

# The Bede Griffiths Sangha Newsletter

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December 1998

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## Editorial

Welcome to another edition of our newsletter which, we hope, keeps you in contact with what is going on in the Sangha, and which aims to bring you interesting articles and information.

The most important recent event is the publication of Shirley du Boulay's acclaimed biography of Fr Bede, Beyond the Darkness (Published by Rider at £20). In fact it soon sold out and we are delighted to hear that the publishers have ordered a reprint, which means that there will be copies in the bookshops before Christmas. So get out there and buy your Christmas presents now! We are particularly delighted to reprint in this edition the review of Shirley's book by Laurence Freeman, who will be known to many of you for his work in promoting Christian meditation. This is reprinted by kind permission of The Tablet.

The life of the Sangha is very much in its retreats. The BBC World Service made a programme around our retreat at Park Place in the summer and this was broadcast during November. Inside you will see details of how you can get a copy tape of that broadcast. The Skreen retreat was again fully booked and Jean Hopwood's article on the Council of All Beings, held at the retreat, gives a flavour of our time in Wales.

Building the Sangha, a community of like-minded people, seeking spiritual direction and inspired by Fr Bede, is a joyful undertaking. Although the community only comes together three or four times a year, the constant flow of telephone calls and Emails is a reminder that the Sangha does give a spiritual home to many people throughout the year.

Once again - please do let us have your letters, articles, reflections or whatever you would like to see included in the newsletter. Our next one will be coming out in March, so let us have your ideas by late February,

Jill and I are off to Shantivanam on Boxing Day and we will take greetings from the Sangha to Brother Martin. Namaste

Adrian Rance

## The Council of all Beings

The theme for our Forest Retreat at the Skreen in Wales this September was Awareness. So it seemed appropriate that one day we focused on the Natural World around us by holding "A Council of All Beings". The intention was to be aware of and speak from the position of another life form or natural feature in order to become more conscious of the need to preserve our beautiful planet and its diversity.

To prepare we spent time in silence tuning in to being another life form. We then came to the Council to share what we had felt and wanted to say as that life form, to human beings. Among those at the council were a wasp, a battery chicken, 2 rivers, a cow, 2 slugs, a leaf, a rock, a duck, an oak tree and a pine tree. The sharing felt very genuine and opening. The gen-

eral consensus afterwards was that humans need to be more compassionate, to show more respect towards fellow dwellers on this planet and not see them as resources for exploitation.

*(A description of the Council can be found in "Thinking Like a Mountain". See, John; Macy, Joanna; Fleming, Pat; Naess, Arne. New Society Publishers 1988).*

Jean Hopwood

# Beyond the Darkness

**The following review of Shirley du Boulay's biography of Fr Bede is published here by kind permission of The Tablet. It is by Laurence Freeman, Director of the World Community for Chris-**

A holy life, said the early Christian monks, is better than a sermon. Shirley du Boulay's biography of Bede Griffiths not only confirms this claim but is also a significant contribution to the meaning and influence of his life. In her vivid telling of his story, she identifies the motifs of a lifelong search for himself and for God: prayer, asceticism, friendship, intellectual inquiry, and the courageous living out of this Benedictine vow of *conversatio*, continuous change. She does not over-analyse Bede, reduce his life to an explanation or melodramatise its events. And so, the loveable mystery of this fascinatingly complex man flows in her narration.

In portraying his relationships and inner turbulence, du Boulay points to a transcendence that was integral to his life and personality; and that was as much a mystery to him as to those who knew him. How on earth can one show the movement of God in a human life? Perhaps only by showing how the person becomes more loving as life educates them. This is truly useful, edifying theology, and Bede is fortunate in having a sensitive, intelligent biographer who understands this throughout.

His Englishness may have hidden Bede's passionate nature but it did not stop him from falling in love with God, cultures, ideas and people throughout his life. The pattern began one summer evening in Sussex when he was 17 with the ecstatic experience of nature which he described in *The Golden String* as the true beginning of his spiritual quest. The next 80 years repeatedly suggest that this childhood experience also hid the end and the middle of that quest. Du Boulay wonders if his life was not a continuous search for ecstasy.

