

The Golden String

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BEDE GRIFFITHS’ NEW VISION OF REALITY Cyprian Consiglio

For me, the main contribution that Fr Bede made to a new understanding of cosmology is the same as what he articulated so well in terms of a new anthropology: to always recognize the spiritual, psychological and physical aspects of all created reality, and to understand that the human person is at once spirit, soul and body. This was the one topic I heard Fr Bede speak on in 1992, and it permanently changed my way of thinking about and seeing reality.

In a sense to speak of a “new cosmology” of Fr Bede Griffiths, or even of his “New Vision of Reality,” the title of his last major publication, is ironic. Fr Bede was convinced that as we entered this new age western science was slowly recovering, re-discovering, the ‘Perennial Philosophy,’ the wisdom that had prevailed throughout the world from 500 AD through 1500 CE. What is really happening in our new age is that Western science is slowly catching up with the mysticism, and “discovering” what especially the oriental spiritualities and philosophies had never doubted: *that the material universe is pervaded by and finds its explanation in a transcendent reality.* That was precisely what had already taken place in India in the fifth century before Christ, “when there was a breakthrough beyond mental consciousness to the supramental with the discovery of the Ultimate Reality sustaining the whole universe.” Bede himself had discovered this perennial philosophy through the Vedanta, and then saw it latent everywhere, not least in his own Christian faith at its best.

Aldous Huxley, in his introduction to Christopher Isherwood’s translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, wrote that the focus of Indian religion “is also one of the clearest and most comprehensive summaries of the Perennial Philosophy ever to have been made.”¹ He states it in four points. First that “the phenomenal world of matter and of individualised consciousness—the world of things and animals and [human beings] and even gods—is a manifestation of a Divine

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OSAGE MONASTERY, LOOKING BACK Pascaline Coff

It all started with our very own magazine, *Spirit and Life*. In the March-April issue of 1975 the centerfold pages carried a formidable spread on a Benedictine Ashram in S. India with pictures of Fr. Bede Griffiths OSB sitting at the tea circle at Shantivanam (Forest of Peace). Having long wondered where an American Benedictine sister might go for a Sabbatical year in 1975, a letter with three questions was immediately addressed to Fr. Bede, a Benedictine monk, an Englishman and, from his writings and pictures of earlier East/West dialogue gatherings in Asia, he was reputed to be a holy and wise man. “Do you take women at the Ashram?” “Is it possible to stay for one year?” “And how much will it cost?” The response was warm and welcoming and hard to believe – they didn’t charge and Fr. Bede figured a dollar a day would cover the cost by way of donation.

The intensely delightful sabbatical (June ’76-June ’77) in India ended with a great desire “to initiate in communion with our Congregation and in behalf of it, a small community with a simplified monastic style of life, somewhere apart from our present structures and grounds, with sufficient freedom for birth and growth, life, death and resurrection.”

O+M has celebrated its blessed birth and growth, and life and is now in the process of death and resurrection. On St. Michael’s day 1978 Bishop Eusebius Beltran welcomed us warmly and both groups of Benedictine Sisters in Oklahoma welcomed us generously: the Red Plains Sisters invited us to spend overnights with them while searching for property, and the St. Joseph’s Sisters in Tulsa loaned us their former chaplain’s residence on 22nd Place until the Sand Springs property was discovered and prepared. On June 8, 1980 (Sesqui- millennial Year for Benedictines), some 250 laity joined us for an outdoor Mass and Benediction with the “foundation” monsternce from our Swiss motherhouse. Our BSPA Congregation welcomed this new foundation as our monastic ashram in the Forest of peace which it has been for the 27 years since that dedication by Bishop Beltran.

Five sisters began with one Trappist monk from Gethsemani. Fr. James Conner, OCSO had grown up in Tulsa and attended Marquette Grade School. He remained for 10 years as chaplain and member of the community before returning to Gethsemani. Srs. Trinitas, Christina and Sr. Monica have gone to heaven during these 27 years. There

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New Vision of Reality (Continued from page 1)

Ground within which all partial realities have their being. . .” Second, that human beings are capable of realizing the existence of the Divine Ground by a direct intuition that is superior to discursive reasoning, a knowledge that unites the knower with that which is known. Third, that human beings possess a double nature, “a phenomenal ego and an eternal Self, which is the inner person, the spirit, the spark of divinity within the soul.” And finally, that the end and purpose of human life is to identify oneself with this eternal Self and “so to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground.”²

Similarly, Fr Bede taught that the great insight the Vedic philosophers had come to was an understanding of the threefold nature of reality, that the world is at once physical, psychological, and spiritual. These three realms of reality are always interdependent and interwoven. In other words, according to Vedic philosophy, every physical reality has a psychological aspect, and both the psychological and physical realms have an underlying reality that is the source of both other realms—spiritual reality. The Vedic philosophers never separated these aspects.³ Fr Bede explains that this understanding of the threefold nature of the world

. . . underlies not only the Vedas but all ancient thought.

