



# The Golden String

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## BEDE GRIFFITHS AND CONTEMPLATIVE RENEWAL

Shirley du Boulay

Father Bede was often consulted by people seeking spiritual guidance. A young woman still remembers asking his advice, and still remembers what he said: 'I can only tell you one thing – meditate.' Father Bede's life was held firm on the rock of his meditation practice; everything else faded into insignificance by comparison. In meditation he found the still point beyond the world of duality, the reconciliation of opposites for which he longed. The regular practice of meditation was the single thing that most attracted people to Shantivanam; the effect that years of meditation had on Father Bede was what drew people to him.

How then, did he come to practice meditation? Had it been part of his life since his first steps towards God? As a young man he had powerful experiences in prayer, living through a turbulent period that brought him close to breakdown. He would stay up all night in prayer, knowing that it would leave him weak and exhausted and driven into further confusion by considering Hindu and Buddhist mysticism. Was God a person, as Christians believe, or could he be conceived impersonally, like the Hindu Brahman? Was Absolute Reality a state, like Buddhist Nirvana? His mind was in chaos; he thought he was going mad.

Finding his vocation as a Benedictine monk brought him stability and comfort, but though he valued the meditative reading of the Scriptures and the Fathers, increasingly he found that this was not enough. In fact he never found his ideal of contemplation, a direct experience of God in prayer,

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## SHANTIVANAM CELEBRATES BEDE CENTENARY

Cyprian Consiglio

The Bede Griffiths Centenary Celebration at Shantivanam began on Thursday the 14<sup>th</sup> of December, though many began to gather already Wednesday night. There were approximately 80 persons in attendance. A large pavilion had been set up with chairs next to the tea gathering spot for the presentations. The temple was full and the dining hall was filled to overflowing, with many eating in the tea circle. (The delicious food was prepared across the street at Ananda Ashram by a caterer from Kulithalai.) About half the crowd were Indians, and the other half European, mostly English (from the Bede Griffiths Sangha) and German (a group brought by Christian Hackbarth-Johnson), plus a Canadian, a Frenchman, and an American. All the rooms at Shantivanam were full, and Ananda Ashram was also nearly full, housing many of the women religious. Many of the Indian men introduced themselves as sannyasis or as "Swami" and were clad in various shades of khavi. Many of the sisters also described themselves as having been initiated into sannyasa by Fr Bede, and quite a few of them have been brought under the mantle of the Camaldolese under Madre Michela of San Antonio in Rome. It seems that the ashram movement in India is alive and well.

There were eight presentations a day, two at a time. They were largely non-academic, and each presenter had been asked to stay within a half hour. Those who have failed to do so were often coupled with those who only spoke for ten minutes or so. Fr George and Bro Martin mainly asked people to speak about their personal experiences with Fr Bede and what impact he had on their lives. That could have been tedious—so many tributes and confessionals—but it wasn't. Many folks delighted in telling about what their lives are like now as a result of their contact with Bede. Only a few spoke mainly from a more academic vantage point, which provided some welcome variety. The first two speakers seemed to typify the kind of people outside of India that Fr Bede touched. The first was a German man who had been outside the church, a follower of yoga and zen, very put off by "institutional religion," but Bede somehow made it all make sense to him with his teaching about the *sanatana dharma*—the eternal religion, and his references to the *nirguna Brahman*, the Godhead behind all name, form and historical conditioning. The most beautiful

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in the monastery, eventually realising that this tradition had been obscured by the emphasis on philosophy and theology. For him true meditation was not an exercise in discursive reasoning, its aim should be “to pass beyond the limits of rational consciousness and awake to the inner life of the Spirit, that is to the indwelling presence of God.”<sup>1</sup>

He was also saddened that western Christianity gave scant attention to the position of the body in prayer and indeed that so few Catholics taught meditation in the sense in which he was coming to understand the word. He was deeply in sympathy with all who felt the need for contemplative prayer. Recognising that they were no longer satisfied with theories about God, they longed for direct experience, longed to learn a method of meditation, a way to reach the centre, the point beyond thought. He was impressed by people like Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington and most of all his fellow Benedictine John Main; indeed it is largely thanks to their influence that a Christian contemplative life is now within reach of all.

What then, was his own method of prayer? He would sit outside his hut for at least an hour in the morning and again in the evening, his practice being the repetition of the Jesus Prayer, (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner,”) which, after many years, he had come to find “goes on almost always when my mind is not otherwise occupied.” He explained his own practice of meditation with great precision:

To answer your questions,

- 1) My meditation period is normally an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening, but it is sometimes shortened slightly (to 3/4 hour) & sometimes lengthened to 2 or 3 hours, but not commonly).
- 2) I find that the words of the Jesus Prayer normally repeat themselves. Sometimes it goes on rather mechanically, the mind wanders; sometimes it seems to gather strength and one prays in a concentrated manner.
- 3) Sometimes the words ‘fade out,’ but rarely completely so. They seem to go on in the ‘heart’. One may not notice them, but one finds them going on, as it were.
- 4) If thoughts really intervene and cut off the prayer, then I renew the mantra again - or it renews itself, as soon as I realise what has happened.
- 5) Yes, I regard the concentration on the person of Jesus as very important. I feel that it puts one in touch with the concrete reality of his person, and ‘focuses’ the mind. To me this is the difference between Christian and Buddhist or Hindu prayer. Christian prayer reaches the Centre in and through Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Towards the end of his life Bede’s great desire and vision was the renewal of the contemplative life. He felt we needed both small groups that meet regularly and centres where people can go for longer periods. He also wanted to found lay communities and drafted documents on the life he envisaged. He suggested that the people meditating in the tradition taught by John Main were setting an example, as