If so, it was guarded and restricted by his intense intellectualism. Throughout his life he struggled against the dominance of the rational mind in Western culture. But it was not until old age and after a severe stroke that he felt personally delivered into a fuller integration of thought and feeling, body and mind. Asked once after his stroke how his health was, he replied: "My rational mind is very diminished but, I must say, I rather like that."

In his twenties, Bede's anguished conversion to Christianity, which du Boulay handles with her characteristic mix of psychological insight and informed restraint, led him to fall in love with a classical form of Benedictine life which he lived in England for 20 years before going to India to "find the other half of my soul". In India he found that his passionate love for God was intensified by the revelation of the sacred that he discovered in Hinduism. And there, in old age, he broke through to a remarkable mystical and fully human experience of integrated love, the coming together of eros and agape.

This biography is more than a well-connected narrative. It is a *lectio* of a life. Du Boulay works this out by following its chronology simultaneously on several levels. There are the dramatic changes, failures, humiliations and disappointments which renewed rather than damaged him so that, as he said, he felt always that he were 21 and making hopeful new beginnings. He said that he grew more in the last two years of his life than in the preceding 84. Everyone who knew him over many years remarked on his growth in tolerance.

His human growth blended pain and bliss in his emotional, intellectual and public lives. There is the way his understanding of the dialogue of Christianity with other faiths developed from a fulfilment to a pluralist theology of religion. There are the repeated personal dramas of his lifelong attempt to surrender the "citadel of my self", the tension between ego and spirit. There is his suspicion of technology, the tension between romanticism and pragmatism. There is his passion for friendship and his need to renounce emotional attachments. Above and through all these levels, the skill of his biographer allows us to see the indefinable mystery of holiness steadily growing, in cycles of death and resurrection, through Bede's very human humanity.

Bede's life shows up an expanding dimension of transcendence, yet he was a down-to-earth mystic, not a psychic. This transcendence, both its darkness and its blinding brilliance, shows through the controversies, triumphs, setbacks, relationships and above all the interior deepening of his prayer of the heart. He was not the first prophet to die with a sense of relative failure, feeling that his message had not been fully understood. And yet what sustained him in hope was the lifelong intuition that his experience did not concern himself alone: it had a meaning for others.

Du Boulay is naturally concerned about her subject's influence and reputation. Maybe she is too concerned with the assessment of theologians. It is not they but ordinary spiritual seekers who will pass the important judgement on the meaning of his life and work. Theologians, especially those feeling the grip of ecclesiastical conformism, will be tempted to focus on the controversial elements in Bede's thought in the last period of his life. This was when he saw that the meeting with the Eastern religions challenged Christianity to stop clinging to outworn formulas and that the best way to defend the faith is to show how old truths can be translated into modern language. But ordinary seekers, like the many whom in his life he led back to Christian faith, will be less concerned with politics than with the practice of their religion. His life and ideas continue to liberate many from the fears, guilts or superficial religious education which block their spiritual growth.

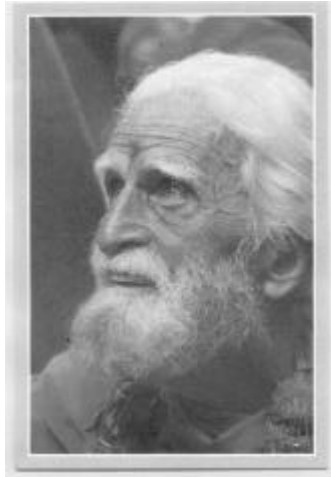
Like Cardinal Newman, with whom he shares the cosmopolitanism of the convert, a lucid literary style and a non-fundamentalist historical approach to theology. Bede also believed that, in Newman's word, "there is something true and divinely revealed in all religions over the earth". Bede's ideas about inter-faith dialogue are sensitive today because it is difficult to reconcile an

uncompromising commitment to Christ with a reverence for other revelations. The Second Vatican Council urged Christians to do this. Bede dared and succeeded better than many because his experience, both of India and of his personal prayer, helped him to understand what this meant.

Soon after Bede arrived in India, he was powerfully moved by the sculpture of the Siva Maheswara in the Elephant Cave in Bombay. Its three faces express the loving, the terrifying and contemplative aspects of God. The contemplative face, however, is at the centre, and it was the to contemplative experience that Bede continually returned.

