



The Bede Griffiths Sangha Newsletter

Volume 4, Issue 3

October 2001

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

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Editorial

'This is a war against terrorism and not a war against Islam' is the stated and re-stated commitment of Western leaders since the dreadful events of September 11th. The contrary reality is that for the first time in our history, a global conflict is being seen by many participants or bystanders, in both east and west, as a conflict with religion at its heart.

How are we to react to all this? Brother Martin, in a contribution to the Saha-jananda website, asks us to reflect individually on how we contribute to this violence, by proclaiming adherence to a religion and, by drawing a boundary around ourselves and our belief structures. In doing this do we help create separation and violence? Thich Nhat Hanh, writes, *'Terror is in the human heart. We must remove this terror from the heart...the root of terrorism is misunderstanding, hatred and violence. This root cannot be located by the military. Bombs and missiles cannot destroy it...only with the practice of calming and looking deeply can our insight reveal and identify this root...only light can dissipate darkness.'*

In times like this the great spiritual figures of our age assume a new importance. Father Bede with his vision of the truth at the heart of all religion emerges as a prophet of our time. We can celebrate his wisdom and love, and by committing ourselves to transcending boundaries of religion to be open to

the spirit of God, we can make our own small contribution to peace and harmony in the world.

At this very time, just as the world needs to hear the voice of Father Bede, a new anthology of his writing, the core of his teaching, has been published in America. *The One Light: Bede Griffiths' Principal Writings** is by Bruno Barnhart of New Camaldoli, a long time friend of Father Bede. The *National Catholic Reporter* welcomed the publication describing Fr Bede as 'one of the greatest religious leaders of the 20th century whose influence is only now beginning to emerge'.

Templegate have just republished *River of Compassion*, Father Bede's commentary on the Bhagavad-Gita. This will delight many Sangha members who have been unable to get this book for years. Also, Shirley du Boulay's *Beyond the Darkness* has just been published in German (*Via Nova*). These publications are a beacon of hope, a sign that the light of wisdom can shine through the religious division of our troubled times, a sign that men and women are still touched by the compassion and wisdom of Father Bede.

Namaste

Adrian

* Published by Templegate, 512 pp paperback, \$29.95)

The Priest and the Swami

Shirley du Boulay

This article on Father Henri le Saux, otherwise known as Abishiktananda, the co-founder of Shantivanam Ashram, was first published in The Tablet, and is re-printed by kind permission of the Editor.

It was a dark Indian night in 1959, in Uttar Pradesh, some 70 miles from the Himalayas, and the ecumenical community of Jyotiniketan were ending compline as they always did, standing at the door of the Chapel to give the Peace to the neighbouring villages. By the light of the kerosene lamps they saw a strange figure, patiently waiting in the mango grove. He was wearing the saffron robes of the *sadhu*, a wandering monk, and the bags containing his worldly possessions were slung round his neck. It was the Benedictine monk Henri le Saux, better known as Abhishiktananda. He had come at the suggestion of Raimon Pannikar, a pioneer in East-West dialogue, but he had been lost until the lanterns shed light on the ashram and its chapel. The community members took the wanderer to their hearts; it was the beginning of a remarkable friendship, particularly between Abhishiktananda and Murray Rogers, the ashram's founder.

Both men were in their forties, both Christians, both considered to have wandered from their traditional paths; but in some ways they were very different. Murray Rogers had come to India as an Anglican missionary under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society. He was a tall, imposing figure, married with three children, the son of an English stockbroker from a privileged background. Soon after he arrived in India he had fallen under the influence of the Gandhian movement and been forced to re-think his ideas, especially on poverty. He de-

cidated it was not possible to share the Christian message by standing outside the situation, so he and his wife Mary resigned from the Church Missionary Society and asked that no more allowances should be sent to them. God is in the mud and the suffering, they argued, and that is where they wanted to be.

Abhishiktananda was a Frenchman, an old-fashioned priest of Breton seafaring stock, who had spent the last nineteen years as a Benedictine monk in the monastery of Kergonan near Briac. He was bearded and untidy, his charm lying more in his vitality, his gesticulations and his humour than in his physical appearance. His coming to India in 1948 was the fulfilment of a dream that had lingered round his consciousness since he was a novice - he wanted to bring Benedictine life to India. At the time of this meeting he was living at Shantivanam, an ashram in Tamil Nadu he had founded with another French priest, Fr Monchanin. Overwhelmed by meeting the great Indian sage Ramana Maharshi, he had become so attached to silence and solitude that he was to spend his last years as a hermit in the Himalayas. As a monk he had of course taken vows of poverty, but he took the vow to its limit saying 'No man is free until he has nothing.'