groups of meditators, usually meeting once a week, were established all over the world. Bede wanted to take this idea further, forming small communities of men and women, married and single, secular and religious, dedicated to a common life of prayer and meditation while continuing to work in the world. He envisaged independent communities with no central authority, united in some kind of network. They would be primarily Christian, though open to visitors of any tradition and having contacts with a wide variety of religious organisations. Most important was that members of these communities should recognise a transcendent reality, which he saw as the greatest need in the world today.

Unless human life is centred on the awareness of a transcendent reality which embraces all humanity and the whole universe and at the same time transcends our present level of life and consciousness, there is no hope for humanity as a whole. The aim of every community should be to enable its members to realise the transcendent mystery in their lives and communicate their experience to others.

Father Bede died in 1993, leaving us his inspiration. Now it is up to us to bring his vision to reality.

### Notes

1. Bede Griffiths, ‘Indian Christian Contemplation,’ *Clergy Monthly*, vol 35, 1971.
2. Bede Griffiths, letter to Nigel Bruce, 21 August, 1981. ■

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## THE GOLDEN STRING IS ONLINE!

Each issue of **The Golden String** is now being posted — complete — on the Bede Griffiths website: [www.bede.griffiths.org](http://www.bede.griffiths.org) Back issues, from the beginning of the Bulletin in 1994, will also be found on the website. The format of the posted issues is .pdf, which requires that Adobe Reader be installed on your computer. Many of you will already have this program installed. Those who do not can download it free of charge from [www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com) — a link to this site will be found on the Bede Griffiths website.

Many of our subscribers, now that they can download **The Golden String** from the website, may find it unnecessary to have the paper copy mailed to them. If you wish to discontinue your paper subscription, let us know — e.g. by an e-mail [after February 1, 2007 to [bruno@contemplation.com](mailto:bruno@contemplation.com)] — and we will remove your name from the mailing list — important for subscribers outside N. America; international postage rates are high!

Teresa Matyniak, our very competent webmaster, has taken the website in hand once again, and continues to make improvements. We urge you to look at this beautiful website again, if you have not done so recently. Current and back issues of the newsletter of the Bede Griffiths Sangha (UK) are available there, and a number of new articles have been added to the Wisdom Christianity section. Other features include current and future events, and lists of relevant academic theses and dissertations and other resources. ■



## A YEAR OF CELEBRATIONS

Bruno Barnhart

While the year 2003, tenth anniversary of Bede Griffiths' *mahasamadhi*, was marked by several significant commemorative events, the year 2006, hundredth anniversary of Bede's birth, brought a more abundant harvest of memory and thought, personal reflection and scholarly discussion. The conference in California — *Carrying Forward the Contemplative and Prophetic Vision of Bede Griffiths* — was reported in the last issue of *The Golden String*. Elsewhere in this present issue you will find accounts of the celebrations at Shantivanam, at Camaldoli, in Italy and at Osage Monastery in Oklahoma. Here I will recall several other commemorative events of the year, witnessing to the continuing vitality of Bede's legacy.

**England.** The Bede Griffiths Sangha presented *A Vision for the Twenty-First Century*. Nearly ninety Sangha members were present, as well as Fr. George Nelliyanil, Prior of Shantivanam, and Fr. Cyprian Consiglio of New Camaldoli. Three speakers were featured: Keith Ward, Caitlin Matthews, and Timothy Freke. Professor Ward, speaking on *The Perennial Philosophy* (main theme of the gathering), presented the views of Thomas Aquinas, of Sankara and of Ramanuja, on the ultimate Reality and human approach to union with that Reality.

Caitlin Matthews spoke, from her own experience, on double belief, or double belonging — a theme obviously central in the life and thought of Bede Griffiths. Our double belief, she concluded, expresses a striving for unity, a delighting in truth, the embrace of the lover and the beloved.

Timothy Freke spoke on '*Lucid Living*,' which he summarized in "seven insights," which included "life is a mystery", "now is all you know," "the world exists in you," "all is one" and, finally, "being one is loving all." This last insight, he emphasized, sums it all up.

Brother Martin of Shantivanam, one of the featured speakers, was not able to come to England for the gathering, but sent his paper. *The Spiritual Vision & Legacy of Father Bede.*, focused upon Bede's transcending of religious divisions and his conception of nonduality. (*extract on p. 10*)

The event was enlivened by Indian music (by Indian musicians and Fr. Cyprian) and dance.

**Germany.** Michael von Brück organized a 'birthday party' for Father Bede at his Academy in Munich on December 18, featuring readings from Bede's books, a film about him and a lecture by Dr. von Brück.

