

The Bede Griffiths Sangha Newsletter

Volume 3. Issue 1

March 2000

The Bede Griffiths Sangha is committed to the search for truth at the heart of all religions

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Editorial

A month ago about 30 members of the Sangha gathered in Oxford for a day of reflection on the Sangha, and its future. It was a wonderful day, full of creative energy and love.

What was lovely was the way in which people expressed their feelings about the Sangha actually being a community of like-minded 'seekers', whose lives had been inspired by the 'marriage of East and West'. As one member pointed out, the Sangha is not a community built around a particular belief or practice, but is more a community built on friendship, or perhaps more accurately, welcome. It is a group, or network, in which people can find a home precisely because they are welcomed, and can share their hopes and aspirations with others. Fr Bede's own special charisma was his ability to welcome people and make people feel valued. This was of course the core of his life as a Benedictine monk.

The meeting decided to establish a 'guiding' or 'inspirational' council that would be responsible for guiding the Sangha and its growth. It is anti-

pated that this group will meet two or three times a year.

Members were keen to see the Sangha grow 'organically', that is to say, growth should not be forced in any way. What is amazing is that we are getting on average one new enquiry by phone, letter or email each day.

Once again the Sangha is pleased to welcome Brother Martin, the Sangha's *anam cara* or soul friend from Shantivanam. He will be in the UK throughout June and his itinerary is published in this edition of the newsletter. He will also be in Germany in May and some details of this visit are on the website (see below).

Finally, did you know that all of Fr Bede's books published with Harper Collins are now out of print. Why don't you write to the publishers and say that this situation really ought to be put right.

Namaste

Jill and Adrian

www.bede.griffiths.com

In an era when we read of dot.com companies and millionaires, it is gratifying to know that Father Bede is now on the internet. www.bede.griffiths.com has been established by the Bede Griffiths Association in America. The site is more than being just about Fr Bede, it is a significant site for all interested in inter-religion dialogue. The Bede Griffiths Sangha Newsletter and calendar

of events are listed on the site and there are sections devoted to resources (books, tapes, links to other sites), the Golden String, dialogue, meditations and satsang with Fr Bede. The Satsang page has a reflection from Fr Bede on ageing – given in response to a question at Osage Monastery in 1992. The site has so much, it really is worth getting on line to read it.

The Church (part 1)

By Father Bede

I'd like to share some reflections on the church, which I think are important for us all. It may be disturbing for some because many new understandings have come in recent times, but as I say, I think they're important for all. And of course it is a very urgent subject, you see, what we mean by the "Church": where the Roman Catholics mean the Roman Catholic Church, then we should remind ourselves that the Council of

Provence in the 15th century said "The Holy Roman Church believes, professes and teaches that outside the Roman church no one can be saved; whether pagan or Jew or heretic or schismatic but will all go to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, unless before their death they enter the church." That is canonical Catholic doctrine until recently. So we have to face these facts you know.

And of course the Orthodox Church has an equally strong claim, that you see, Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria were probably all founded before the Roman church. And the eastern churches are the inheritors of these ancient apostolic churches, so they say we are the apostolic church. And then Luther comes along in the 16th century and says Rome and the eastern churches are all corrupted, we're going to return to the authentic church of Christ himself in the New Testament and he establishes the Lutheran church. And then the Anglicans come along and they accept the Reformation but they try to preserve all that they can of the Catholic tradition-they took a sort of middle way. Then the reformed churches, Calvin and all the others, come along and they say also with some reason, there were no bishops in the early church, there were presbyters, so we have a Presbyterian church you see. And each one is convinced they're right-they are *the* authentic church. And then you go along, the Pentecostals say the Holy Spirit descended on their church at Pentecost, the same spirit is present among us, and



The Cosmic Cross at Shantivanam

we open ourselves with the Holy Spirit and we are the authentic church. And finally, people I respect as much as any, the Society of Friends, the Quakers, they say that the Holy Spirit is present in the heart, and if you sit around quietly, meditate in silence, the Holy Spirit will give you all that you need. You don't need priests or sacraments or doctrines, just sit and wait on the Holy Spirit. That's another way.

So, all these are alive today, and all believe themselves to be authentic expressions of Jesus' own will for the church. Now how do we try to see how Jesus himself understood the church? Well, it is here that recent biblical criticism has given us rather new understanding. And the book which impressed me most is one called *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, by James Dunn. He's a professor at Durham College in England and Fr. Raymond Brown, who is a chief Catholic authority on the bible said "I know of no overall book on the New Testament that is comparable to it", and he practically accepts the view put forward. And I think one can say it is the view of scholars whether catholic or protestant today. And what comes out of this, which is a little disturbing, is that *none* of the organised churches can be traced back to the first century. They all come from the second century. And this is very disturbing for Catholics as we've always thought Jesus appointed Peter the head of the church, Peter founded the church of Rome, Peter appointed a bishop, and *none* of that can be established today historically. There's no evidence that Peter founded the Roman church. In fact, there's very positive evidence that he did not. You see I'm sorry if this is a bit damaging, but it will come around in the end.