His holiness was fired in the solitude of his unique vocation. His life shows the danger to the Church of repressing spiritual freedom. His courage in standing up against unspiritual religion in any form was essentially ecclesial courage. The Church, Bede said, was where he found the total Christ, and could give himself totally to Christ.

C.S. Lewis once remarked that Bede was a great advertisement for monasticism. Reading this elegantly written, shrewd



Dom Bede Griffiths

and gripping biography invites one to extend that claim to Christianity, in its present knife-edge of death and resurrection. Bede saw this so clearly because he had lived it himself so faithfully and so often throughout his life.

## Laurence Freeman.

### ODE TO THE ROCK

You are the beginning  
You are the end, you are,  
My anchor, and my  
Uncomplaining friend.

*Chris Lines*

# The Kingdom of God

**The following extract is from a talk by Br Martin on the Beatitudes. In it he shows how the whole teaching of Jesus is contained within one statement, "Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand". The kingdom is the awareness of the reality within and beyond the duality of creation.**

The Beatitudes have been considered the most sublime teaching of Jesus Christ. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the nation of India, was profoundly influenced by the Beatitudes. A lot of commentaries have been written on the Beatitudes and I wish to make an humble attempt to give a short commentary on this sublime teaching.

The Beatitudes cannot be properly understood without first understanding the good news that Jesus announced. We all know that Jesus announced the Good News of the Kingdom of God. In the Gospel of St Mark we read, "After John had been arrested Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the good news of the kingdom of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the Gospel'". The whole Gospel is put into three phrases: the kingdom of God, at hand and repent. If we understand these three phrases correctly then we understand the whole gospel. If we misinterpret these three phrases then we misinterpret the whole gospel. The statement that 'The kingdom of God is at hand' is a statement of fact. Just as we say the sun rises in the east is a statement of fact and universal truth (at least empirically) so also is Jesus an-

nouncing an eternal and universal truth. God is everywhere is the universal and eternal truth. God was everywhere, God is everywhere and God will be everywhere. This is the eternal truth which Jesus announced.

If God is everywhere what does one has to do? He says 'Repent'. The word 'repent' does not imply a movement towards a positive goal. It rather implies a negative action. Let me explain through symbolic language. A little fish in the ocean does not know that it is in the ocean and is searching for the ocean. It asks a big fish where to find the ocean. The big fish responds by saying, 'My dear little one, the ocean is everywhere, you are living and moving and have your being in it. You cannot live one minute without the ocean. Stop all you searching and realise that you are already in the ocean'.

In the same way Jesus has announced the eternal truth to humanity that God is like an infinite ocean and we are all like in fish in the ocean searching for God. We cannot find God through our movements and find that we are already in God. So the word 'repent' is not doing something positively but rather renouncing all doings, all movements, through a way, through a path, but only by renouncing all the movements, all the ways and all the paths we discover that we are already in God. So the word 'repent' has a very simple and radical message: the only way to find the kingdom of God is to renounce all the ways. All the ways and means have value in as much as they hold one to come to that repentance.

Before proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God, Jesus himself had to experience it in his own life. In other words Jesus had to discover it in his life. This experience of Jesus was described at his bap-

tism where the heavens opened and the Spirit of God came upon him and he discovered that he was the Son of God. The experience of the kingdom of God has two aspects. The first is a breakthrough in human consciousness or the entry of God's spirit into the human heart. Through this the human being discovers that the kingdom of God is everywhere and that he is in the kingdom of God. The second aspect is the realisation of one's identity in relationship to God. When the human consciousness of Jesus opened, the Spirit of God entered into him and he realised that he was the Son of God. He did not become the Son of God, he always had been the Son of God but now he became conscious of it.

The discovery of the kingdom of God, which is the discovery of one's true identity, is a sudden discovery. Jesus describes this through a parable. "The kingdom of God is like a man who found treasure in a field. He buried it again, went home, sold everything, and bought that field". In order to understand this parable we can read it like this. The man who finds the kingdom of God has a similar experience to the man who found treasure in the field. Just as he buried it, went home happily, sold everything and bought the field, so the person who finds the kingdom of God, will joyfully give up everything he has and attains the kingdom of God, because what he has found is infinitely greater than what he is losing. So he gives it up joyfully, spontaneously and rather choicelessly. The truth is so clear that there is no time to think, and there is no room to make any choice. The farmer found the treasure suddenly, he was not expecting it. It was an unexpected experience.