In the primitive mind (which is also the natural mind) there is no such thing as a merely physical object. Every material thing has a psychological aspect, a relation to human consciousness, and this in turn is related to the supreme spirit which pervades both the physical world and human consciousness.⁴

This cosmology was “typical of the whole ancient world which had emerged out of the mythological world of more ancient times.” Fr Bede spoke of this unitive vision as

. . . the Oriental view of the universe, which is in fact, the view of the ‘perennial philosophy’, the cosmic vision which is common to all religious tradition from the most primitive tribal religions to the great world religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.⁵

He tells us that up until the Middle Ages, in China, India, and the Islamic world as well as in Europe, a creative synthesis had been achieved and was maintained in which the physical, psychic and spiritual worlds were integrated. Economic, social, political and cultural orders were all conceived as a harmonious unity in which each human being was related to nature, to one’s fellows and to the Divine.

Often Bede wrote about how western philosophy gradually came to be dominated by a philosophy of materialism, whether implicit or explicit. According to Fr Bede this unitive vision began to be lost at the Renaissance.

After [the Middle Ages] this creative synthesis began to disintegrate. The Reformation and the Renaissance, the ‘Enlightenment’ and the French Revolution, the Russian and the Chinese Revolutions, are all stages in this process of disintegration.⁶

In *A New Vision of Reality*, beginning with Descartes’ separation of mind and matter, through Francis Bacon, Gali-

leo and Isaac Newton, he shows how by the eighteenth century all aspects of a divine reality governing the Universe had been gradually eliminated and a mechanistic system alone remained. Fr Bede also accused rationalism of setting the human mind free from the divine and communism of depriving human beings of their basic liberty and enslaving them to the material world, all as a result of a mechanistic, materialistic philosophy.⁷ Consequently, in our times we have now inherited a mind-set that separates matter from mind, and separates matter and mind from the Supreme Reality, from God.⁸ Especially the West suffers from the disease of the merely rational mind that

. . . causes us to see [matter, mind and spirit] as separate from one another, to imagine a world extended outside of us in space and time, and the mind as something separate from the external world.⁹

This eventually has affected all aspects of science from social theory such as Marxist dialectical materialism through Freudian psychology. Just as the existence of a divine Ultimate (spiritual) Reality was no longer needed in cosmology and the natural sciences, so the existence of the soul was gradually deemed unnecessary in psychology due to Freud’s initial mechanistic model, which he never fully transcended. In *A New Vision of Reality*, we see Fr Bede, who had had such a mistrust of modern science and the technological age, having immersed himself in the works of modern science in his last years, rejoicing that “the elements of the more universal and profound vision” were being recovered in the context of scientific thought today.¹⁰ He then explicates in his own words, through his own filter as mystic and monk, the work of “the new physics” of Fritjof Capra, David Bohm and Ilya Prigogine, as well as the new psychology, first of all of Carl Jung, but more recently of Karl Pribram, Ken Wilber and the emerging transpersonal psychology. Fr Bede saw far-reaching consequences for the West slowly regaining this original and ancient vision, this Perennial Philosophy, not just through modern physics but through depth psychology as well.

What is marvelous about Fr Bede’s teaching is that it always resolves in a fresh view of the human person in all our glorious transcendent capacity. From this Perennial Philosophy he comes to understand that just as all created reality has a spiritual, psychological, and material dimension, so each human being is spirit, soul, and body. This is not the typical Western way to speak of human anthropology. We do not normally distinguish spirit from soul, but speak of the human person as either body and soul or body and spirit, though we do speak of the “spiritual soul.” For example, the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church says: Sometimes the soul is distinguished from the spirit. . . . This does not introduce a duality into the soul. “Spirit” signifies that from creation [human beings] are ordered to a supernatural end and that [one’s] soul can be gratuitously raised . . . to communion with God.¹¹

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New Vision of Reality (Continued from page 2)

Fr Bede, among others, found this anthropology lacking. On the one hand he saw the need always to distinguish between the spirit and the soul, between the spiritual and the psychic; on the other hand he saw the need to understand and accentuate the importance of the spiritual realm, which brings the other two realms to their fruition.

It is this anthropology—spirit, soul and body—that became the core of Griffiths’s teaching and writings. Once, in a presentation just before his death, he said, “The body, mind, and spirit are the main focus of all my thinking presently; we have to integrate these three levels of reality that exist at every moment.”¹² As body we are part of the earth, connected to every element of creation from the beginning of time. Our soul then is the whole inner realm—matter coming into consciousness and then coming into self-consciousness and learning to harness the powers of the mind. Perhaps the rational mind is at the center, but it is surrounded by all the strata of the psyche, sub-conscious, higher states of consciousness, the collective unconscious, and psychic powers and phenomena of all sorts. But beyond both, and the source and summit of both is the realm of spirit, beyond all phenomena, beyond all thoughts and words. Our spirit is that point of human self-transcendence where we are one with the Divine spirit who is beyond all phenomena—the Tao, Brahman, the *sunyata*, *al Haqq*, the abyss of the Godhead. The human person first goes beyond mental consciousness to experience the transpersonal, trans-mental or, as Sri Aurobindo calls it, the “supramental” consciousness. Then we discover within ourselves that our ultimate “I” is one with the ground of the universe (Brahman) and the ground of human consciousness (Atman).