You see, the Letter to the Romans was written in the 50's; fifty to sixty, and in it Paul writing to the church in Rome addresses many greetings to definite people in the church, and never mentions St. Peter at all.

Now, it's almost inconceivable that if Peter had been there he would have mentioned him, but still more, Paul made a habit of not visiting churches founded by other apostles. Each apostle had their own churches and he didn't like sort of interfering with others, so he almost certainly wouldn't have written to the Roman if he knew it was Peter's foundation. I'll explain a little later how the Roman church actually comes to hold the position which it does.

So, now that we've got to take that a step further, the next step is: that not only did Peter not appoint a bishop in Rome, but that there was no bishop in Rome in the 1st century and there were no bishops in the church in the first century. You see, there were people in the New Testament that were sometimes called Presbyters or elders and sometime called bishops or overseers. And a curious example is in the letter to the Philippians if you look it up, it's addressed to the bishops and deacons of the church and at that time the churches were ruled by a group of leaders who were sometimes known as bishops and sometimes as presbyters, but there was no single bishop as the head of the church until the 2nd century when we come to St. Ignatius of Antioch in the 2nd century, martyred in 110, then one bishop is the head of the church, he's believed to be a successor of the apostles and that remains the rule until the present day. But it started at the end of the first or beginning of the 2nd century, so that is how the bishop comes to be seen as the head of the different churches. So we have to go back now into the first century, and there again, even these presbyter bishops, they appear very clearly in the letter to Timothy of Titus, and there again, they're not properly distinguished. In Titus, I think it is, he says, a presbyter should be of this kind, and then goes on to say the bishop. And the presbyter is simply two different names for the same official and incidentally, of course, it says he should be a married man, with one wife and not more. But that was the rule-he should be a married man. And that was incidentally the rule until about the 3rd century, nearly all bishops and priests were married. Gregory of Nissa, the great mystical doctor, was himself a married man and the son of a married priest. That's in the 4th century. Then, perhaps it's worth pointing it out, that monks came in, and the priests were not called to celibacy but monks are called to celibacy, it's a charism and the monks,

particularly St. Anslem and others, began to be seen as models of the church, and more and more priests began to see that they in their position of leadership should be celibate like the monks. And so the two vocations which were quite distinct originally, gradually fused together.

So we go back now to the presbyters or bishops, they appear at the end of the first century. But before that, they're not mentioned. If you look up the list of ministers in the church, in Corinthians and Ephesians there's no mention of presbyters or bishops. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, preachers, administrators, helpers; all these are given, but no presbyters or bishops. And the probability is, now Timothy and Titus were written late in the first century, probably 70 or 80, and the probability is that there were no presbyters or bishops even in the earlier time. You can't prove it, because in the Acts St. Luke says that Paul appointed presbyters in the churches, and many critics today think he was reading that back, which was a very common thing in the earlier time, but it could be that they are presbyters, but they're simply not mentioned in the early church.

So now, we go back a stage further. What did Jesus himself appoint and do? And here I follow very closely Fr. Raymond Brown's book on the *Priests and Bishops*. (I haven't got it here, unfortunately, it was sent to India by mistake, but I recommend it, *Priests and Bishops*, it's a small book). And what comes out from that is as I say, there were no priests, there were no bishops until late in the century, and Jesus appointed apostles. Now that seemed fairly clear in all the Gospels, he appointed apostles. Though let me also add another negative feature: the word "church" only occurs twice in all the synoptic gospels and that is in Matthew. "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church," and "if you have a quarrel among yourselves, take it to the church." So only twice in all the four gospels is church mentioned. Jesus always spoke of the kingdom of God.

So Jesus certainly appointed people, called disciples whom he called apostle-apostle means one who is sent of course, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God. That seems absolutely clear. Jesus himself went round a thousand villages of Galilee preaching

the kingdom of God, appointed these apostles to continue his work. Luke also mentioned seventy, whom he also appointed. So Jesus himself certainly empowered his disciples to preach the kingdom of God. And preach not only by word but heal the sick, cleanse the lepers cast out evil spirits. And now to put it more concretely, what Jesus did was to communicate the Holy Spirit, and to me this is the essence of the church.

