and awake. This does not mean that such persons don't have anger or even violent

thoughts on occasion, but it does mean that they know what to do with these powerful emotional contents and thoughts. They are genuinely convinced of the importance of advancing the value of nonviolence.

Another critical aspect of spiritual maturity, indeed of the mystical journey itself, is *humility of heart*. A person cannot make any progress in the spiritual life without humility, and this element is found in every tradition, as are the other eight. Humility of heart is first of all truth about ourselves before God. We know our weaknesses and our strengths. It doesn't allow us to deceive ourselves or others. We understand our nature and of what we are capable. Humility doesn't permit us to use or manipulate others. It keeps us focused on our spiritual lives, and makes us receptive to others. It opens our hearts to kindness, compassion, love, mercy and sensitivity towards those we meet, especially the poor and the vulnerable.

A viable *spiritual practice* is a further element of a universal mysticism found in the lives of spiritually mature persons in all areas of the world. Any individual who reaches a degree of human and spiritual integration is someone who undoubtedly has a regular — that is, daily — spiritual practice. A way of relating to Ultimate Reality, the Divine Mystery, and access to infinite consciousness, is absolutely essential to an effective inner life. When we meet a person who has achieved a certain level of holiness and service to others, it becomes clear that such a one has a form of prayer, or meditation, and perhaps a multifaceted way of relating to the Divine Reality. Spiritual practice, as an element in the mystical life, is the crux of inner change, and an indispensable part of spiritual life for all of us. In every tradition it is a non-negotiable practical absolute without which no progress in the spiritual journey can occur.

It is spiritual practice, or prayer, that opens the door to a *mature self-knowledge* that is the basis for the person's transformation as outlined above. It is this quality of self-understanding that can often be absent in the lives of people who have not developed a more mature form of the inner experience. Self-knowledge of this depth and honesty emerges where there is also a highly evolved humility; humility of heart and a mature self-awareness go hand in hand. What this element of the mystical journey means is that the person who has this type of maturity is very clear about who they are, what limitations they have, or faults they need to work on, and what their potential is. They have a wonderfully accurate understanding of themselves, and they are not satisfied with the flattering opinions of others, nor deceived by a self-image that they may have wanted to protect earlier in their lives.

A spiritually mature person is also humanly mature, since a spiritual life is a human life, and only a human life, in our world, can have a spiritual commitment to a way of being in the world. An important and authentic way of being in this world, one that is sensitive to the poor and to the

(Continued on page 7)



Spiritual Maturity

(Continued from page 6)

natural world, and one that constitutes a further element, is *simplicity of life*, or of lifestyle. All genuine mystics in every tradition manifest this simplicity. It is a clarity about what's really important in how we live, and a modesty, a responsibility, about how resources are used in one's day to day living. All the saints, no matter the tradition, embody this simplicity in lifestyle. Simplicity of life allows us to have our priorities in order.

Spiritual or mystical life is not just in the mind, or within; it bridges to the external world. It is firmly connected with the community, with the needs of others, particularly the vulnerable, the poor, the marginalized, or those who are victimized by injustice and oppression. Spirituality is not fully mature, or indeed, authentic, if it lacks *compassion or love in action*. Again, this is a significant aspect in the lives and actions of the saints. Compassionate service, incarnating an active love and kindness that is not sentimental, is also indispensable to a legitimate spirituality that is universally valid. Spirituality hasn't arrived at real maturity until it makes a strong connection and commitment to active love and compassion in the world. The inspiring example of Mother Teresa is such a brilliant instance of spiritual maturity that balances contemplation and action, and that draws its vitality of love in action from prayer, from relationship with God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Divine she contemplated in prayer she perceived in everyone, especially in the poorest of the poor. It should be borne in mind, however, that for every Mother Teresa, there are millions of unknown saints doing the same kinds of things in a hidden way. Compassionate service or love in action is one of the most compelling elements of spirituality and maturity in the Spirit.

The final element — final not in importance, but in chronology — is *prophetic witness and action*. This aspect is closely aligned with the preceding one, and is integral with all the others. It is an extension of love and compassion to the area of justice. This element of a universal mysticism, a global spirituality, rounds off spiritual maturity by connecting the wisdom of the mystical to the political sphere of action. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama, Cesar Chavez, Mairead Maguire and Betty Williams in Northern Ireland, Thomas Berry, the ecologist, are all examples of prophets, of witnesses to justice in all its aspects and dimensions: economic, social, political, ecological and, one can also say, interreligious. A spirituality for the masses of humanity is not valid if it lacks the prophetic element. To put it bluntly: we must be willing to stick our necks out for justice, and that is one of the chief fruits of the mystical life, and clear evidence of its genuineness, effectiveness and transforming reality.