What Fr Bede taught me to see through his writings is that all reality is pervaded by the Divine, Atman, the Spirit; and that I too possess a double nature, that I am not only my phenomenal ego but I am an eternal Self, which is my inner person, the spirit, the spark of divinity within my soul; and, more importantly, by his example he made me long for that end and purpose of my life—to identify myself with this eternal Self and so as to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine.

Notes

1. Aldous Huxley, introduction to *Bhagavad-Gita: the Song of God*, trans. Swami Prahavananda and Christopher Isherwood (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1987), 6.
2. Huxley, 7.
3. Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality [NVR]*, 58.
4. Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West [MEW]*, 51
5. *MEW*, 51
6. Griffiths, *Return to the Center [RTC]*, 96
7. *RTC*, 96
8. *NVR*, 59
9. *NVR*, 57
10. *NVR*, 11
11. Catechism of the Catholic Church, (USCC 1994), #367, 93-94
12. Bede Griffiths, “Integration of Mind, Body and Spirit,” An Occasional Paper of the Fetzer Institute (Kalamazoo, 1994), 1.

Osage Monastery (Continued from page 1)

were 5 sisters at O+M until just recently when our eldest, Sr. Priscilla, now 91, was transferred to assisted living at the motherhouse at Clyde. This May two of the present Community will return to the motherhouse at Clyde, and two will be transferred to our monastery in Dayton, Wyoming.

The community enjoyed a weekly ‘forest day’ – a day of solitude without any common schedule of prayers or meals. One week in the year was set aside for community week without visitors, retreatants, etc. and another week was celebrated as solitude week just before Holy Week.

Over the past 27 years hundreds of private retreats have been offered to those in the area and beyond, who appreciated the peace and quietness of the Forest’s 45 acres of trails with white-tailed deer, singing birds and hungry squirrels munching on the smorgasbord of acorns. One retreatant has come annually for 26 years, the past two years coming all the way from Anchorage, Alaska.

The ashram, true to its name, has also been a place of simple lifestyle with efforts to be welcoming to people of all religions, poor and rich alike. The Benedictine Oblates at Osage now number 93 though many of these have moved out of town over these past 27 years. A large group of Friends of the Forest have generously gathered to assist the community in any way they are able.

The Sisters have been very active in the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue efforts and have been involved in the eight exchanges with the Dalai Lama and his monks and nuns, visiting each other’s monasteries and welcoming the Divine in the other.

After their basic dedication to Christ in the Eucharist, the main effort of the Sisters at O+M besides keeping contemplative prayer and its atmosphere as their goal for themselves and retreatants, has been hospitality “welcoming the Divine in the other” - all others – a perfect fit for their inter-faith dialogue efforts. The sisters believe dialogue with other religions has always been important even though practiced by only a few, but now it is crucial for all.

As a monastic ashram, from the start O+M has had a simple life style, has been open to all religions and has had intensive spiritual exercises – the three qualities of every authentic ashram. Besides their involvement in Hindu-Christian dialogue, the sisters invited several local Muslim Leaders in the area to come share with the community and some friends, for an interesting exchange on the topic of *surrender* – the very meaning of the word ‘muslim’. The sisters were delighted to learn that for them, surrender means ‘a passionate desire to be right with God’.

Osage Monastic ashram was also a Bede Griffiths Center with a collection of the latter’s books, tapes and letters. Fr. Bede visited the community in Sand Springs some five times and called it the Shantivanam of the West, hence the name Forest of Peace (shanti = peace; vanam = forest). The Bede Griffiths website was created at O+M some five years ago and has been maintained from there ever since.

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RETURN TO THE CENTER

Pascaline Coff

A surprise gift of two weeks in South India brought me with three companions back to Fr. Bede Griffith's Shantivanam Ashram in Tamil Nadu on the Kavery River. Thirty years earlier '76/77 I spent one entire year here with Sr. Maurus Allen, a Benedictine from Cullman, Alabama. Since several of the younger monks had been sent away for Seminary studies, we were "Fr. Bede's monastic community" that year. Fr. Bede was named by Cardinal Basil Hume "one of the greatest mystics of our times." We delighted in his teachings three times daily with homilies at Eucharist and Vespers and an afternoon class on some Eastern scripture as we sat on straw mats under the Coconut trees by the river.

The "return" this year was a pilgrimage of thanksgiving especially from our Benedictine Oblates at Osage+Monastery Forest of Peace and many Friends of the Forest. Many who have shared the fruits of the Oklahoma monastic Ashram wanted to extend their gratitude in a tangible way through our pilgrimage.

We were warmly welcomed by Fr. George, Prior at Shantivanam and Bro. John Martin and the community upon our arrival. My companions were Bob Doenges, Oblate of O+M; Fr. Brian Pierce, O.P. former temporary member at O+M; and Edith Stein, Friend of the Forest. Although many changes have taken place in thirty years, the vibrant spirit, the liturgy and many of the earlier known workers and friends still abound. The community now has a formation house on an adjacent property with three or four young students. Fr. George is the novice master for them. The community does a great service to the poor in the area: staffing a school for children, building many small houses in the village plus a home for the helpless aging for which they furnish food daily. Eleven young women, novices from the Mother of God Congregation, were retreating with their director while we were there. It was a joy to hear the sweet high tones as they sang the old familiar bhajans in Tamil — quite a contrast to the male voices chanting in Malayalam in Kerala where we had visited the week earlier.