The experience of the kingdom of God is an individual experience but this individual experience grows into universal consciousness in which the whole of humanity, past, present and future, and the whole of creation find their place. Jesus describes this experience through a parable describing the kingdom of God as a mustard seed, the smallest seed in the world, which grows into the biggest of trees, in which the birds come and make their nests.

It is an individual that finds the kingdom of God, but this individual experience grows into universal consciousness, in which the whole humanity and creation find their place. If it remains as an individual experience then the person cannot be a saviour of humanity and creation. This person cannot have good news to proclaim to the whole of humanity and creation. The search for the kingdom is an individual search but this individual search becomes universal just as a river at its birth is a small stream but grows bigger and bigger as it moves towards the sea. So also the individual search becomes universal. Individual discovery becomes universal. Individual salvation becomes universal salvation. One individual grows into the whole of creation.

The kingdom of God is something, which unfolds naturally and spontaneously. Once it is experienced one has to renounce all the efforts. One has to remain silent and wait patiently for the kingdom to grow. Jesus describes this through a parable. "The kingdom of God is like this. A man scatters seed in his field. He sleeps at night, is up and about during the day, and all the while the seeds are sprouting and growing. Yet he does not know how it happens. The soil itself makes the plants grow and bear fruit; first the tender stalk appears, then the ear, and finally the ear full of corn, when the corn is ripe, the man starts cutting it with his sickle, because harvest time has come". The kingdom experience is an experience of creativity. Creativity comes about not through the efforts of mind but when the mind relaxes and remains silent and effortless. In the virginal state of mind creativity manifests itself. The kingdom experience is an experience of creative life.



**We do hope that you enjoy receiving this newsletter.**

**However it is quite expensive to produce and to mail out to everyone on our mailing list. So if you do not want to carry on receiving it please do contact us and let us know.**

**Brother Martin**

## Some men should have mountains

There are some men who should have mountains  
to bear their names to time.  
Grave markers are not high enough or green  
for ones who, when they were alive, were so alive!

This is no epitaph. I write no obituary.  
I list no date of birth or death.  
For what is history  
when it lists the events but misses the meaning?  
Nor is this a mourning song  
but only the naming of a mountain.

Even the best biographers  
can only draw a man's shadow.  
They give the shape and form of a list  
but not the substance,  
not the smile of life that flickers like light  
over running water and then is gone.

Fresh and green,  
his great river flowed past my stream  
and yet we were one  
for all that flows to the sea  
and something of him remains with me.

I knew him in his final years, after his stroke.  
While sitting in his hut by the river  
I would listen to the silence of long Indian nights  
where even the crickets seemed to hesitate.

He and the river combined to bear all thought away.  
For the mind is itself a river that flows from the source  
and runs to the open sea. When it encounters the open  
sea  
its own current dissolves.  
In that hut the sea was sitting next to me.

Like water holiness has no colour or form of itself  
but because of that it reflects the sun/  
For the presence of holiness is tangible and absolute  
as an empty space. It bears no description  
But moulds itself to the changing earth.  
It cannot be discussed or analysed, it simply is,  
and the mind is forced to recognise the real.

Father Bede wrote many books  
his story was famous throughout the world,  
He was hailed as a prophet, yet to me  
his silence is what stays in the memory.  
It is of that silence that I would like to speak  
if it is possible to speak of silence.

So I ask you now to cast aside  
all the familiar furniture of the rational mind  
and make a space for the great unknown.  
For his mind soared higher and higher  
to take in a Universal view  
and yet, as an Eagle keeps its nest  
at the centre of its flight

so did Bede keep Christ.

In all humanity he found that Image of God  
that was prior to all belief in God  
for in all religions he found that core of unity.  
Each had their unique truth and yet the fullness of truth  
would be found in their meeting  
and that meeting place was the human heart.

A prophet, a teacher, a personal friend  
I was with him, by his bedside when, close to the end,  
he spoke of the heart as "a fullness of Love"  
and complained that the Indians just couldn't make tea!  
He remained to the end just an Englishman  
who had fallen in love with another land.