Awareness as Integral to Spiritual Maturity

Transformation is definitely evident in heightened awareness.² This transformation is the reality of inner maturity as it affects all aspects of our being, and its impact is felt by those around us. Awareness here refers to the pri-

mary, existentially powerful, and immediately actual understanding, or perception, of reality in both its vertical and horizontal "directions." To be more precise, awareness, an ultimate form of knowing that is always present to us, has a vertical dimension related to the Divine, and a horizontal dimension related to the world, to others, to the natural world and even other sentient beings, including trees.

Vertical awareness is the pressing reality of an ongoing mystical connection with the Source, with the Divine, or in Buddhist terms, with vast consciousness. It is a connection that springs from union with God, or actualized awakening of vast awareness itself. Vertical awareness is a consciousness quite organic to mystical life. It is the mystical knowledge informing our relationship with the Divine, and drawing out its presence from our awakened sensitivity to it, from our mystical or contemplative process, the adventure into Divine Consciousness itself. Vertical awareness includes illumination in the cosmic mysteries, the principles that govern this universe and others, as well as all the realms beyond the manifested cosmic order. It includes the angelic, the mathematical, the self-subsistence of transcendent Light, and so much more.

Horizontal awareness, although one with and inspired by the vertical inspiration, is an incredible sensitivity to all manifested being. It is a heightened awareness of the natural world and all its species, and the members of the human family encountered in the course of a life, or on the margins of awareness. It is a keen wisdom about what is necessary and appropriate in all the situations of life, even those that are morally complex or ambiguous. Horizontal sensitivity is a vast kind of perception, a consciousness that embraces the very subtle realities of everyone and everything we encounter. The example of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, with which this essay began, illustrates the nature of this sensitivity that is the fullness of horizontal awareness. No spiritual life is complete or can reach the maturity that we see in the transformed state unless it includes awareness in its vertical and horizontal dimensions. *(to be concluded)*

Notes:

1. I have discussed these nine elements at great length in *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato, California: New World Library, 1999), chapters 5-7
2. For a more detailed discussion of awareness, see Wayne Teasdale, *A Monk in the World: Cultivating a Spiritual Life* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2002), chapter 10, "Living in the Heart of Awareness." ■

The World is in desperate need of people who have awakened to the deeper spiritual life in its mystical dimension and truth. Such souls go beyond a merely religious level of observance, as good and necessary as it is, to embrace the responsibility of a total commitment to spirituality and all the demands it makes on one to change. Those generous people who walk this path, who persevere in its course, eventually arrive at a degree of spiritual maturity. (Wayne Teasdale, "Spiritual Maturity," Part I, GS, Summer 2004). ■

Awaken and Surrender! (Continued from page 1)

the psychological, until finally spiritual evolution is attained."³

But is the opposition of tantric path to the *sannyasa* path of renunciation a false dilemma? Perhaps we can also see a synthesis of the masculine way of renunciation and the feminine way of embrace, that is still in keeping with traditional Indian thought, in which Tantrism is not seen as opposed to the *sannyasa* way—in which the way of *eros* is not opposed to the way of *agape*. If we see this development in the light of the traditional Brahmanic pattern of the four stages (*asramas*) of life—that one passes through the stages of *bramacharya*, householder and forest dweller before reaching the age to take *sannyasa*—one could understand that healthy renunciation might only come after some integration has already taken place, when the kundalini energy in the natural flow of life has been revered and allowed to work its transformation on the human person. Perhaps one is only ready for the great renunciation after the kundalini has been revered and allowed to rise up and begin the work of transforming the whole being, starting with the physical, working through the psychological, until finally spiritual evolution is attained. This makes a lot of sense, and stands in contrast not to the path of renunciation itself, but perhaps in contrast to the monastic practice—Buddhist, Hindu as well as Christian—of young people "taking *sannyasa*", attempting a life-long commitment to celibate chastity without ever having gone through the necessary stages of reverencing their *eros*, of allowing this divine creative sexual psychic energy to do its work of transformation, particularly of *eros* being transformed into *agape*.

I am amused and somewhat consoled to discover that this tendency toward dualism is not limited to Christians but is shared by monastics in general, as evidenced by this, one of my favorite Buddhist stories, from China: There was an old woman who had supported a hermit for years, giving him a hut and feeding him while he spent his life in meditation. One day she decided to test him to see what kind of progress he had made, so she sent a beautiful young woman to his hut. The girl sat on his lap, threw her arms around him and pressed her body close up to his, and then asked the old man "What are you feeling right now?" And the old man answered, "I am like a withered tree that grows on a cold rock in winter. Nowhere is there any warmth." Well, the young girl went and reported this to the old woman, and when the old woman who had been supporting this hermit for years heard this reply she immediately grew furious, went to the hermit's hut and kicked him out, and burned his hut down saying, "And to think I supported that guy for twenty years! What a waste!" So, *agape* without *eros* leaves our human nature starved. It is like a withered tree that grows on a cold rock in winter. Nowhere is there any warmth. What a waste!