**South Africa.** On May 13, about twenty people gathered at **Ananda Kutir Ashram** (Capetown) to celebrate the life of Father Bede. After introductory prayers and chants (including some from Shantivanam), the group listened to a tribute to Fr. Bede by Raimon Panikkar and watched a biographical film. Then Fr. John Oliver spoke on his experience of the Ashram and on Bede's vision. The gathering concluded with music, meditation, prayers and *arati*. ■

## BEDE'S CENTENARY

### CELEBRATED IN ITALY

Robert Hale

Some 130 participants gathered from all over Italy for the Centenary Conference on Fr. Bede Griffiths offered at the thousand year old Monastery of Camaldoli in the Tuscan mountains. The Conference, held from November 3 to November 5, featured the Prior General of the Camaldolese monks, Fr. Bernardino Cozzarini, a close friend of Fr. Bede and the Ashram, who spoke on Fr. Bede's deep contemplative experience. Fr. Alessandro Barban, prior of the 1,000 year old Camaldolese monastery of Fonte Avellana, spoke on Fr. Bede as monk, living icon of *advaita*. Fr. Joseph Wong, monk of New Camaldoli, spoke on Fr. Bede's Christology as key to Christian non-duality. And Fr. Robert Hale, monk of New Camaldoli, spoke on Fr. Bede's prophetic ecclesiology. The open discussions were very lively, and Professor Antonia Tronti offered the conclusion to the Conference. Indian nuns contributed Ashram liturgical elements to the Eucharistic celebrations. The papers presented will be published in Italy.

One of the areas that the speakers and participants explored was the sources of Fr. Bede's thought. His incredibly wide-ranging reading was noted, from literature to theology to spirituality, including the classics of Hindu and other religions. Alessandro Barban noted how Bede would "consume" a text, ponder it, digest it, make it profoundly his own. St. Thomas Aquinas was mentioned as a significant source for Bede, the *Summa Theologica* being the basic text for his monastic priesthood studies, but read by Bede in a sapiential way, not as an academic neo-Thomist. Then the importance of Karl Rahner upon Bede's later thought was stressed by Joseph Wong, who mentioned that Rahner's collected works were in the Ashram library, and many sections underlined and commented upon in the margin in pencil by Fr. Bede—Fr. Thomas Matus had confirmed this to Wong. And Bede himself had mentioned to Wong during a visit to New Camaldoli his strong admiration for Rahner, confirmed by some texts of Bede. Then I mentioned Teilhard de Chardin as a significant influence on Bede, also for Bede's larger vision of a compassionate Church finally encompassing all of humanity, indeed all of creation in the cosmic Christ. I cited my article on this topic that appeared in the *Golden String!* Teilhard's influence, also through Monchinin, was reiterated by one of the participants, Paolo Trianni, currently finishing his doctorate on Le Saux.

But a participant raised an interesting question: if Bede was so rooted in these western thinkers, what was he able to gain from India? How did Hinduism make a difference for his Christology and ecclesiology? The speakers had noted from the beginning that Bede was not a systematic theologian, but a wisdom figure with a vision. He was nourished by these wisdom figures of the West, but also by so

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much wisdom of the East. The key category of *advaita* was mentioned, as challenging all his reflection, also regarding Christ and the Church. Noted also was the extent to which Bede was influenced by the pervasive “anima” of India, and the Hindu reverence for the Divine Mother, which confirmed his own mystical experience and caused him to challenge the masculinist/animus domination of western theological categories and ministries.

There seemed to be a consensus at the end that Bede remains a giant of a figure, offering so much insight regarding such a range of human concerns, and achieving a profound synthesis in his writings and in his life. ■

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### OSAGE MONASTERY CELEBRATES Pascaline Coff

One of the many celebrations this year in honor of Fr. Bede Griffiths’ 100th Birthday (1906-2006) was held May 20-21, 2006 at Osage+Monastery in Sand Springs, Oklahoma USA. The two day *mahasamadhi* anniversary and Hundredth Birthday celebration began on May 20th with a conference by Fr. Bruno Barnhart, from New Camaldoli in Big Sur, California, who spoke on “The Revolution in Christian Vision Today”, which included teachings from Bede Griffiths, Karl Rahner and Thomas Merton.

The following day there was a pilgrimage to The Hindu Temple of Greater Tulsa. The ashramites and friends of Bede Griffiths were hosted by Swami Venugopal Gaptu and Rajagopal Raghavan. The latter gave a talk on the *murtis* and festivals of the temple. The pilgrims then returned to Osage+Monastery for creative Vespers in the sundance circle with the Fire Blessing. After a buffet supper the celebration concluded with a second conference by Fr. Bruno at St. Bede’s Hall entitled “Bede Griffiths and Karl Rahner,” much appreciated by all. ■

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### NEWS

- Fr. George Nelliyanil, Camaldolese Prior of Shantivanam, has been named President of the Benedictine Inter-religious Dialogue Commission for India and Sri Lanka. The group will meet in February on the theme of poverty in the different religions.
- John Douglas spoke at the annual Thomas Merton dinner at St. Bernard’s Church in Tulsa on Dec. 2, on “Knowing Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths and You.”
- Jill Hemmings and Adrian Rance have been coordinating the activities of the **Bede Griffiths Sangha**, based in England, for the past ten years. At the time of the Sangha gathering in July, Jill and Adrian retired from this role. Under their leadership the Sangha has grown to an active network of hundreds. Jill and Adrian will devote their skills and energy to the recently formed **Bede Griffiths Charitable Trust**. ■

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### A HOMILY ON PAUL’S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS (1:6-10) (*Shantivanam, 1988*) Bede Griffiths

St. Paul is facing this problem of the Judaizing party in the Church who wanted to make the Gentiles undergo circumcision to keep the Law. And Paul is resisting it with all his might; we can see that he is terribly upset about it. He attacks them vigorously:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

St. Paul saw that Jesus had brought something new into Judaism; he transformed it. Judaism had its own unique values: it was given by God; it had the Lord and Prophets; it had all these prophecies and expectations. But Christ brought something new into it; it brought an inner transformation. And when people tried to go back to Judaism after that, back to the Circumcision and the Law, they were rejecting Christ. That was Paul’s understanding.