Our first stop of 5 days was at Sameeksha ('integral harmony') Spirituality Center in Kalady. This is a Jesuit experimental Seminary and Dialogue Center. Fr. Sebastian Painadath, S.J. was waiting at the station for us as we arrived very early in the morning. The monsoons hardly bothered us as we reveled in the sharing Fr. Sebastian gave us on the

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Bob Doenges, one of the O+M Oblates has now purchased the property and desires to maintain it as a contemplative ashram in the spirit lived by the sisters here for the past 27 years. The new name of this budding non-profit spiritual centre will more than likely be: OSAGE FOREST OF PEACE. ■

**SIMPLICITY AND SILENCE OBSERVED:
AN ASHRAM JOURNEY IN INDIA**

Meath Conlan

By the age of nineteen and like many young Australians, Maggie Anka had already started to question the Christian foundations of her childhood. She read about Eastern religions such as Buddhism and practiced yoga, though she remained an agnostic until, in her late forties. Maggie went through a series of family and personal health issues that precipitated a sense of spiritual crisis in her life, the most serious being her husband Andy's death. By the age of fifty Maggie had a growing conviction that in the religions of Asia there was much that was close to her own core beliefs. Maggie here recounts the story of her decision to travel on and her experiences of a recent ashram journey in South India.

I still longed for a way of experiencing the life of the Spirit. So I began meditating with a small group of Christians. The method they taught me was to repeat a mantra — a method that has been strengthened thanks to the influence of Hindu meditation and yoga. Through friendships established with fellow meditators at this time I discovered the written works of the late Father Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine monk who lived for over thirty years at Sacci-

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mystical inner journey in St. John's Gospel, the mystical inner journey in Meister Eckhart, and a mystical teaching on the Bhagavad Gita. Here in Kerala we visited the birthplace and temple of Shankara, the Thomas Aquinas of India. When we journeyed on to Tamil Nadu we learned at Shantivanam that Bro. Martin had done his thesis on Shankara years earlier with a comparative study of Meister Eckhart. It was a joy to find a new edition of that in the bookstore at the Ashram. Sr. Mary Louise gave us a tour of her Ananda Ashram across the road from Shantivanam. Many sturdy huts are available for retreatants. Our last few days at Shantivanam included Eucharist in Fr. Bede's former hut and placing a lei on his tomb nearby. Fr. Brian was invited to offer the final community Eucharist the morning we were departing.

After a night train back to Kalady and a plane to Delhi, we had a 15 hr. non-stop flight to Chicago, watching on a screen as the plane went over Russia and then Greenland, without ever actually crossing the Atlantic ocean, which seemed far to the South of our curving route. India is on the move with more highways being built, many more autos and trucks on the roads and with the thousands of poor in the heart of the cities. We were so grateful to have survived the taxi rides to and from the stations as we went. We returned to the USA with still deeper gratitude for Shantivanam and for Fr. Bede and for the beautiful people of India. ■

The Golden String

Simplicity and Silence (Continued from page 4)

dananda ashram. Here he created a place of genuine inter-religious dialogue, prayer and meditation. It was his intention that every visitor, no matter their faith, should drink from the same sources of wisdom and unity that lay at the heart of all religions, and most of all, build durable friendships based on mutual respect, inclusiveness and love. His spiritual vision, I found, corresponded with my own insights. He spoke in a language that I could understand. As a disheartened Christian who sought more than was being offered through my local church I was hungry for more of what this man had to say. Having found the website dedicated to Griffiths' spiritual teachings, I also discovered that regular ashram tours were available each year from November through February. From previous visits to India I was well aware of India's deep and rich spiritual heritage. I knew there was still much to learn there, and so I resolved to return – this time with the spiritual quest as my principal goal.

I decided to join with a small group of people under the auspices of Dr Meath Conlan of *Diverse Journeys* – an Australian organization that seeks to assist people travelling beyond the crossroads in their lives through specialised and unique small-group tours to spiritually rich and culturally diverse locations.

In Chennai I joined others who made up our group. We boarded the comfortable bus and headed south, eventually staying nearly a full week at Saccidananda and Ananda ashrams. I began to sense immediately that the experience of India, whether in a large and bustling city such as Chennai, or in the lush coconut palm fringed paddy fields of the south forces one to be in the *now!* I tend to feel more, alive, alert and aware when in India, while balancing the contrasts of vibrant colours with the grey drabness of poverty and neglect, while appreciating the aromatic odors in contrast to the putrid smells of clogged canals and drains, and comparing the ever-present signs of desperate poverty with the rapidly growing affluence. Through it all, I found myself constantly aware of the smiling, accepting faces of the people living close to their faith day by day.

During those days spent on the banks of the River Cauvery at Shantivanam ('Forest of Peace'), I learned important lessons: in particular that simplicity and silence are ways of building lives and communities with peace, harmony and love. Though only a relatively short stay, living a meditative daily schedule in my simple hut among the bougainvillea, banana trees and coconut palms, and within the ashram community, were reminders that it is actually possible to at least start again to release one's attachment to materialism and the ego.