According to Fr Bede, Tantra is particularly important today because many in the West, consciously or not,

have already discovered this way of the Mother. Furthermore, when understood correctly, it may have lessons to teach especially Western Christians, reeling in the wake of a sexual crisis among its professional celibates. Because *agape* without *eros* starves; and *eros* without *agape* is madness.⁴

Christian asceticism: transformation in the Holy Spirit

So shakti rises and eventually reaches the *sahasrara chakra*, the thousand petalled lotus at the top of the head. This is where we open up to the whole universe and the transcendent mystery beyond. . . . I like to see it flowing from above, with the Holy Spirit descending through all the faculties, right down through the whole body and then rising up again and returning to God.⁵

In the best of the Christian tradition, *eros* is not to be avoided. As a matter of fact the ancients speak about our *eros* for God, and God's *eros* for us. Dionysius the Areopagite writes

In God, *eros* is outgoing, ecstatic. Because of it lovers no longer belong to themselves but to those whom they love.

Maximus the Confessor, as well, writes, in *On the Divine Names*, that God is the producer and generator of tenderness and *eros*, and that God is the moving force in those who look to God and who possess the capacity for desire, according to their own nature. The most direct connection is made by Origen who says that although "eros is usually experienced in terms in relation to a human lover, it is in reality a heavenly force." And to further corroborate our theme, St John Climacus taught that for those who love God with the strength of *eros*, that *eros* is transformed into *agape*.

In modern times Ronald Rolheiser has a beautiful treatment of *eros*, using Goethe's phrase the "Holy Longing" in the book of the same name. He says it is

. . . an unquenchable fire, a restlessness, a longing, a disquiet, a hunger, a loneliness, a gnawing nostalgia, a wildness that cannot be tamed, a congenital all-embracing ache that lies at the center of human experience and is the ultimate force that drives everything else.⁶

For Rolheiser our contemporary search to define Christian spirituality needs to be rooted in *eros*. He writes that for the Christian, spirituality "concerns what we do with desire. It takes root in the *eros* inside of us and it is all about how we shape and discipline that *eros*."⁷ He gives the example of John of the Cross whose "love's urgent longings" were none other than the *eros* which is the starting point of the spiritual life, and for whom spirituality is how we handle that *eros*. "Eros," for Rolheiser—carrying with it desire, disquiet, nostalgia, lust, appetite, and hope—"is soul and soul gives energy." He writes that Christians should agree with the Greeks who say that we are fired into life with a madness that is the root of all love, hate, creativity, joy and sadness, and we should add that God has put this *eros* inside of us, so

(Continued on page 9)

Awaken and Surrender! (Continued from page 8)

that we might share in God's work of creation, and ultimately contemplate that which we have helped create and burst with a joy and "swell in a delight that breaks the prison of [our] selfishness." And for this reason

. . . sexuality lies at the center of the spiritual life. A healthy sexuality is the single most powerful vehicle there is to lead us to selflessness and joy, just as unhealthy sexuality helps constellate selfishness and unhappiness as does nothing else.⁸

Given the sexual scandal in the Roman church that has surfaced over the past few years, one does not have to reach far to guess that it is quite possibly a result of the destructive and dangerous character of blocked sexual energy. Richard Rohr agrees with this, quoting Fr Bede in his book *Adam's Return*, and adding

. . . if religion does not integrate and validate the sensual, pleasure-loving, erotic part of a man [he is specifically referring to male spirituality here], it takes devious and destructive directions. If you do not bless it and bow to it, it turns on you and controls you, as we have seen in the recent pedophile scandal. If you bless it, it also shows its limited value and longs for something higher.