If we reflect on this we can see how something new can come into a religion and transform it. It is a little like the “Water and the Wine.” At the Marriage at Cana in Galilee, Jesus changed the water into wine. The water is the water of purification for the Jews and it stood for the Jewish religion. And then he transformed it into wine; he brought something new which transformed that religion and people didn’t realize it; they thought they could just go on with all the old customs and bring Christ into it but it really wouldn’t make any great difference. But for St. Paul, it made all the difference; once you accept Christ then you relativize the whole Law. That was the point of the whole thing; it was to relativize; it is no longer absolute. And these converts had not realized this.

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed.

That is very strong language. But Paul feels really that the whole Gospel depends on this; once you go back to the Law, you are changing the Gospel and Christ becomes secondary; you have to accept Him, he has a certain place in your religion but he is no longer the center of it, the source and the inspiration of the whole. It has changed its character.

As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still pleasing men, I should not be a servant of Christ.

He feels that the whole Gospel, really, turns on this  
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and I think it still has a very great importance — that is, the way that a religion can be transformed; how something enters into it which brings to it a new dimension altogether. Judaism is a very profound religion; it was probably the most profound religion in the world at the time. It had the Law and Moses and the Prophets and it had all these gifts of God, it had the Temple, the synagogue and the great festivals; as a whole it was a complete religion and it still is. For many Jews that still remains the religion of God, the unsurpassable religion revealed to Israel.

But Paul thought that Christ had brought something new to transform the whole thing. I am sure you could find analogies in science. I'm not a scientist, but you can introduce some element into a thing and the whole mixture will be totally transformed. And that is really how Paul sees what happened with the coming of Christ. And perhaps I should say that it has a lesson for us all; there are many secondary elements in Christianity and you can be very much occupied with these secondary elements. There really is, I think, an analogy.

Take the Latin in the Mass. Many of you don't remember, but before the Second Vatican Council everybody considered Latin to be the language of the Church. You could not have a Mass in any other language. It wasn't allowed to use any other language. That would be thought completely contrary to the Law of God. We never imagined it could be changed. I always recall that I was at a meeting in London — in 1950, it must have been — and Bishop Butler, who was one of the leading authorities, suddenly said, "I can't see how we can make any progress unless we can have the vernacular." It was the first time that anybody in authority had said that publicly; anybody who spoke of the vernacular in the liturgy was considered a sort of lunatic, just one of these fringe people with their fantastic ideas. And in a few years, the Church had totally accepted the vernacular and now it is normal. This is a small example, but involved something very vital. Some people thought that Latin, like the "old Law", must be kept. Don't forget that John XXIII wrote an encyclical stating that all theology should be taught in Latin. And nobody took any notice of it. Amazing! It was totally ignored. But he tried; so many people in Rome were pushing him to do it. They wanted all theology in Latin. Then you've got your Latin canon law. They wanted a complete and unchangeable Latin religion, like Judaism, an integral religion given by God to be accepted by everybody. Then the Council awakened to a new vision of Christ, a new understanding of the Church and the Gospel of the Church, and changed the whole scene.

We have a similar problem today; there are people who would like to go back. For example, there is Archbishop Lefebvre; he is a very dangerous person. He has two or three seminaries, dozens of priests, or maybe even hundreds, and he is going to make bishops if he can. He wants to keep the old religion, just as the Judaizers wanted to keep the old religion, bringing Christ in but keep-

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## THE REBIRTH OF CHRISTIAN WISDOM

**Bruno Barnhart**

Reborn out of the critical purification of recent centuries, 'Christian wisdom' awakens to new potencies which include a theological interpretation of history and culture. A new historical *gnosis* emerges late in the day to open our historical development itself to theological understanding. For seven centuries, Christian wisdom has remained still as a seed in the ground, bare as a tree in winter, while a new world sprang up and flourished in the light of Western rationality. Now, when the widespread branches of this historical movement have borne their fruit and the dazzling rational light is itself declining, the dawn of a deeper awakening can already be sensed. The main currents of this new wisdom will no longer be 'monastic.' But the light in which it unfolds — in which person, world and history become newly transparent to the central mystery — will ultimately be, as always, the uncreated light in which contemplative life is at home. ■

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ing it within in the Jewish tradition. So Lefebvre wants to keep the old religion, make some little changes to bring things up to date, but not accept the basic principle of the Vatican Council; that is his idea. Since the change has come, many Catholics think it has brought confusion and so — why not go back to the old way.