Abhishiktananda had never met an Anglican, nor had he met a married priest of any denomination. At first he found it hard to believe that Murray and Mary were Christians at all, indeed he was, says Murray, 'chary', constantly needing to remind them that he was a Roman Catholic. Nonetheless Murray's overriding impression was of a man who was deeply authentic, open and human. He was a solitary who loved company.

Their separate lives and the size of India meant that they only met two or three times a year, but these times were charged with energy. They were serious and they joked. Abhishiktananda had a refreshingly down-to-earth understanding of God, seeing him, as Donald Nicholl noted, 'as much in the making of a good soup or the careful handling of a train as in our most beautiful meditations.' He had no problem seeing God in other denominations or religions, so when friends of the community came over for Bible Study, that very Protestant activity, Abhishiktananda entered into it with gusto. More often they sat under a

tree studying the Upanishads together, when Abhishiktananda would read a passage and say, 'You and I have Christian hearts, what echo is there in your Christian heart to what you've just heard?'

As the friendship grew Murray appreciated more and more the rare depth of holiness in Abhishiktananda and Abhishiktananda, for his part, saw that Murray's work at Jyotinakinetan was a real contribution to the church; he even came to see the value of a married priesthood and 'the sacerdotal value of the couple'. But it was more than mutual admiration that drew them to each other. Both felt they no longer completely belonged to their own traditions and were, as Murray puts it, 'blessedly at home with a fellow eccentric.' They shared a vision, a longing to find God beyond the different religions, beyond the clothing of name and form. Both longed to get back to the "source", where all is one.

Abhishiktananda has written extensively, crucial to all his thinking being the value of experience. At around the time he met Murray he wrote in his diary: "If I am the bearer of a message, as people tell me, then what is this message? You can bear witness only to your own experience. There is only one thing I know, that 'I am'. This I am, *aham*, which bursts out in all creation, in everything, in every event, natural or historical."

He always remained Christian and faithful to his Benedictine roots, but his discovery of *advaita*, or non-duality, the fundamental insight of the Hindu scriptures, caused him the greatest anguish. Abhishiktananda called *advaita* 'a royal secret.' *Advaita* is pure being. It is Christ's 'Before Abraham was, I am.' It is the mystery that God and the world are not two. It is the ultimate experience of mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Rumi, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

The full advaitic experience was eventually known to Abhishiktananda and then he found reconciliation and great peace, but on the way he was torn apart. How could he reconcile the apparent incompatibility between Christianity and *advaita*? What if in *advaita* he was only finding himself and not God? The tension brought him to the point when he wrote in his diary: 'I

wrestle with the angel. I constantly try to deny the ultimate value of *advaita*.' For years he tried to reconcile his total commitment to Christ with his conviction that the advaitic experience is the deepest experience known to man.

Murray described his own vision as 'The wish that the reality of God - Father, Son and Spirit - might grow inside me, might swallow me up, if I dared to let it.' This longing for what can be seen as a Christian understanding of *advaita* must have been balm to the soul of Abhishiktananda, who for many years found few with whom he could discuss the overwhelming tension in his life.

Abhishiktananda died in 1973 so we must rely on Murray, who now lives in England, to answer questions like how they dealt with denominational differences, for instance the Eucharist. At first, when Abhishiktananda was staying at Jyotiniketan, he would celebrate Mass alone, standing in his room, wearing his crumpled Roman vestments, using his portable Mass kit and Latin missal. Gradually he and Murray came to celebrate together, sometimes cross-legged by the Ganges, the altar-stone a rock, taken specially from the river. Not wanting to cause offence, least of all in anything concerning the Eucharist, they never concelebrated in public.

Another question, inevitable in the Indian context, was that of guru and disciple. Though Abhishiktananda was not concerned with having disciples he lived both experiences, his guru being Sri Gnanananda and his closest disciple, at the end of his life, a young Frenchman called Marc Chaduc. Was there anything of the guru/disciple relationship between him and Murray? The humility of Murray's answer is touching: 'I think I wasn't deep enough - to put it in a very Western way - to make use of what Swamiji had to share.'