Within the community at Shantivanam there are two persons I wish to speak of: Benedictine Sister Mary Louise, who for me was Love in motion; a woman filled with joy, peace, faith, strength and practicality. She oversees every aspect of life at Ananda ashram, from the cooking of our daily meals, to the running of the dairy and cultivation of

coconuts for sale in the markets. I have been extremely moved by the way she provides emergency relief for the poor of the countryside and the village of Tannirpalli. She has also taken on supporting a multitude of orphans following the devastating Tsunami along the coasts of South India.

In the adjacent Saccidananda ashram, Brother Martin has, in a way, taken on the spiritual role of his teacher and mentor, Bede Griffiths. His teachings gave me definitive answers to questions I'd long wrestled with. Most afternoons he is to be found in the meditation hall speaking to listeners about Christianity in the light of Eastern and particularly Hindu wisdom. I felt his mind was clear as a laser; his knowledge melded East and West; and his heart delighted in sharing his wisdom.

The extended sojourn at Shantivanam worked its magic. Spiritually refreshed, my companions and I completed our ashram journey northwards. It was time to depart for the popular pilgrimage town of Tiruvannamalai. On arrival we find our hotel has a peaceful garden with good views of Mt. Arunachala - a mountain more geologically ancient than the Himalayas. Arunachala is Siva's abode and axis of the world. Covered in rock-overhangs and caves, it has been the home of Hindu sages throughout millennia.

For half a century, the saintly Sri Ramana Maharshi lived on the mountain in peaceful and often silent contemplation until his death in 1950. To visit the ashram and attend the daily chanting is a wonderful, gentle and uplifting experience. The climb to the saint's cave at Skandashram, where he spent seven years, is worth the effort. Overlooking the main temple, this hermitage is a peaceful spot where fresh water falls from the inner mountain and shady trees abound. Ramana Maharshi, given more time at his ashram and among his followers, has much to teach. The consensus is that the several days spent at Tiruvannamalai, are simply not enough; someday, we suspect, we shall more than likely return.

Of course, I realise that it is one thing to have the insight – of a peaceful and harmonious community of love - in the special retreat-atmosphere of an ashram, and quite another to live it out in practice when returning home to Australia. But due to the example set by the communities of two ashrams – one Hindu and the other Christian - together with the simplicity of their lives, I feel inspired to work on developing these qualities in my own life and relationships. My journey to India has made a significant positive change in my spiritual awareness and consciousness and already I feel it has begun improving the quality of my relationships. One day I would like to return.

Maggie Anka travelled to India with Meath Conlan, Ph.D., founder of *Diverse Journeys*, which takes small groups of spiritual adventurers to places of cultural richness and diversity, including Fr. Bede's ashram at Shantivanam and other ashrams of India. For a description of these journeys, see Dr. Conlan's website: www.diversejourneys.net ■



THE HERMITS OF SACCIDANANDA
(Part I) Carrie Lock

In 1939, Fr. Jules Monchanin (1895-1957) arrived in India from France with the vision of establishing a contemplative life in India devoted to the Holy Trinity (*Saccidananda*) and in the tradition of *sannyasa*. From 1939-1949, Monchanin served as a parish priest in numerous parishes in the diocese of Tiruchirappalli (Trichy), in Tamil Nadu.

In 1947, Monchanin received a letter from a Benedictine monk in France, Fr. Henri Le Saux (1910-1973), who felt called by the same vision. Le Saux arrived in Trichy in 1948 and in 1950 the two priests established *Saccidananda Ashram*, better known as *Shantivanam*. That same year, Monchanin took the name *Parama Arubi Anandam* (Supreme Formless One) and Le Saux the name *Abishiktananda* (He whose joy is the Anointed, Christ). In 1951, Monchanin and Le Saux published 'An Indian Benedictine Ashram' (the French version, which was published in 1956, was known as '*Ermites du Saccidananda*' – The Hermits of Saccidananda) which was an attempt to share their vision of a contemplative Christian life deeply rooted in the wisdom of Indian spirituality.

Monchanin remained at Shantivanam until serious illness caused him to return to France in September 1957; he died one month later. Le Saux was based at Shantivanam until 1957, when his spiritual calling led him to North India. In 1961, he established a hermitage in the Himalayas where he was based until his death in 1973.

With the death of Monchanin and Le Saux's relocation to the North, the ashram was effectively vacant from the period 1957 to 1968. During that time, Le Saux remained responsible for Shantivanam and would visit the ashram on occasions, in part to lend support to the local people who acted as caretakers, including one Mr. Vishvasam. In 1968, Fr. Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine monk, moved to Shantivanam from Kurisamala Ashram, where he remained until his death in 1993. Shantivanam is now home to a community of Camaldolese monks.

While the early years of Shantivanam did not meet with success in a worldly sense — for example, no-one joined the Hermits — the visionary presence of Monchanin and Le Saux was instrumental in establishing the Christian ashram movement in India and in pioneering Hindu-Christian dialogue. Their lives and writings increasingly act as an inspiration to all who seek the God who is beyond form and through which peoples of different faiths and cultures can meet in peace.