It is the same kind of challenge. But Paul saw through all that; all these laws and regulations, the Latin in the Mass and so on, these are totally secondary things. Christ is something totally new, something which changes your own life and your own outlook. We have to discover Christ anew. You can't just take Christ on trust as he is passed down to us in the catechism and in the old textbooks of theology; he is buried in those books. The Second Vatican Council brought the living Christ to us once again as something deeply meaningful for the Church and the world; now the transformation can take place. The analogy is not complete, but its very significant and we need to reflect on it. We must have the living Christ. To preach the dead Christ of the manuals of theology has no meaning today at all. It has to be the living Christ who is related to the world today to Hinduism and the other religions, to the secular world, to the whole state of the world in which we are living. That is the living Christ and that is what we have to preach. There is no need to go back to the old traditional language and methods; that is now meaningless. That is not growth. Newman said, "Life is growth and growth means change." As long as you live you have to change. There is continuity; growth is change in continuity. Without the continuity, you just wander anywhere. But without the change, you stagnate; you just become fossilized and dead. And the Church could become dead like that, turning to the past and not allowing itself to grow. This is a problem with all religions; we must all have change, but with continuity. ■



**BEDE’S PROPHETIC EDGE (concluded)**

**PART IV: THE ELDERLY**

**Robert Hale**

In 1991, when Bede was 85, he was again visiting the West, and I had the great honor of showing him about the Graduate Theological Union campus at Berkeley. He very much affirmed the open, ecumenical and interreligious character of the G.T.U. He explored the bookstore with particular relish and purpose—he was purchasing for the Shantivanam library back in India. He asked me what I would recommend as the best books in the areas of feminist, black, latino, native American and gay spirituality and theology. The G.T.U. bookstore has shelves devoted to all these specific areas. And I was amazed by his openness and enthusiasm—he seemed like a young seminarian beginning his studies! Some of our visitors from abroad (even from just beyond Berkeley!) remain perplexed, even threatened by the G.T.U. and its bookstore. But here was an elderly monk from another continent delighted by the challenges of these new areas of spirituality and theology. What an example for Catholics, I reflected to myself, for the church, for the aging, for everyone!

We are just beginning to realize the depths of the prejudice of “ageism” in the West. If life is all about self assertion and acquiring, productivity and achievement, then the elderly will be viewed as “over the hill,” an economic and emotional burden to society. Bede prophetically critiqued this prejudice, and proposed, in his writing and particularly in his life, an entirely different perspective. Utilizing the tripartite anthropology of body, psyche and spirit found in the New Testament (cf. 1 Thess. 5:23) and in some of the patristic and medieval writings, Bede argued that the early years through adolescence constitute the phase of “the gradual growth of physical maturity...during that time the mind and the character are beginning to develop, sexual desires are awakening and the person comes to the border of maturity.”<sup>1</sup> Then the middle years “are the stages of *psychological maturity*; the capacities which have been developing in adolescence come to flower, and normally the person marries, has a family, they take work, find a profession, and they develop all their different powers for sport, for arts and poetry and all the different aspects of life.”<sup>2</sup>

But what afterwards? Bede notes: “Now most people think that is the end of life and the aim is to prolong that period as long as possible into the fifties and sixties. And when that begins to decline, your faculties begin to decline, you can’t do what you did before, you thing you’re failing, and so old age is a gradual senescence, a gradual loss of power. And I want to suggest the opposite.”<sup>3</sup> We Westerners tend to have a dualistic anthropology, the “computer in the ape” concept of analytic mind in the body. But Bede insists, with much of ancient anthropology, that there is, beyond the physical and the psyche/mind, a whole decisive



third dimension of the human person, the spirit. He then argues that our later years offer the privileged period for our spiritual powers to flourish: “The spiritual is precisely the part which transcends the physical and psychological and opens us to the eternal...so old age should be the flowering of the whole personality, and in a deep sense I think I could say we’re not fully human persons until we enter into the third phase.”<sup>4</sup> He nuances all this by acknowledging that the spiritual dimension was there from the very beginning, and for some people is profoundly flourishing even in early years. But he does propose this general pattern, which invests the later years with immense significance.

Bede then indicates, in prophetic manner, the final and definitive mysterious passage, for which the older years provide privileged preparation: “And when the material body is shed, then the soul, the psyche, has a greater freedom and is able to unite with the spirit in a more meaningful way, and the whole personality, the whole being, finally passes and reaches its fulfillment, not in this world of space and time, but in the eternal world of reality. So that is the hope of the future.”<sup>5</sup>

**Conclusion**

We have traced in these pages how Bede’s life was lived on the margins, and from there he spoke and wrote and acted prophetically, challenging the institutional church, seeking to help the poor, to promote interreligious dialogue, to affirm women and the feminine, to protect and advance the rights of homosexual people, and to stress the privileged significance of the later years. And always from a deep contemplative center, and indicating beyond earthly struggles the transcendent Realm where all tears are wiped away.

And what about us, Bede would enquire. Where are our lives lived out? What is our witness? What are we doing about it? And what is our ultimate horizon?

**Notes**

1. Bede Griffiths, *Satsang on Aging*, Bede Griffiths Website, [www.bede.griffiths.org/satsang.htm](http://www.bede.griffiths.org/satsang.htm)
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*

**FINDING GOD’S WILL AT SHANTIVANAM**

Shantivanam became a place where people might find ‘the will of God.’ Bede would advise that this will can only be known “by trying and making mistakes.” Over time a perception of continual guidance would be discerned. He referred to one of the continual activities of life at Shantivanam as meditation. In this important activity, Bede would say, the meditator is “guided to meet the right people, to go to the right place, to do the right thing, and see that [they] are not managing [their] life just by [themselves]. God is acting in [them]. . . We are part of the rhythm of the universe. Once we tune in to it, things begin to happen . . . If we are attentive and watchful and flow with that rhythm, then we do [what is] right and are moved by the Spirit.”