But we are not left behind to adore  
one who passed on to the further shore  
for that same spirit that was inside him  
is deep in the heart of everyone:  
in that place where no image or thought can come,  
in that place where the body and soul are one,  
in that place where the Spirit of God's own son  
makes in us a home there we too can become  
mountains of God and "a light to the nations"  
"lit on the hilltop so that all may see"  
"rooted in love and with firm foundations",  
a prophet of God like Father Bede.

### WORLD SERVICE BROADCAST

Last month, the BBC World Service broadcast a half hour programme about the Sangha which was recorded by Ralph Rolls at our retreat at Park Place during the summer. The broadcast includes interviews with various members of the Sangha who knew Fr Bede, who had visited Shantivanam, or who have been inspired by his life and vision. It captures the spirit of the retreat with the bhajans, and the celebration of mass in the Indian style.

If you would like a copy of the programme please contact Kim Nataraja. Her address is Flat 3, 24 Linden Gardens, Bayswater, London W2 4ES. Kim will be able to process your requests after the beginning of January. There is no charge but a donation to cover costs will be welcome.

To contact the Sangha please write,  
phone or Email:  
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Canterbury  
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Email: arance@msn.com

## The Friends of Bede Griffiths in the USA

times of meditation, worship services that cross spiritual traditions, dissemination of his books and videos, conferences, workshops and a commitment to a social justice ministry".

The Friends can be contacted at  
604 Judson Ave  
Evanston  
Illinois  
847: 962-1275  
The Friends have a web site at <http://home.earthlink.net/~bedegriffiths/friend.html>

### *Dates for your Diary*

- Spring Retreat at the Rowan Tree Centre, Builth Wells, Wales. 30th April – 3rd May 1999.
- Weekend seminar with Brother Martin, Park Place Pastoral Centre, 2nd-4th July 1999
- Annual 'Forest' retreat at the Rowan Tree Centre, Builth Wells. September 12-18th 1999
- 1999 Advent Retreat at Prinknash Abbey, 10th –12th December. Celebrate the millennium with the Sangha

*We too would love to have a web site. If anyone can offer to do one for us please do let us know*

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## Spring retreat at The Rowan Tree Centre

The Rowan Tree Centre is a beautiful retreat house in mid-Wales, where the Sangha first came together as a group in 1998, and where we hold a week's annual silent retreat. This 'long-weekend' (including the bank Holiday Monday) will be an opportunity for those who cannot manage a full week in September, though you are welcome to attend both!

The retreat will be mainly in silence, following the monastic timetable of Shantivanam, Fr Bede's ashram in southern India. The Theme, "Who do you say that I am?" will guide our reflections.

An application form is enclosed with this newsletter. Places are limited to 14 participants so early booking is advised.

**To ensure a place return the form with a £25 non-returnable deposit (payable to The Bede Griffiths Sangha) to John Careswell, 70 Weymouth Road, Frome, Somerset BA11 1HJ.**

The total cost of the weekend, Friday evening to Monday lunch-time, will be £75.

The annual business meeting of the Sangha was held in London, at the home of Kim Nataraja, on November 14<sup>th</sup>.

The meeting considered the annual accounts for the

## Annual Business Meeting of the Sangha

Sangha. Donations/subscriptions raised £932 in 1998. This amount, together with the small surpluses on our retreats, have paid for the production of the newsletters, the publicity leaflet, mailing to our members, and a subscription to The Tablet for the ashram at Shantivanam. Importantly we were able to provide assisted places at all our retreats. We feel it is very important that people on low incomes are not excluded from the life of the Sangha. We were also able to fund Br Martin's trip to the UK details of which were provided in the last newsletter. The Sangha had a turnover of just over £5000, ending the financial year with about £1300 in the bank, slightly down on the balance for last year.

**If you would like a copy of the annual accounts please do let us know and we will mail one to you.**

The Friends of Bede Griffiths are a group based in Evanston, Illinois, USA. They tell us "we are people from many walks of life. Some of us follow formal religions and spiritual traditions and some of us do not. Some of us knew Dom Bede before his death in 1993 and some of us did not. What we share is having been touched deeply by his teachings about the importance of both Eastern and Western styles of thought and his belief in the unity of all Creation.

What we hope to do is to continue his message through retreats,