Jesus himself, now here's another important point I want to make, people so commonly today speak of Jesus as God, but if you look at St. John's gospel you see Jesus *never* speaks of himself as God. And it's quite foreign to his thought. I was looking it up today in St. John's gospel, and the Jews protested about him because he made himself equal to God or I think it says called himself God, and Jesus' retort is this: "It is said in law, in the Old Testament, You are Gods and all of you Sons of the Most High. If those to whom the word of God is given can be called God why do you say him who God has anointed and sent into the world is wrong if I speak in the name of God?" Jesus was appointed and sent into the world and elsewhere Jesus says, again I looked it up this morning, Ch. 5 I think it is, "the Son can do nothing of himself, he can only do what he sees the Father doing." Jesus lives in total communion with the Father and only in and through the Father can he do anything. The Son knows the Father and loves the Father, the Father knows the Son and loves the Son, and the Father gives the Son to have life in himself. Everything comes to him. Even the Godhead comes to him from the Father. He's God from God. He's not simply God. A curious point, if you don't mind, in St. John's gospel it says "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God." And in the Greek, the word is "ho theos", and the Father is called "ho theos" *The* God, and the Word was "theos" not "ho theos". It's very subtle in a way, but there's a real distinction because he's God *from* God and he *is* God in all the wisdom and knowledge and love-everything that's in the Father is given to the Son and the Son communicates that to his disciples in the Spirit, you see. The Holy Spirit is the very "Being" of Jesus and the Father communicated. The Son is the "being" of the Father expressed, revealed and the Spirit is the "being" of the Father and the Son communicated to the disciples you see, and we all receive. And don't forget the very important text of St. John

that Jesus prays for his disciples "as I am in you, the Father, and you are in me, that they may be in us, that they may be perfectly one." As Jesus shares the life of the Father and the love of the Father, so he communicates that very life and love to his disciples in the Holy Spirit. Fr. John Main had a beautiful expression, "to share the consciousness of Christ is to share the stream of love that flows between the Father and the Son, the Son and the Father, and *is* the Holy Spirit." That's the stream of love. And that's what we receive, each one of us you see, we receive the life of the Holy Trinity itself into our very being. So this was Jesus gift to the world-to share himself, knowledge and love of the Father, to be in the Father and the Father in him so that whoever sees him sees the Father. And yet he is not the Father.

This article is a transcription of a talk given by Father Bede at Osage Monastery, Oklahoma, USA, in June 1992. The final part of the talk will be published in the next edition. It has been made available courtesy of Shirley du Boulay

MONEY MATTERS

We need someone with basic book-keeping and/or accounting skills to help with the Sangha's finances which we operate through a club account with the Giro Bank. Such a person has the grand title of 'treasurer' but it is not tremendously time-consuming, but if there is a member who could do this 'karma' yoga, it would be a great help.

Contact Adrian & Jill on 01227 752871

Brother Martin's visit to the UK June/July 2000

Once again we are delighted that Brother Martin, the Sangha's *anam cara* or soul friend is making an extended visit to Britain this summer.

Brother Martin is a monk at Shantivanam, Fr Bede's ashram in Southern India. He is an inspired teacher and has a wonderful vision of a Christianity renewed and re-inspired with the wisdom of the eastern traditions. He has published a number of small books that are now available from the Sangha (see back page).

We have now arranged his itinerary and are giving the details so that you can ring up his 'hosts' at the different parts of the country if you would like to find out more about talks and retreats that he will be giving.

Saturday 3 June – Thursday 8 June **Belfast**

Contact: Sheila Mary O Donoghue Tel: 01232 287471

Thursday 8 June – Monday 12 June **London**

Various talks at different venues
Contact: Kim Nataraja Tel: 0171 727 6779

Monday 12 June – Thursday 15 June **Canterbury**

Contact: Adrian Rance & Jill Hemmings Tel: 01227 752871

Tuesday 13 June

One Day Retreat Day, The Friends Meeting House, Canterbury. Phone Adrian & Jill 01227 752871

Wednesday 14 June

Talk at Waterstone's Bookshop 7.00 p.m.
Phone Chelca Thurlow 01843 835578

Thursday 15 June – Friday 16 June **Oxford**

Contact: John Osborne Tel: 01235 528701

Friday 16 June – Monday 17 June **Stratford-on-Avon**

Contact: Anna Corser Tel: 01789 450778

Monday 17 June – Wednesday 17 June

Monmouth

Contact: Hazel Eyles Tel: 01600 713853

Wednesday 21 June – Saturday 14 June **Exeter**

Contact: Val Cherry Tel: 01392 873367

Wednesday 21 June

An Afternoon with Br Martin at the Friends Meeting House, *A Spirituality for the Third Millennium* 2.30 p.m. Contact: Joan Uzzell Tel: 01392 276825

Saturday 24 June – Tuesday 27 June **Milford Haven**

Contact: Joan Walters Tel: 01646 692496

Tuesday 27 June – Thursday 29 June **Bath**

Contact: Peter Spink, Omega, Wexford Manor, Tel: 01275 472262

Thursday 29 June – Friday 30 June **Canterbury**

Contact: Adrian & Jill Tel: 01227 752871

Friday 30 June – Sunday 2 July

THE PARK PLACE SEMINAR, Fareham, Hampshire

Contact: John Keaney Tel: 0118 947 4976

See enclosed application form.

Sunday 2 July – Tuesday 4 July

Essex

Contact: Chris Collingwood tel: 0181 504 4476

Tuesday 4 July

London

Talk *Journey to the Source of Life* at the Study Society, Colet House.