Murray feels that Swamiji, as he was known by his friends, was Sancho Panza and Don Quixote rolled into one. He was Sancho Panza in that he was down-to-earth, never taking for granted, for instance, where

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the next meal was coming from. He was Don Quixote in the courage with which he tilted at windmills, even at the structure that tries to keep Christianity in one box and Hinduism in another. "Not" as Murray says, "because you can find where they interlock and say this doctrine agrees with that doctrine - not on that level at all, but by surpassing both. He moved beyond comparisons - that's a real windmill." (The Tablet cut this line - would it be wicked of us to re-instate it???)

So profound were Abhishiktananda's experiences that he sometimes thought he was mad, and Murray feels the courage of his persistence on this hard path was all the more remarkable because he had a painful sense of inferiority. Though well versed in theology and philosophy, he felt nervous with learned people; he was overwhelmed by them. "He couldn't cope when he was faced with a human being who spoke about the eternal, about the Christian experience or the advaitic experience as if they knew what they were talking about. Swamiji knew that however much he knew he was in the first form. He was extraordinarily humble." Perhaps even more than most of us Abhishiktananda needed appreciation and love.

"Beyond, always beyond" Abhishiktananda used to say, and that took him to realms where some Christians doubted his Christianity. Just as he could share with Murray the tension he experienced between Christianity and *advaita*, so he was able to share thoughts that were, at the time, unacceptable to many. For instance he wrote to Murray just two months before his death, "The Christ I might present will be simply the I AM of every deep heart, who can show himself in the dancing Shiva or the amorous Krishna! And the kingdom is precisely this discovery...of the 'inside of the Grail! The awakening is a total explosion."

If proof of the depth of their friendship were needed it lay in the depth of their sharing, in its combination of intensity, humour and trust. It lay in Abhishiktananda's grief when Murray and his community left India, far exceeding the concern he usually felt when parting from friends; it lay in the three day journey he made from his hut in the Himalayas to Delhi, to spend

just one evening with Murray, who was passing through.

As for Murray, he says his friend 'opened my eyes on what it means to be in God. I remember him saying "Prayer is simply believing that you are in God." Apart from my family Swamiji is the greatest gift God has given me.'

Friendship like this not only changes lives but can affect the spiritual lives of people around them. Here were two people who could share at a very deep level. They could even share what Abishiktananda called the 'Ah' of the Kena Upanishad. "That which is the hearing behind hearing, the thinking behind thinking, the speech behind speech, the sight behind sight. It is also the breathing behind breathing.'

Sangha Newsletter on the Web

***The Bede Griffiths Sangha Newsletter is now available on line at the website of the Bede Griffiths Trust
www.bedegriffiths.com.***

We can also send the newsletter by email. If you would like to receive it as a pdf attachment please email your request to bg.sangha@btinternet.com

Due to cost, the Sangha Newsletter will not be mailed overseas after December 2001 unless individual subscribers particularly request a mailed copy.

Reflections on a visit to Kurisumala Ashram

Bernard & Janine Kilroy

Sangha members Bernard and Janine Kilroy were able to make a short visit to Kurisumala, in Kerala, South India during February 2001. They compare their impressions with Shantivanam, which they had visited in January 2000.

"Isn't that the ashram where Bede originally went between 1956 and 1963 before finally settling in Shantivanam?" is one way of thinking of Kurisumala, as if it was part of his evolution only. In fact, it is a thriving community still, which has been developing a parallel but different tradition from Bede's. It is still very actively led by Francis Acharya, aged 91, Bede's senior collaborator originally from Belgium, and who generously described Bede to us as "...doux [gentle] ...Il avait tous les vertus qui me manquent" [he had all the virtues which are missing in me].

The scenic contrasts between Kurisumala and Shantivanam are striking. The former is perched on a small plateau perhaps 1500 metres up, remote in the Western Ghats of Kerala, with a panorama of hazy peaks on a scale as stunning as the view from Mount Nebo in Palestine, and with similar extremes of temperature - quite unlike the humid and shady river bank groves of Shantivanam, now audibly close to the local village and the main road to the Tamil Nadu city of Trichy.

The enculturation of Kurisumala is immediately apparent in the simple saffron robes and bare feet of the monks. Otherwise, the buildings, the monastic day, the church layout and, above all, the liturgy exhibit its threefold roots. First, underlying all is the Trappist (rather than Benedictine) practice and life inherited from the abbey of Scourmont in Belgium where Francis had been professed, although our British eyes kept seeing the Cistercians of Caldey in Wales. And, superficially, we were reminded of this in the way the

monastic buildings merge with the farm of dairy cows, themselves the descendants of two Jersey bulls shipped from Caldey in 1961.