Mr. Vishvasam

On 9 October, 2007, I participated in the commemoration of the fiftieth death anniversary of Fr. Jules Monchanin (10 October 1957) at Shantivanam. One of the first speakers that morning was an elderly man from the nearby village of Tan-

nirpalli. His name was Mr. Vishvasam (Tamil for 'faith') and he was aged 79. Mr. Vishvasam served as Monchanin and Le Saux's cook from 1949 -1957 and was resident at the ashram during that period. Mr. Vishvasam was able to recall several wonderful stories about Monchanin that provided a personal insight into Monchanin's nature and also into those early years in Shantivanam.

Later that month, one of the monks from the ashram accompanied me to the home of Mr. Vishvasam, to see if he would be interested in recording his memories. He was only too happy to talk. When I met Mr. Vishvasam, he was seated under a wonderful old black and white photograph hanging on the wall. The photo captured five people, one of whom was unmistakably Le Saux. Through my companion, Mr. Vishvasam explained to me that he was the young man pictured beside Le Saux, along with his wife and their two children. The photograph was taken nearly forty years ago, one morning in 1968, and just hours before Le Saux's final departure from Shantivanam. It was the farewell photograph and one which Mr Vishvasam obviously prized. I asked him if he had any photographs of Monchanin, and with obvious regret, he said no.

It was immediately clear that the stories of Monchanin, Le Saux and Shantivanam were all intrinsically inter-related in the heart and mind of Mr. Vishvasam. We agreed that I would come back a few days later to focus on recording his memories of Le Saux. In all, I recorded about ninety minutes of Mr. Vishvasam's memories of those years so long ago, when he was not only the cook for Monchanin and Le Saux, but more precious, their friend.

Memories are of course subjective, and not all that Mr. Vishvasam recalled corresponded with other records (in which case, endnotes have been added). However the value and appeal rests in having a glimpse of the Hermits of Saccidananda, as viewed through the eyes of the only other person who was resident at Shantivanam during those years 1949-1957.

A few days after our last recording, I arrived with a gift. With some encouragement, Mr. Vishvasam withdrew a framed photograph from a brown paper bag, and as he did so he was immediately faced with his friend of so many years ago, Fr. Monchanin. He let out a spontaneous 'Ahhh', and looked up and smiled with gratitude, the happiness evident in his eyes. The picture was placed on the wall, along with that of Le Saux.

The Memories of Mr. Vishvasam

The Meeting with Le Saux

I was born on 9 November, 1928. I come from Tirunelveli district (in southern Tamil Nadu).

I first met Le Saux on March 15 or 20, 1949. Fr. Le Saux came to the village of Kosavapatti, near Dindigal, where I was working for the local parish priest.¹ At that time, I was one of two boys working in the kitchen and Fr. Le Saux asked the priest whether he needed both boys. The

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Hermits of Saccidananda (Continued from page 6)

priest said 'No.' Fr. Le Saux then asked the priest whether he could take me with him, and he also asked me if I was willing to go. I said 'Yes'. Le Saux said, 'After getting permission from Fr. Monchanin, I will send you a letter'. On March 30, 1949, Fr. Le Saux brought me to *Bhakti* Ashram, in Kullitalai² and I have been here ever since.³ I was in *Bhakti* ashram for seven to eight months until the Fathers started *Shantivanam*, in 1950.

From 1949 to 1957, I was the cook at *Shantivanam*. I liked that job very much. The job was not a burden for me because I only had to cook for two people. If any guests came I would have to prepare food for them too. I was happy there.

The Meeting with Monchanin

The first time I met Monchanin was 1949. When I arrived on 30 March, Monchanin said, 'If it had been yesterday that you arrived, I would have given you last months' salary'. And I said, 'No problem, I will get it next month!' (Laughing).

When Le Saux was in France, he sent a letter to Monchanin in India, informing him of his interest in starting an ashram here. Fr. Monchanin too came from France to start an ashram in Tannirpalli, but being alone he was not able to do so.

Monchanin and Le Saux were of the same type of thinking. They were French; though they came from different areas, they belonged to the same country. From the beginning until Monchanin's death, the two were of the same type of thinking. From the beginning to the end Monchanin and Le Saux were happy with each other and not even a single quarrel between them.⁴

The name that was given to the ashram was 'Shantivanam'. *Shanti* means peace. The name was given by Fr. Le Saux; that name was chosen so that the ashram might be a peaceful place. Given Le Saux and Monchanin's (peaceful) natures, it was the right place for them both.

The ashram's old chapel was at the corner of Stephen's garden.⁵ Now the graves of Stephen's parents are there. The (current) chapel was built later. On 21 March, 1950, the foundation was laid and the Fathers started to build *Shantivanam*. For (nearly) two years they used the old chapel.⁶

The people were positive (about the ashram being built), as few Christians were here in Tannirpalli. One of the Christian families donated the land to Monchanin and Le Saux to build an ashram, and all the people were very happy on hearing that an ashram was going to be constructed.