Contact: Georgina 0181 7748 9338

Wednesday 5 July – 15 July **Scotland**

Contact Angelika Monteux Tel: 01224 867251

Michael Giddings Tel: 01644 450689

Brother Martin returns to India on 15 July.

The Three Wise Men from the West

Part 2

By Brother Martin

Concluding Brother Martin's article on the founding fathers of Shantivanam

Three Prophets from the East to the West

These three sages who came from the west to the east become in turn prophets from the east to the west. The word delivered by them became a Word that healed. The authenticity of this Word was its universal validity, its unifying quality, its liberating power, and its possibility for human growth and its reasonable persuasion. Their word was and still is authentic because it was not arrogant but prophetic and liberating.

The word announced by them breaks down the walls of division and creates one God and one humanity. It reveals universal wisdom, the Eternal Logos, which has manifested itself in human history but which also transcends it. The word invites everyone to make this pilgrimage to the East, the source of life. In India the most famous holy river is called the Ganges.

The seekers of God make pilgrimage to the source of the Ganges called Gangotri. Our founder Swami Abhishiktananda made this pilgrimage and wrote about his experience. To go to the source of life is true conversion or repentance, true rebirth. Jesus invited all his listeners to this conversion. The original water, which runs in the conduit of time, has become conditioned by history and so is contaminated. It has lost its freshness and vitality. For this reason there is always this continuous need to return to the source of life. Only the sages who have seen the limitations of the conditioned waters can make this journey. The king and the priest are ever preoccupied in protecting their continuity. They are afraid of the original waters. This call of returning to the original source could only be announced in the desert by a prophet like John the Baptist. Only those persons who have become dissatisfied with the waters of the village and have a profound desire for the living waters will go into the desert to listen this Word, which is fragile (because it is newly born) but powerful.

The Spiritual Journey of the Founders and the Spiritual Tradition of India

I would like to compare the spiritual journey of the founders with the spiritual tradition of India. The spiritual tradition of India presents human life in four stages and four levels of consciousness. The four states are: *Brahmacharya*, where the student learns about *Brahman* as revealed in the scriptures; *Grhastha*, where one takes responsibility in the society and gives continuity to tradition. These two stages belong to the level of continuity, which is essential to maintain order in society. The third stage is the stage of *Vanaprastha*, hermitical life, which is the beginning of the process of discontinuity. It is a movement from the external to the internal. It is indicated when one starts 'digging the well within'.

The fourth stage is the state of *sannyasa* which is the supreme state of discontinuity. A *sannyasi* lives according to the *Sanathana Dharma*, the eternal will of God. The *brahmachari* and *Grhastha* follow *Sampradaya Dharma*, the law of tradition and continuity. The hermit and the *sannyasi* follow the law of discontinuity. A *sannyasi* is not bound by the tradition. His way of life is the way of death, dying to the past and moving into the eternal present. He has to be always on the move. He cannot settle down. The equivalent term for *Sanathana Dharma* in the New Testament is 'the kingdom of God'. When Jesus invited his listeners to search for the kingdom of God and its righteousness, he was inviting them to this *Sanathana Dharma*, the eternal will of God. There is a will of God or dharma of God, which comes to us through the scriptures and the tradition and it comes from outside. This apparently gives us the will of God until our death. This is indeed necessary but it is purely mechanical.

People have nothing to think or discover but put themselves under the established norm. But the way of *Sanathana Dharma* is to follow the interior law, the interior way. It is the way of continuous death, a dying to the past and moving into the 'eternal present'. In this the will of God is not fixed once and for all but is manifested moment by moment. We cannot have *Sanathana Dharma* fixed once for all until the end of our lives. It can only be given from moment to

moment as God gave manna to His people in the desert.

The way of the kingdom of God is the way of continuous death or renunciation. One must be expert of interior death in order to live. Jesus said, "The foxes have their holes, the birds have their nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lie down and rest". (Lk.9.58) Tradition usually reveals or presents the theoretical will of God in unnecessary and awesome fullness making it a heavy burden to bear through life's journey. But in the kingdom of God the will of God is dispensed from moment to moment so one walks lightly without any burden. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light". (Mt.11.28-30) Jesus, who became free from the burden of tradition, is gentle, humble and light. He invites people to come to him so that he can also make their lives light by showing them the way of *Sanathana Dharma*

The stages of *vanaprastha* and *sannyasa* are outside the hierarchical structure of religion and belong to the level of discontinuity. A religion, which is a virgin mother, shows her children the stage beyond itself. Religion as a virgin mother gives birth to a child who is greater than she is. She chooses the future for the sake of the future. She is a life-giver. A religion which is not a virgin, conceives but never gives birth. She chooses the future for the continuity of the past. She is a life-taker.