The second root is the Syro-Malankara rite, which has its own bishops in union with Rome. Francis and Bede were attracted to this rite and the invitation of the Malankara Archbishop of Trivandrum mainly because it was one of the Churches whose traditions were very consciously as the Christians of St Thomas the Apostle. Otherwise, the Latin Church had been imported comparatively recently by the Portuguese conquests, with an imperial and Tridentine theology. An additional attraction was that, even in pre-Vatican days the Syro-Malankara rite was using the vernacular of Kerala (Malayalam). Even at that time, its hierarchy welcomed experiments in inculturation. Now, it is this Eucharistic rite which Kurisumala celebrates in the Holy Qurbana in all its solemnity every Sunday, albeit within a Cistercian setting.

The third root is the Hindu idiom, rituals, and allusions which are integrated within the daily weekday Eucharist or Bharatiya Pooja (in English), very similar to the liturgy of Shantivanam - with the fire, the flowers and the cave - or to that at the Catholic Bishops' national centre at Bangalore in the neighbouring state of Karnataka. It is only perhaps the linear plan of the small monastic church at Kurisumala, which makes that liturgy less accessible to visitors than at Shantivanam. We were often in the back row craning our necks to see and hear what was going on.

As at Shantivanam, all the guests eat in silence the simple vegetarian meals in the same long corridor as the monks, cross-legged on the floor. In that way, we felt completely welcomed into the community. It reminded us how rare is that practice of open hospitality in the monastic houses of Britain, maybe of Europe too.

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We were able to stay for a mere three days, just one couple among the diverse two dozen guests, both women and men, who were coming and going. It was enough to give us a most extraordinary revelation. Kurisumala has developed its own very distinctive monastic office (some of it written by Bede) which uses the work of the fourth century Father St Ephrem of Nisibis, whose language was close to the Aramaic of Jesus himself and whose theology is written in poetry as vivid as that of the Psalms.

For us, it was like seeing the planet Earth for the first time from the Moon. We saw the Western and Graeco-Roman Church with its Hellenistic concepts and logic and systems and iconography as if on the *other* side of the valley, where the sun was setting. 'Our' Church was now a natural expression of the East, both the Middle East and the Far East - as we strained our eyes back towards Jerusalem and Antioch and across Mesopotamia, where once Christianity had flourished, back along the fertile routes of the Apostles Thomas and Bartholomew, knowing that behind us were the kindred worlds of India and China where the sun was rising again.

Is it possible to make a fair comparison between our experience at Kurisumala and at Shantivanam, especially when we were at each so briefly? The topography at Kurisumala and the walks and views which were possible, along with the variety of haunts to sit and read and pray and wonder, plus the canopy of stars at night, we found opened us up. The experience of Shantivanam we found had been more internalised, more intense, though perhaps more challenging.

On the other hand, at Kurisumala we were left much more to make our own programme; there was nothing as structured as Brother Martin's afternoon talks. Unlike at Shantivanam, where the majority of guests had been Westerners with a lot of intermingling, at Kurisumala most of the guests were groups of Indian seminarians or Sisters, coming with their own programmes. Thus, quite part from the zones of silence, there was little conversation among guests (which we liked).

Indeed, at Kurisumala, when we wrote to ask permission to come, we were greeted with a great deal of caution

and reminded that couples were expected to be separate during their stay. That and remoteness of Kurisumala - it is a three hour local, lurching and crowded bus ride into the mountains from Kottayam, which itself is far from most of the classical centres of South India - means that it has to be a very deliberate choice. For us, however, the privilege of staying longer, if there can be a next time, would be one we would embrace. Hence, we feel protective about it, which explains why we would not print their address here but will pass it on privately with a few more caveats.

Kurisumala is well described in Shirley du Boulay's biography of Bede Griffiths *Beyond the Darkness* Rider paperback 1998. Kottayam is some 4 hours north of Trivandram (with its international airport) by main line train or about 20 hours by train from Chennai (Madras).

If you are interested, do ring, fax or e-mail us on 01252 843133 or bernardkilroy@uk2.

Sangha Trip to Northern India

Preliminary consideration is being given to a Sangha trip to Northern India in February 2003 with Soul of India Tours. The trip will be for about three weeks and is likely to cost about £1700. If you are interested please contact Adrian and Jill so that we can gauge likely support for the idea.