So perhaps Christian asceticism can and needs to be seen in a fresh light. Perhaps the idea of "mortification of the flesh" derived from the Fathers of the Desert, and their tendency toward extreme asceticism, has outlived its usefulness. Bede wrote that "their aim was to *conquer* [emphasis mine] the flesh by watching, fasting and bodily mortifications . . . They probably found these disciplines necessary but it had a very bad effect on the Christian tradition of asceticism. The result is that many people reject asceticism altogether."⁹ He also wrote of the asceticism found in Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, that it is not a good model for today because it is limited and negative. "We are learning to appreciate the physical self particularly through yoga . . . We are trying to learn to appreciate the body and the world, and to integrate them into our Christian lives."¹⁰ When seen through the eyes of yoga, the discipline of *ascesis* can rather be seen as control without any strain, complete control in perfect harmony, with an eye toward transformation and right relationship rather than a dualistic notion of punishing the flesh. "Yoga is never a suppression of anything," Bede writes in *The River of Compassion*, "neither of the body, nor of the passions, nor of the senses, nor of the mind. It is a bringing of the whole person into harmony, into a perfect order." We may even do the same things as before, engage in the same practices, but we would do them for different reasons, and that slight change of focus may help us immensely.

This is not far from the thinking of other contemporary Christian teachers. Anselm Gruen, Benedictine monk and author, writes for instance that discipline (asceticism) is not a way that we suppress our drives and passions, but a

way that we can transform and shape them.

The three basic drives—eating, sex and greed—are *transformed* through fasting, asceticism, and almsgiving. Here discipline is a good way not to suppress the drives, but to shape them, so that they can serve us as a *power source*. We overcome sadness by fleeing dependency on the world, by letting go of what we are clinging to, and by setting ourselves free. [emphases mine]¹¹

As the *Amritabindu Upanishad* (1-2) teaches:

Driven by the senses the mind becomes impure;
but with the senses under control, the mind becomes pure.

Driven by the senses we become bound;
but with the senses mastered we become free.

The senses are not suppressed or killed—they are controlled and shaped, (might we say "focused"?) and thus become sacraments, instruments of salvation — what Cipriano Vagagini teaches that all flesh is for the Christian.

For Fr Bede, a primary necessary step in learning to deal with and shape our *eros* is meditation. He uses a pleasant expression when he says that in meditation we learn "to let our own natural desires, our *eros*, awaken and surrender it to God, that is, let it be taken up into *agape*." It is specifically in and through meditation that we learn to turn the mind to the inner light, the Atman, the Spirit, which is able to direct the mind and bring it into right relationship with the senses. As Andrew Olendzki says about the Buddhist tradition, the reason why meditation is such a crucial tool is because the wisdom spoken of here is really only accessible to a settled and focused mind.¹² It is in meditation that we still the mind and train the senses, so that we may awaken and learn the surrender necessary to be guided by the spirit. It is in meditation that we may learn to surrender to God who, as Maximus the Confessor reminds us, is the moving force, the producer and generator of tenderness and *eros*, and come to possess the capacity for outgoing and ecstatic, creative desire.

Awaken and surrender!

Notes:

1. *Wild Ways: Zen Poems of Ikkyu*, transl. John Stevens, Shambhala, 1995, p. 58.
2. *New Vision of Reality*, 66-77.
3. *New Vision*, *ibid*.
4. Unfortunately, tantric practices have been abused since their inception until today, and often the true spirit of yoga disappears; as Mizumi writes about tantric Buddhism (p.40-41): "a vulgar, often lascivious, hedonism substituted itself . . ." Again, our point: "Eros without agape is equally disastrous. It leaves us to the compulsion of human and sexual love."
5. *New Creation*, p. 43.
6. *The Holy Longing*, p.4
7. *The Holy Longing*, p.7
8. *The Holy Longing*, p. 193.
9. Bede Griffiths: *River of Compassion*, p. 114, *New Creation*, p. 26f.
10. *New Creation*, p. 26
11. Anselm Gruen, *Heaven Begins Within You*, p. 76.
12. "Back to the Beginning": An Interview with Andrew Olendzki, *Tricycle*, Winter 2003, p. 47. ■

The Golden String

COMING EVENTS

Since December 17, 2006, will mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Father Bede Griffiths, a number of commemorative events will be organized during the year. The **Camaldolese Institute for East-West Dialogue** is planning a **Symposium** in two parts, on the theme: *Toward a New Contemplative Vision: Developing the Intuitions of Bede Griffiths*. The first part will be an invitational conference held, if possible, at New Camaldoli, in Big Sur, from June 25-29. The second part will be a public Conference at Mercy Center in Burlingame, California, on the following weekend (June 30-July 2), and is expected to feature four lectures on aspects of the same topic. Indian music and a Shantivanam-style liturgy will be included in the program. The Institute plans to publish the contributions to the Symposium in book form, as was done for the East-West Symposium at New Camaldoli in 2000 (*Purity of Heart and Contemplation*) Further information will appear in *The Golden String* and on the Bede Griffiths website as the time for the Symposium approaches. ■

Visit

the Bede Griffiths Website:
www.bede.griffiths.com

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