(Meath Conlan in *Bede Griffiths: Friend & Gift of the Spirit*, p. 51) ■

## NEW PUBLICATIONS

- **Meath Conlan: *Bede Griffiths, Friend & Gift of the Spirit***, Templegate Publishers, Springfield, Illinois, 2006; paperbound, 124 pages, \$20.00. (See extract in the column to the right.)
- ***Diverse Journeys*: [www.diversejourneys.net](http://www.diversejourneys.net)**, the web-site of Meath Conlan, has now been updated.
- **Raimon Panikkar's *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery***, translated by Joseph Cunneen, published by Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 141 pages, 2006.
- **Bede Griffiths' *The Marriage of East and West*** has been translated into Spanish by Magdalena Puebla to be published in Buenos Aires, Argentina, by Bonum.
- **Adrian Rance (ed.), *Falling in Love with India: From the Letters of Bede Griffiths***, 420 pages, Shantivanam Ashram, 2006. Available in UK from Beech Tree Cottage, Selling, Faversham, Kent, ME 13 9RH. Contact: [adrian.b.rance@btinternet.com](mailto:adrian.b.rance@btinternet.com), 01227 752871 (See description below)
- **Bruno Barnhart's *The Future of Wisdom: Toward a Rebirth of Sapiential Christianity***, is to be published by Continuum, New York, in March of 2007 in paperback, 224 pages, at \$29.95. (See extract on p. 5) ■

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## A COLLECTION OF BEDE'S LETTERS

*Falling in Love with India* (edited by Adrian Rance and published by Shantivanam Ashram) is a very personal and moving account of Fr. Bede's journey of discovering India. Starting with his exploration of Indian thought and spirituality during the 1940's, the letters then cover in wonderful detail the emergence of what he called his 'Indian Scheme' in the early 1950's, his eventual arrival in India in 1955, his attempt to start a foundation at Kengeri and his eventual foundation of Kurisumala Ashram with Francis Mahieu in 1956. The letters end with a description of his 60th birthday party in 1966, in which he makes the somewhat startling revelation that he thought he was actually born in 1907! The letters which make up the collection were written to his close friend Dr. Mary Allen (Known as Micheline) and her companion, Mary Dunbar. It was Mary Allen who paid for his ticket to India and for the building of his first monastery at Kengeri, near Bangalore. The letters give a unique insight into the development of his thought and his spiritual life, and into his struggles to develop his monastic ideal in India. These letters were not available when Shirley du Boulay published her biography. Research and publication of his letters is just getting underway, and it is to be hoped that this first collection will encourage people who hold letters from Fr. Bede to make them available for publication.

(from the Newsletter of the Bede Griffiths Sangha) ■

## BEDE'S UNDERSTANDING

### OF DZOGCHEN Meath Conlan

Bede Griffiths' understanding of Tibetan *Dzogchen* meditation had matured since his discovery of Namkhai Norbu's treatise on the Six Vajra Verses. He brought this ripened thinking with him to his meeting with Geshe Loden in Melbourne. Bede's discovery of the Tibetan view of non-duality was valuable for him as a way of clarifying the depths of his Christian faith . . .

*Dzogchen*, meaning "Great Perfection," claimed Bede's keen attention. The Tibetans regard it as a means of realisation and of experiencing the fullness of wisdom and compassion. He felt there were striking similarities between this system and Christianity. He said: "In *Dzogchen*, the primordial state, the supreme reality, where everything is contained in perfect wholeness, fullness, and bliss, is realised suddenly, without the need for preparatory steps of *yoga* and meditation training." Likewise, for Bede, in the Christian tradition, contemplation is a gift, a 'grace' from God. It is not something one acquires through personal exertion. . .

As far as Bede understood *Dzogchen*, new students moved from the basic stage of training called *sutra* — following the meditation teaching of the Buddha by way of doctrine and discipline such as *yoga* and other complex rituals. The next stage, called *Tantra*, focuses on the body, the breath, the blood, the five senses and the feelings. . .

There is a third stage in *Dzogchen* practice called the Primordial State. This, Bede reflected, exists from the beginning, hidden behind the body, the feelings, the senses, and all limitations. Through *Dzogchen*, the practitioner realises the Buddha nature within, thus entering into Buddhahood. The aim of this practice is to become open to the infinite and the eternal, which is in everyone and everything throughout the cosmos . . .

*Dzogchen* (according to Bede) can teach Christians the necessity of "integrating all levels of reality in the supreme wisdom." In Buddhism this is called *prajna*. In Christianity it is called *gnosis*, or Divine Knowledge. Buddhists understand the Primordial State as total oneness: everything gathered into unity, and then manifesting itself in the multiplicity of the universe — earth, sky, nature, and people, all manifestations of the supreme wisdom reflected as in a mirror, a mirror of the primordial state. The idea of reaching such total oneness is very close, said Father Bede, to the Christian idea of *pleroma*, fullness. However, the idea that Christ is the one in whom the fullness of Divine Reality is totally present has not the same implication for Buddhists. In his later years, Father Bede realised that he needed to exercise a degree of prudence when tempted to draw too firm a conclusion as to how Buddhist and Christian mysticism were aligned. Ultimately, the fullness of Divine Reality, whether understood according to the insights of Buddhism or Christianity, was beyond thought and beyond words.