The Four Levels of Consciousness

Just there are four stages of life so also there are four levels of consciousness: the waking consciousness, the dreaming consciousness, the deep sleep consciousness and the final fourth state, the *thuriya* the state of unity. The first two levels belong to the life of continuity. In the first level one gives continuity to one's personal desires and ambitions and personal memory. In the second level, which is the level of dreams and ideals, one gives continuity to ideals and ideal persons of the past. Here the dreams are not just physical dreams during the sleep but ideals of life. The third level, deep sleep, is the level of discontinuity. It is the state where the ideals and the ideal persons of the past come to an end and one is reborn as an original person. So far one was giving continuity to the past thus living a second hand and mechanical life.

In the deep sleep consciousness there is discontinuity of the personal memory and collective memory. The movement of the past has come to an end. When the past comes to an end then the future also comes to an end since the future is nothing but the continuation of the past. When the past and the future come to an end then the psychological time comes to an end and the eternity manifests. Jesus said, "The time is fulfilled,

the kingdom of God is at hand, repent". This is the state of virginity, of rebirth and of spiritual childhood, where one leaves the womb of the God of memory and enters into the God of eternity. It is the state of illumination where one hears the voice of God saying, "You are my beloved son"(or daughter). It is the state where God is born into the world and a human being is born into God. It is real Christmas. It is the Realm of originality where nobody enters into the traces left by others and nobody leaves the traces for others to follow. From the beginning of human history many have entered into that original and virgin domain which always remains in a virgin state.

The fourth state is the state of eternity where one discovers one's identity with God. It is the state of ontological non-duality. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one". (Jn.10.30)

These declarations are not proud declarations, as they appear externally, but statements of profound humility. The spiritual revolution and fulfilment which Jesus brought to his spiritual tradition is this dignity of the human being, manifested in the image and likeness of God, who has the potentiality for transcending religions, external ways and means and of affirming boldly, "I am the way, the truth and the life". (Cf. Jn.14, 6). So far human beings revolved around the religion. Now religion revolves around the human beings. This is the revolution but also fulfilment. Another revolutionary statement of Jesus is: "The Sabbath was made for mankind and not mankind for the Sabbath. The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath"(Mk.2.27-28) The Sabbath is not only a day where one abstains from any kind of work but it is the symbol of religion with all its beliefs, rules, laws and hierarchical structure. The religions were made for the service of human beings and not human beings for the service of religion. God did not reveal religion first and then created human beings to serve religion but He created human beings first and then revealed religion in order that it might serve human beings. Human beings are greater than the religions.

This is the revolutionary message of Jesus Christ to the humanity. It is the revolution and the fulfilment in the spiritual growth of the human being, when a man or a woman declares: "I am the way, the truth and the life". 'I am an original human being. I am not the follower of any path made by the others'. A person who says, 'I am the way, the truth and the life' will not ask others to follow his or her way thus reducing others into mere second grade status but will only invite others to discover this reality within themselves. "I am the way, the truth and the life" is the most liberating and the humblest statement that Jesus had ever made. It is the most liberating because Jesus frees himself from the luggage of the past. It is the humblest because he does not become a burden to the future. This is the good news that Jesus brought to the world and this is the good news Christianity has yet to an-

nounce. Perhaps this is reserved for the third millennium. This good news alone can break down the walls of division between Christian churches and the barriers between religions.

To announce the birth of God as man, as Christmas does, is only to announce half the good news. Christmas is not only the birth of God in the world but it is also the rebirth of a human being into God. Thanks to the symbolic virgin inside him. Jesus did not announce the birth of God but the rebirth of human beings. "Unless you are born again you cannot enter into the kingdom of God" he said. To announce Jesus as the light of the world is only to announce half the good news. Jesus who said, "I am the light of the world" (Jn.8.12) also said, "You are the light of the world". (Mt.5.14) To announce Jesus as the way, the truth and the life is to announce half the good news. Jesus who said, "Just as the Father has life in himself, he has granted the son to have life in himself", (Jn.5.26) also said, "I have come to give life and give it abundantly". (Jn.10.10) Christianity has to announce to the whole of humanity, 'you are the way, the truth and the life. Discover it through rebirth'.

To announce the Resurrection of Jesus is only to announce half the good news. Religion has killed human spirit and buried it in the tomb of her structures but Jesus broke open this tomb and transformed it into a womb, which not only conceives but also gives birth. The experience of resurrection is the experience of rebirth. It is the experience of Christmas. Christmas and Easter are not two different experiences but one, which is the rebirth of man into the freedom of the kingdom of God, into the truth that has no boundaries. To announce the Resurrection of Jesus and yet bury the spirit of his people in the tombs of structured religious tradition is contrary to the message of Christ.

Announcing half the gospel produces a God, a Christ, a Religion and a Church with boundaries excluding others, and they all become like Herod who had his boundaries to protect or expand. Where there are boundaries there is the potential for war. Where there are boundaries there is violence. But announcing the gospel in its fullness produces a God, a Christ, a Religion and a Church without those boundaries and embraces the whole world.