For urgent matters, Monchanin would go to Trichy or Kulittalai, but otherwise he'd remain at the ashram. Even to go to Kulittalai, he would only do so when the parish requested him to say the Mass. If he had some work to do he would leave the ashram, otherwise he would not go away. He only left *Shantivanam* when called by the Carmel convents to take retreats at Bangalore and Kodaikanal. Apart from this, he often visited Pondicherry. Many of his well-

wishes were there and whenever they called him, he would go. He stayed not more than a week at a time. The last time he went to Pondicherry, he didn't return.

Food and Cooking

In the morning, the Fathers used to have *idly*, *dosa*, *puris*, *owl* or *upma* for their breakfast. For their lunch and supper they would have rice, sambal and *appalam* (poppadom).

In those early days, they could not easily get rice. For two years they were without rice. They ate *kambu*, corn and *ragi* (types of grain). As they wished to live like village people, whether they got rice or not, they were happy with these sorts of foods. Apart from these foods, they ate food made of wheat. I made the *dosa* from wheat flour.

Monchanin only ate a handful of food, enough for his survival, and what he ate was simple food. The Fathers ate no mutton or chicken, not even egg. They were vegetarian.

They ate simple food like *rasam* (a hot drink), *sambhar*, *more* (buttermilk), curd, *kaelvaragu* (grain) and *kambu*. Le saux liked all the foods. There were no chapattis because there wasn't enough time to make them. I would prepare *upma* (made with *owl*). I soaked the *owl* in water and after some time I filtered it and then added chilis and mustard seeds and I'd fry it all up (to make the *upma*). They would gobble the *upma* down; they really enjoyed it. Fr. Monchanin was one who liked sweets very much and he always wanted to add more sugar to his food. Le Saux only liked a little bit of sugar.

We bought the vegetables from the market because there were many cattle around and they used to graze in and around the ashram, that's why we didn't cultivate anything. Where the huts now stand was full of palm trees. The coconut trees were planted only after Fr. Bede came here (in 1968). So we bought everything from the market.

Whenever I felt homesick, I would ask the Fathers if I could go home. I would stay with my mother, and my brother would come and prepare the necessary food. Both of the Fathers would let me go home to see my mother. They never said for me not to go.

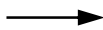
Monchanin and Le Saux used to talk with each other for about an hour after their meal and then they would go for a stroll together. Both of them were very happy.

The Villagers

Whenever Monchanin walked through the village, he would chat with the people and they would all feel happy to see him. People of various religions would seek his advice. There was one Brahmin who would regularly go and talk to Monchanin. The local people would call Monchanin by the name 'Big Father.'

There was no conflict between the people of Tannirpalli and the Fathers. The Fathers lived peacefully without any disturbance from the people outside. People in the village were happy about Monchanin and Le Saux. People used to come and go to the ashram for prayers. They would

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ask for a blessing and then they'd go. Other than that, the Fathers had no regular contact with the local people.

Prayer, Reading and Work

Monchanin used to pray and read all day long. Even while walking, Monchanin used to pray: when he walked from his hut to the chapel, he would pray the rosary. Monchanin would read books sent from France. After the morning Mass, they would have breakfast. As soon as Monchanin went back to his hut he would again start reading his books. He read sitting on the floor. I never saw him sleeping.

At prayer time, Le Saux would join Monchanin and the rest of the time he would pray, read and type. Le Saux had a typewriter and he would be typing to publish books and to write letters to their benefactors. After finishing his breakfast, Le Saux would read his books. After reading and before coming to lunch, he'd pray. After lunch and until 3 pm he'd take rest and then after that he'd again be with his books. Le Saux used to spend two to three hours praying with his books. He prayed like Monchanin. There were no differences between them (in their dedication to prayer).

Monchanin always spent his time reading, but Fr Le Saux sometimes used to do some fencing or pest control for termites, cleaning the chapel or his room and typing. Monchanin did no work other than reading. Only if he wanted to go to Trichy would he put aside his books. Monchanin didn't know any other works, so he did only that work (reading), but Le Saux knew many types of work.

Both Monchanin and Le Saux went to Sri Ramana Ashram (Tiruvannamalai). Le Saux would go there for two to three months at a time. Monchanin and Le Saux would talk about Arunachala; they'd talk about the ashram, their prayer and retreat time there and about the temple. Le Saux used to go high up the mountain and he'd sit in a cave for meditation. There wouldn't be any light; he'd simply be sitting in the cave like this (*padmasa*).

Mass

The Mass was at 0630 in the morning and ended by 0730. (At first), people from Tannirpalli would go to the ashram for Mass, and then the Reverend Father in Kulittalai requested that the people of Tannirpalli go to Kulittalai for the Mass (two miles away). The believers weren't happy about having to walk all that way and they asked if they could attend Fr. Monchanin's Mass. They urged Fr. Monchanin to conduct Mass every day, but Fr Monchanin asked that they come on all days except Sundays.

Before 1970, the Mass had to be conducted in Latin, but after that they could take Mass in Tamil. All the arrangements were made and the Fathers were waiting for the permission from the Pope (Rome) for them to be able to say the Mass in Tamil. While they were waiting for permission, Fr. Monchanin died. Fr. Le Saux was waiting for the permission from the Pope; after 1970 the permission was granted. Fr. Monchanin faced the altar to say the mass, as was the custom then.