(From Meath Conlan's *Bede Griffiths: Friend & Gift of the Spirit*, pp. 86-89). ■

## The Golden String

### Shantivanam

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thing that he said was that at one point he discovered that God was also the spirit in the heart, and that this spirit was love, and so suddenly he could pray “thy will be done,” because that meant surrendering to the love inside of him rather than the God outside. A Swede now living in Australia presented his academic research on Bede’s impact on that continent. Bede had been there twice, once in 1982 and again in 1991. The speaker spoke especially about the growth of small Christian contemplative communities.

A handful of sisters spoke, many with virtually the same story, that they had been members of active religious congregations and had experienced some kind of spiritual awakening specifically to the wisdom of their own Indian spiritual tradition either through Fr Bede or guided by him. They then wanted to live an eremitic-ashram life and had battled with their congregations and sometimes local bishops, before finally getting settled in some place. Many of them report having taken *sannyasa diksha* from Fr Bede.

One sister, a fiery little 77 year-old, wanted to move back to Kerala, her native state. The bishop told her no, that he did not want her their living that kind of life. (India is very conservative when it comes to women being that independent, she told me later, especially in Kerala.) She said, “I told him as respectfully as possible, ‘I understand your feelings, my Lord, but perhaps you have not read the constitutions of our country? I am a citizen of India and I can live wherever I choose.’” Another sister told of returning to her convent after a year at Shantivanam, whereupon another sister, with whom she had had some problems, challenged her, saying, “So you have been in the ashram for a year. I do not see any halo around you!” And the first sister answered, “Ah, but there is a change. Now I can see the halo around you!” Sr. Stephany has an ashram nearby and is a good friend of Shantivanam. She has been raising a now five-year old girl since she was nine months old that all the young monks here treat like a little sister. She too put herself under Bede after she discovered a new depth to her spirituality by reading the *sruti*—sacred texts of other traditions. She had been raised in Burma so had already been exposed to Buddhism from a young age. Her foundational experience came from the teaching about meditation from the Mundaka Upanishad (II-ii-4):

OM is the bow;  
the soul is the arrow;  
and Brahman is its target.  
It is to be hit by those who are unerring.  
One should become one with It just like an arrow.

This teaching led her to spend five years in silence under Bede’s guidance before beginning her ashram. She has now taught this “bow meditation” to countless numbers of other religious sisters and retreatants.

It was amazing to learn how many Indian sisters

came to spend time here to learn from Fr Bede a new way to be, a new spirituality. He was very careful that they first get permission from their immediate superiors, but was also not afraid to bend a few rules.

There was a major presentation by a Swami Satchitananda Bharati, a former high-ranking officer in the Indian Air Force, now a high-ranking sannyasi in India, doing marvelous work all over the country with something he calls the National Regeneration Movement. He too was outside the church before putting himself under Bede’s guidance, and was later baptized. He is very sophisticated and articulate and told some marvelous stories. He also sang an introductory chant before his talk, a little snippet of the Svetasvatara Upanishad that was a favored text of both Abhishiktananda and Bede. Many will recognize it from the back of the postcard with Bede’s picture along with the Colossians canticle and from the final quote in the Abhishiktananda movie “An Interior Journey”:

*Vedahametam Purusham mahantam  
Aditya varnam Tamasaparastat  
Tameva viditratrumrityameti  
Nanya pantha vita tayanaya.*

I know the Great Person of the color of the sun beyond darkness.  
Only by knowing that one do we overcome death.  
There is no other way to go.

The swami said that he and Fr Bede used to sing this together all the time. Another discovery was from a sister who introduced us to Abhishiktananda’s Sanskrit version of the Jesus Prayer, which she also sang. It’s slightly different than the original Russian one:

*Pahimam Ishaputra Prabhu Yeshu  
Mrtyum Jaya Satpurusha  
He pahiman Papatmanam*

Save me, O Son of God, Lord Jesus,  
Conqueror of Death, True Purusha  
Save me, a sinner.

Speaking of the Jesus Prayer, Sr Mary Louise of Ananda, who nursed Bede in his last days, told this story from the time during which she attended him near his death:

... we all know that Bede prayed the Jesus Prayer for over 40 years, but none of us heard him formulate it. Well, this was the moment. All of a sudden I heard “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me” (pause) and the right hand beating the chest “a sinner...” and from that day onwards, each time I saw the prophet, in tears—struggling—nervous—exhausted in that bed, I would just pray: “Lord Je-

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**Shantivanam** (Continued from page 8)

sus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me” (pause). I would remain silent and Bede beating his chest would say “a sinner.” Everything would settle for some moments and then all had to begin anew.

A Fr. Selvaraj, a rather well known teacher here in India, gave a long, wonderful sharing. His was probably the best talk, at least for me. He is a Tamilian priest who started out a theology professor, having done his dissertation on Gandhi. At some point in his career as a formator while introducing his young charges to life with the poor, he himself had a conversion experience and started advocating for and working with the poor, which lost him his good standing in church and society. When everything finally fell apart he came to the ashram for a year, and after having been a theologian and a leading member and teacher in the Charismatic Renewal, suddenly realized that he had no idea how to pray. He said about himself, “What I thought was prayer was not really prayer. My prayer had become a confession of my inability to pray.” And so Bede taught him how to pray, and seemed to do so by first deconstructing him before building him up again. The things he shared that Bede had taught him were incredible:

“You must go beyond words! You are living too much in the office! Come home!”