The Four Stages of Life and the Three Wise Men of Shantivanam

The four stages of life and the four levels of consciousness of the Indian tradition can be traced in the spiritual journey of the founders of Shantivanam. They lived the first two stages in the west. They learned from their tradition as *brahmacharis*; they lived seriously and profoundly their tradition as priests and monks, as *grhastas*. Then they began their journey as hermits and at its culmination as *sannyasis*. The beauty of their journey was that it brought the two

traditions of east and west together and opened them to the East (symbolically Eternity) without the West (symbolically the End). They built the bridge between the God of history and the God of Eternity.

These three wise men from the west who were guided by the star of wisdom, to journey to the east, to the village of Thannirpalli, to the stable of Shantivanam, had found the Eternal Word born of a virgin. This Word transcends the Christian churches and all religions, thus transcends both ecumenism and inter-religious-dialogue. This was the specific charisma of the founders of Shantivanam. Shantivanam is the external symbol of our internal stable where God or Truth would be born. Shantivanam is the symbol of our inner being where the boundaries disappear. Where there are no boundaries there is the forest of peace, Shantivanam. The call which the founders have responded is the call of every human being to become a virgin in spirit, to become a child, to become a wise person, to be reborn, to make the pilgrimage to the source of life which is the interior East without the West.

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A New Buddhist Christian Network

Elizabeth West writes: *"I am writing to discover if you would be interested in being part of a Buddhist/Christian network, the goal of which would be to foster further exploration into practical dialogue between these two traditions. It seems to be that it would be very useful to form a network of people interested in this journey of contemplative discovery..."*

If you would like further information contact Elizabeth West, Holmside, Grewelthorpe, Ripon, HG4 3DP. Phone 01765 650010. Email elizabeth@elizwest.freeserve.co.uk

Father Bede

Some memories

By

Winifred Dearden

Although what had seemed to be a disaster at the time, my accident led to one of the most important events of my life; meeting Father Bede.

In the late 1940's I was called up for National Service and applied to the FANYS (Field Ambulance Nursing Yeomanry). Having been accepted I was all set to travel from Cheltenham where I was living at the time to the training camp at Kettering.

The karma or destiny took over and all my plans were dashed, for hurrying down the stairs at my grandmother's house one day I slipped and fell, damaging my knee so badly that an operation to remove the cartilage was to be performed. I had to tell them at HQ what had happened and was informed that driving an ambulance with a gammy knee was quite out the question, so that was the end of my career in the army.

I was becoming very interested in the Roman Catholic religion at this time, and had started to attend services at the local Benedictine church. One day, my blind physiotherapist who was treating my knee began to talk about a place called Prinknash Abbey, and although he was unable to see he told me how much he enjoyed hearing the monks chanting the Office and smelling the scent of the incense. At once, I was all ears, and he kindly invited me to join him and his wife to visit the Abbey one day.

At the first opportunity it was arranged that she would drive us there and that is how I had my first glimpse of the lovely old honey-coloured Cotswold stone house called St Peter's Lodge with the chapel attached. We attended the service of Compline there, as the present Abbey was not completed in those days. We spent a very happy afternoon walking in the beautiful grounds and it was agreed that the next time I would make my own way by bus and meet the guest master.

When I was fit enough I found a job at the War Office as a clerk in the Medical Board Department which was a great stroke of luck as it occupied the complex of buildings on the Gloucester Road and I was able to go to work from my home.

I shall never forget the first afternoon I went to Prinknash. Taking the local bus I limped down the long winding road, admiring the lovely grounds of the Abbey and passing the little cemetery where genera-

tions of monks lay buried. At last I reached St Peter's Lodge and stood before the sturdy oak door. It was opened by an old lay brother who ushered me into the parlour where I waited rather nervously. Then the door opened and there stood the Guest Master... Father Bede Griffiths! I had only seen monks painted in religious pictures and here was one actually come to life!

He was young, tall, inspiring and dressed in a long white habit and his head was tonsured. There seemed to be an aura of inner peace and deep spirituality about him and I was awe struck and virtually tongue tied, but he soon put me at my ease and so began a friendship which spanned half a century, albeit largely through correspondence. During the next year I was able to visit Prinknash every Sunday and talk with him about my hopes of being baptised into the Catholic Church. As we walked in the beautiful grounds or sat in the parlour over a cup of tea he answered all my questions about the Faith and his words of wisdom and encouragement helped me forward to the decision of asking for Instruction at the local church of St Gregory. At the last the great day arrived and I was received on Holy Saturday 1942

"Will you be able to attend the ceremony?" I asked. "No", he replied with that chuckle which was such a part of his charm, "monks may only leave the monastery to go for a visit to the dentist!"

At last war was over, I was married and remained in London. Over the next 10 years Father Bede kindly wrote to me occasionally from Prinknash and some years later an especially interesting letter came, posted from India. In this he described how he and a companion had founded the Kurisumala Ashram, a contemplative community in Kerala, South India, and later his book *Christian Ashram* arrived through the publishers, in which he recounts the whole history of how this call came about.