I would help the Fathers during the Mass. There were no boys to help with the Mass. After finishing the Mass I would go and prepare the *tiffin* (breakfast items). Before they had the altar, the Fathers had an altar stone for saying the Mass. Fr. Le Saux brought this stone from Trichy by bus. He carried it from the bus stop to the chapel.

Tamil

Le Saux and Monchanin spoke with me in Tamil, as I don't know English. When Fr. Monchanin spoke it wavery clear to me. Monchanin knew Tamil very well because he was here from 1939. He traveled all over the Karur and Trichy districts, especially in the villages, but Fr. Le Saux just came in 1948 and he stayed in Kullitalai and *Shantivanam*. Monchanin used to say the homily in Tamil. The way he spoke would be understood by those people who were familiar with his way of speaking, but for some others it was more difficult.⁷

The way Le Saux spoke Tamil would not be understood by the everyday Tamil person; they would think he was speaking in German or French, just a gush of air would come from his mouth and you might not understand, just 'shshsh...' (laughing). When Fr. Le Saux spoke it was like Tamil mixed with French. Fr. Le Saux would speak some Tamil and then end it with "oui...oui, oui..." The average Tamil person found it difficult to understand what Fr. Le Saux said in Tamil, but I always knew what he was saying. Both of them would speak Tamil the way they spoke French, with that accent. People used to ask me what they were saying; the people thought that Vishvasam knew English and French! They thought Monchanin and Le Saux were speaking with me in French and English, not Tamil (laughing). In 1950, Le Saux studied Tamil and English in Kulittalai with the help of a teacher. Before that he did not know English and Tamil. After I was with them, I learned to read and write.

Hinduism

The Fathers were also kind to Hindu people and they showed interest in reading the spiritual books of Hinduism, such as those by Sri Ramakrishna. Many Hindu *sannyasis* also used to visit the ashram, especially one from Tanjore named Kaivili-Nathan. When he came he used to stay for a week or ten days. Le Saux knew many *sannyasis*. The *sannyasis* from Sri Ramana ashram used to come and stay here, as would those from Tiruveengamalai ashram. Many Hindus used to come. They would talk with each other and then leave. Muslim people also used to visit the ashram as did Brahmins. Among the Hindu gods, Fr. Le Saux liked Muruga very much.

Monchanin

I never saw Monchanin angry. If he had been an ordinary man, there would have been a word called 'angry', but Monchanin was always praying. How could he get angry (when he was always praying)? Neither of them ever got angry and there was no reason for them to.

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Monchanin used to be very kind to us. He knew many stores in Pondicherry, such as textile stores, and when he would return from there he would bring towels. If there was an important function he would give us money and towels. Once he asked me if we could buy a certain brand of bathing soap here, called Hamam soap. I told him we can get all types of soap in Tannirpalli, so he told me 'Buy one for you and one for me'.

Yes, I liked him (emphatically), because he showed love and affection to us. He used to be very kind to me. As it was a forest, no one wanted to live there but I liked to live there because of his kindness towards me. He was a *sannyasi*; I was not, but I lived my life with them as a *sannyasi*. No one would stay there but I stayed because Monchanin treated everyone equally and shared his love.

Monchanin was never sad. Nothing happened to make him feel sad. What did he have to feel sad about? If he was without money he wouldn't feel sad nor would he feel sad if he had money. If he had money he'd go to Trichy; if he didn't have money he'd ask me for 50 paise (laughing). Fr. Monchanin suffered a lot but he was not sad.

Notes

1. Fr. Le Saux would stay with Fr. Arokiam at Kosavappati, Tamil Nadu. One such visit was 11-18 February 1949. See *Diary* p.6.
2. *Bhakti* Ashram was the name Monchanin gave to the presbytery in Kulittalai, two kilometers from *Shantivanam*, where Monchanin and Le Saux were based before starting *Shantivanam* Ashram.
3. (3) 'Here' refers to the neighboring villages of Kulittalai, Tannirpalli and Pettavaithalai.
4. (4) It is in this regard, in particular, that Mr. Vishvasam's view differs from the nature of the relationship as revealed through the diary and personal writings of the Hermits themselves. In some ways, the thinking of Monchanin and Le Saux was very different from each other, and this understandably caused a certain tension between the two (see *Diary* p.138 for example). However, what is of interest in this oral account is that from the view of a local person who lived with them for eight years, their relationship was a happy one; it would appear that their differences of opinion did not generate an obviously unhappy or tense environment.
5. (5) For a short time, the Hermits stayed on the block neighboring the land which ultimately became the site for the ashram. The eventual site was donated for the purposes of the ashram.
6. The chapel was dedicated on October 11 1951, and the book *An Indian Benedictine Ashram* appeared on the same day.' See *Diary* p.21.
7. Not everyone would agree that Fr. Monchanin spoke Tamil well.

Reference

Abhishiktanada, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart, The Spiritual Diary (1948-1973)*, Raimon Panikkar (ed.), ISPCK, first English edition, 1998. (= 'Diary') (To be concluded)

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