“You have fabricated an idol who is an object! God is not an object, and you are not the subject. The subject of prayer is God who prays in Jesus in the Spirit.”

“You must not make an effort to make contact with God in prayer; you must strive to remove everything that prevents you from listening to God speaking in you.”

And this on the “self”:

“We are all fragmented and disintegrated. The real self is God with Christ in the Spirit. When we say “I” it is a self fabricated by social conventions and compulsions, a big balloon that needs to be punctured.”

Bro Martin gave the last long presentation. Before going into the content of his presentation, he talked about his experience of meeting Fr Bede, coming from a poor family, searching for truth, studying all the philosophers and theologians he could find when he was in seminary, and then finally meeting Fr Bede who assured him that everything was okay, that he was not crazy for what he was thinking, and invited him to come to the ashram.

Then Fr George, in his closing remarks, told of his first meeting Fr Bede when he was five years old and went with his family to visit his uncle, Amaldas, while the latter was still a monk with Fr Bede at Kurisamala. Sr. Mary Louise said afterward what many were probably thinking: humble as he is, no one ever knew that about George.

Each evening we were treated to something special. The first night there was a concert by three of the monks;

the second night Bro. John Robert premiered a Powerpoint presentation on the life of Fr Bede; and the third night there was a performance of Indian classical dance by a troupe from Kali Kauvery music school in Trichy.

Since Fr Bede’s birthday, December 17<sup>th</sup>, fell on a Sunday the Mass was doing double duty — Mass for the regular Tamil-speaking villagers who come as well as the conclusion of our centenary celebration. What a crowd! And what decorations! The dirt paths were all painted with more *kolam*—chalk designs than usual, the temple itself was garlanded with flowers everywhere, and the graves of the three founders were covered with flowers as well. Just to give a quick idea of the beautiful mixture of languages and styles: we started with the Sanskrit mantras, then instead of a reading from one of the usual sources of Universal Wisdom there was a long reading from The Golden String, on Fr Bede’s experience of discovering God in nature. The psalms plus the Benedictus were in Tamil, then Mass proper started with another Tamil hymn from a new book that Bro. Pinto had put together of Tamil religious hymns. Then he and I intoned (and a good number of the assembly answered!) the Kyrie from the Mass ‘of the Angels’ followed by the Glory to God sung in Tamil. There is a specific beautiful melodic formula that everyone seems to know, for the opening greeting, to introduce the Gospel, and for blessings, etc. Another beautiful moment was provided by a swami who was playing a set of finger cymbals all through Mass for virtually every piece of music, only not really in the same *tala*—rhythm as anything he was accompanying! But during communion he sat on the ground and broke into a beautiful *bhajan* of his own that many knew how to answer. Mass went on like that with a great mixture of languages and songs, and then a big procession to the graves to sing another *bhajan*—*Jaya Guru Deva*— and to spread more flowers, to light candles.

Everyone was invited for breakfast, so we were about 150. And then preparations began in earnest for lunch. It was estimated that 1000 came, as the tradition is to feed all the villagers on Fr. Bede’s birthday. Tables were set up all over the compound, piles of banana leaves to eat from, and buckets and buckets of food. People poured in from the village and others came from as far as Trichy. We monks and guests did most of the serving ourselves, which we all enjoyed immensely.

What was so interesting about the stories from the Indians is how many of them re-discovered their own tradition through Fr Bede. It is not only Westerners; it is Indians themselves who had never been exposed to anything other than a Western approach to Christianity. If it is possible to understand more, then those of us from the West who were visiting understand more what this man meant to Indians. He was indeed their guru, their father and, as some said, their mother, their spiritual guide and inspiration, and they were and are hopelessly devoted to him. Fr George and Bro Martin should be and are rightly proud of the centenary celebration. They intuitively knew what they were doing and the whole thing unfolded gracefully and then gently closed back up again like a beautiful flower. ■

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## The Golden String

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### JESUS' NONDUAL EXPERIENCE

**John Martin Sahajananda**

There are four important statements that Jesus made: 'I am the light of the world,' 'you are the light of the world,' 'I and the Father are one,' and 'this is my body and this is my blood; take and eat.' In order to understand these statements, we need to understand the spiritual journey of Jesus. Both the Upanishad tradition and the spiritual journey of Jesus reveal the same truth. The legacy and the vision of Fr. Bede is none other than the legacy and the vision of the Upanishadic sages and of Jesus Christ.

Bede's encounter with Indian spirituality helped him to understand the *advaitic* (nondual) experience of Jesus. The *advaitic* experience of the Upanishad sages is towards unity with the divine, tending to neglect creation and human relationships. The *advaitic* experience of Jesus is towards God and also towards human beings. Moving towards God it says 'I and God are one,' and moving towards human beings it says, 'whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do to me.' The uniqueness of the message of Jesus was this radical love both of God and of the neighbor.

*(from 'The Spiritual Vision and Legacy of Fr. Bede')* ■

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**Visit the Bede Griffiths Website:**  
**[www.bede Griffiths.org](http://www.bede Griffiths.org)**

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