It was at this time that I had discovered Indian philosophy through reading a book called *Heaven Lies within You*, by Theos Bernard, and the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita and sages like Ramana Maharshi and Ramakrishna opened up a whole new world for me. Now my letters to Father Bede were full of questions like: can one accept the theories of reincarnation and karma and remain faithful to the teachings of the Church, and his answers were always helpful and understanding.

It was some years later that he wrote suggesting that I might be able to meet him at the Abbey of Farnborough where he had returned for a short visit (he had been Prior there from 1947 until 1951).

I shall never forget that meeting, for this time the figure who walked towards me wore the flowing saffron coloured robes of an Indian holy man and his hair and beard were silver-grey. Now I had a wonderful

opportunity to ply him with the difficult questions arising from my readings and the time passed all too quickly.

He also talked at length on the importance of meditation. "A simple and powerful mantra is the Jesus Prayer", he told me, "It can even be repeated while waiting to catch a plane..."

As we walked in the grounds of the Abbey he spoke of his vision of bringing the Eastern and Western churches closer together, and with his tireless efforts in writing books, giving talks and seminars and the wide-ranging journeys all over the world, that vision has taken shape and will continue to do so far into the future.

Winifred Dearden lives in Hove

A Visit to Shantivanam By Nick Dewey

Shantivanam means 'Peace Forest', and it is well named. There is a graceful stillness even in the gently waving palms, and the natural beauty of the ashram's setting, on the banks of the sacred river Cauvery, conspire to dispel all negative feelings and inner turmoil. As I stepped from our bus on the moist, sandy driveway, I began to experience the mystery of the place; it is tranquil yet not dauntingly silent, exotic birds chirrup in the background and hungry cows moo in their byre, waiting for scraps of food from the dining-hall! Above all, the ashram seems somehow beyond the reach of this world, a 'mystery in itself that no one can comprehend.'

It was here that Fr Bede Griffiths, lived and laboured for nearly 40 years, inspiring hundreds of devotees through the personal example of his own being and an even wider following by his admired published writings. We were privileged during our visit to watch a video of his life, in which he appeared himself only a short while before his death, his mahasamadhi. His handsome tomb, decorated in local style, reposes besides those of the ashram's two founders, Fathers Henri Le Saux (abishiktananda) and Jules Monchanin (Parama Arupiananda), the three swamis together representing what Brother Martin has called the 'Trinity of Shantivanam'. (*the tombs of Fathers Le Saux and Monchanin are memorials, the bodies being buried elsewhere - as I understand it - ed.*)

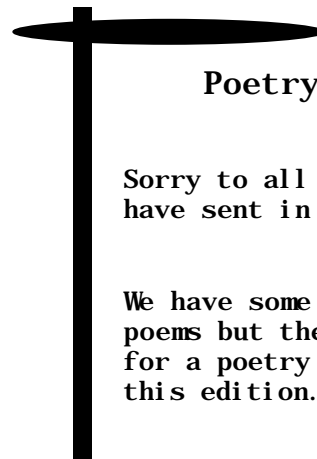
Brother Martin is in a very positive sense Bede's successor, both in perpetuating the intellectual tradition of the Benedictines at the ashram, and also in his creative endeavours to blend and harmonise the Hindu experience of Advaita with the whole Christian revelation. The discourses that he gave during our pilgrimage visit were listened to eagerly and many of his ideas are fortunately now accessible in the little monograph, *A New Vision of Christianity*. The form of Christianity that Brother Martin is proposing as appropriate and needful for the new millennium is one that would satisfy the innermost yearnings of all humanity, boldly different from that which has characterised the past 2,000 years and breathing a bounteous freedom from the restraints of dogma, creeds and sectarian prejudices.

No reminiscence of Shantivanam would be complete without mention of the beautiful ashram buildings, notably the temple where daily services are held. Rightly enough, it is the central focus among the neighbouring structures and combines features in its interior of the two faiths, Christian and Hindu. The well-stocked library and the large meeting-hall are both circular in shape, thatched and with soft pink external walls. In the centre of the latter is a wonderful four-fold sculpture of a prayerful Christ in meditative posture, facing towards each point of the compass as if to remind us of His universality and love for all the races and religions of the earth. Om Nama Christaya.

I would sum up my brief experience of Shantivanam in the words of some pilgrims who know it far better than I do, for whom it has become a 'physical representation and an earthly localisation of that secret place in the heart where God dwells'. I hope to return there one day, myself.

This article was first published in Contact, the magazine of The Study Society

Nick Dewey lives in Oxford and California



Poetry Corner

Sorry to all those who
have sent in poetry.

We have some wonderful
poems but there is no room
for a poetry corner in
this edition.

A new Retreat House

By Sarah Lionheart

Before I had children, I went on a retreat for at least three weeks of the year and led retreats once or twice a year. I went to India, stayed with Father Bede, spent time corresponding with him and also with other teachers and would visit monastic communities in England and had the time to meditate, do yoga, read and study.

Having children drastically changed all this. I kept longing to merge the contemplative part of me with the mother/family/domestic part of me. I found it hard to be 'excluded' from most retreats because I still had a child that needed me. With this in mind we decided to find a house big enough to hold small intimate retreats for families as well as individuals. And at last the dream has been realised. We found a gorgeous turn of the century stone house in Derbyshire with large windows facing the peaks with magnificent far reaching views and lovely gardens. .

I have drawn up The Heart and Mind Programme of events for 2000 with events ranging from meditation weekends for adults only to family weeks for all. Some of the titles include: Finding Spiritual Nourishment in Other Faiths, The Uniqueness of the Spiritual Journey, Parenthood as a Spiritual Journey and Relationships as a Spiritual Journey. There are Alternative Retreats for New Year, Easter and Christmas.

Whether we are single, in a relationship or in a family, I hope our life journey will be strengthened by coming together with others and sharing our wisdom and experience so that we can grow and change together, finding new ways to go forward.

I am aware that many people no longer find spiritual nourishment within established churches. At an ecumenical and interfaith level I wish to work with churches and faiths to create awareness of those who feel they are on the edge of religious institutions. Such people can bring new vision and new life and, once acknowledged and respected, they can feel empowered to help bring about the changes that are needed.

If people would like to know more or offer suggestions they can contact me on **01663 732 701** or e-mail me at **sacred-living@mc-lion.u-net.com** or look up my web page at **www.mc-lion.u-net.com/heartmind.html**. or write to me at: **Marsham, Start Lane, Whaley Bridge, High Peak, SK23 7BP** enclosing a stamped addressed envelope.

We thought that you might be interested in this extract from a letter from Fr Bede to his friend Toby Rance. Fr Bede went to India in 1955, and the letter shows how his vision of the marriage of East and West was quite clear as early as June 1952 when the letter was written from Pluscarden Priory.

"...I am sorry that you don't like the idea of my going to India but it rests on so many deep considerations that I am beginning to think it is inevitable. As you know, I have had this attraction to Eastern thought for a long time, & I am finding more & more a psychological need of it. This corresponds in me with what I believe to be a universal human need - the need of the west with its rationalism, materialism and extraversion to meet the deep, interior & contemplative spirit of the East. I don't honestly think that there is any solution to the human problem until this takes place. At the same time I feel more & more the need to integrate Eastern thought into Catholicism. I feel that this is the great work of the future, perhaps of the next five hundred years - something comparable to the incorporation of Greek thought in the early centuries. I believe that this can only be done by means of the establishment of the monastic and strictly contemplative life, and it is here that an extra-ordinary providence has brought me into contact with an Indian monk, who seems to be the ideal man for this work. He is one of the old Indian Christians, originally of the Syrian rite, of a high caste Brahmin family, very intelligent & cultured, & very well disposed towards English people & things. He found exactly the type of life he wanted to establish at Farnborough & Prinknash, & now, owing to extraordinary circumstances, he has asked Father Abbot to assist him & to send me to help make a foundation. I cannot help thinking that the hand of God is in all this, & I feel a very definite sense of vocation. It all depends now on the Abbot General, to whom Father Abbot is presenting the proposal at the General chapter which begins on June 27th. Will you please pray that God's will may be done in this - not yours & not mine! With my love & please write again.

Yours ever
D Bede

FOR INFORMATION ABOUT THE SANGHA CONTACT

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Some members have told us they can't open the Shantivanam web site we reported last issue. Neither can we! It must have been taken down.

However www.bedegriffiths.com is an important web site which is worth a visit. See front page for comments.

Future Sangha Events

Spring Retreat 2000 - The Rowan Tree Centre, The Skreen, Bulth Wells, Powys May 12th - 15th 2000. (now fully booked)

Weekend with Brother Martin: Park Place Pastoral Centre, Fareham, Hants, June 30th - July 2nd 2000.

Please use the enclosed booking form

Annual Forest Retreat - The Rowan Tree Centre, The Skreen, Bulth Wells, Powys. September 10th - 16th 2000

Contact Kim Nataraja 0171 727 6779 *The booking form will be posted with the July newsletter*

The Sangha Winter Retreat, St Peters Grange, Prinknash Abbey Nov 3rd - 5th 2000

Regional Contact

Regional Contacts for the Sangha

The Oxford meeting decided that it would be a good idea to have regional groups. As a first step the following have agreed to be regional contacts:

Valeria Ives (Taunton)
01823 432468

Therese O'Neill (Guildford)
01730 814879

Olive Norton (Oxford)
01865 242227

Chris Collingwood (Essex)
0181 504 4476

Hilary Knight (South East London) 0168 986 1004

Jill Hemmings & Adrian Rance (East Kent) 01227 752871

If you are willing to be a contact for the Sangha for your region do let us know and we will print a fuller list in later editions.

As a regional contact per-

son you don't have to do more than pass on messages, but if you wanted to arrange local Sangha days that would be great!

Don't forget that books by Brother Martin are available from Kim Nataraja 0171 727 6779