Letter to a Friend

Again we are able to bring you an extract from a letter from Father Bede to his friend Winifred Dearden, a Sangha member who lives in Hove, East Sussex.

Winifred Dearden writes:

Dear Jill

Here is one of the most precious and comforting letters Father Bede ever write to me, and when I read it again yesterday I thought it would be lovely to share with others—it always lifts me heart and makes life just a little but more tolerable...

Much love to you and to all the Sangha.

20th December 1990

“... Often one does not understand the mystery of love and forgiveness, and one must consider that in a deep sense all this world is Maya. It is a shadow and a reflection of a reality which lies beyond. We all grow up in this world of shadows and illusions, and fall into sin as a result of our past conditioning. Often there is much to regret in one's past life, but one must remember that it belongs to this world of shadows which is passing away. You yourself, in your deep self are beyond all this. There is a deep centre in your being where God is always present and in this deep centre you are loved by God. You are in Him and He is in you, and when you die the shadow will pass away, but there may be a period of purgatory before it is finally dispelled.

In the end you will shine forth in your original splendour, created in the likeness of God and redeemed by the love of Christ. Sin is the shadow, the darkness and when that has been dispelled the soul shines forth in the divine light: that is forgiveness. It is the love and light of God irradiating the soul. No sin can stand up against it. God is pure unconditional love: it is we who create the shadow and the darkness which conceals his face. Once we surrender ourselves and ask for

forgiveness and receive absolution nothing stands between us and God. One must reflect on this in meditation: let all thoughts of the past go and be in the Light of Christ which is always shining in your heart and when you let go of yourself and your sins and fallings you become one with that light.

Re-incarnation belongs to the world of shadow, of Maya. It is clinging to this passing world, but the spirit, the self is beyond that. At the moment of death the spirit returns to God, the shadows depart and you find final fulfilment: do think of this, it is very important.”



SPRING 2002

Quieting of Mind and Body

‘Your Retreat is a homecoming; an integrating, a remembering.’ Father Bede

We will again be having a Spring Retreat at the Rowan Tree Centre, near Builth Wells in Wales. It will begin on the evening of May 3rd and end after lunch on May 6th. The centre, set in beautiful countryside on the banks of the River Wye, has become a sort of ‘home’ for the Sangha. We have met here every year since we began in 1993.

The core of the retreat will be a gentle silence. The pattern of our time together is inspired by the Benedictine rhythm of the day as followed in Shantivanam, Father Bede's Ashram in India. There will be periods of meditation, chanting and readings from different religious traditions. There will be plenty of free time, all activities being optional.

To help deepen our quietness, and as Father Bede put it ‘take time to make friends with our body’, Yoga teacher Catherine James will be leading 2 periods of yoga on both Saturday and Sunday [all optional] These will be very gentle and suitable for beginners as well as the more experienced. The numbers on the retreat are limited. An application form will appear in the next newsletter. If anyone would like more details please contact Jane Saunderson 01285-651381.

Pilgrims in Search of the Absolute

by

Fr Emmanuel Bergellini

This homily was given by the Prior General of the Camaldolese, on the Feast of the Epiphany, January 2001, during the mass that preceded the opening and blessing of the new meditation hall at Shantivanam. Many Sangha members contributed to the cost of the meditation hall, which was built in honour of the three 'founding fathers' of Shantivanam to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Ashram.

The gospel according to Matthew tells of wise men from the East who arrive in Jerusalem and ask, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? We have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him'. Speaking of these anonymous pilgrims, the evangelist alludes to all the traditions of spiritual wisdom and religious experience that are symbolically placed in the east: the three wise men represent these traditions moving in search of Jesus, whom at the end, as God has disposed, they will meet. In him, the Word made flesh, they will find their complete fulfilment and the ultimate meaning of all their searching.

In his Son, 'born of woman in the fullness of time', God the Father makes good the promise of love, eternal for all humanity, expressed in the covenant with the people of Israel. God awakens the desire for truth in the human heart and sustains the search for it; God approaches each human being with a personal 'self-revelation' offering the joy of sharing in God's own life. The feast of the Epiphany manifests this as the surprising goal to which the Christmas mystery leads. The very name 'Epiphany' means both 'manifestation' and 'self-gift'.

Fifty years ago three wise men, guided by the spirit of God, set out in search of the manifestation of God's wisdom. They travelled in the opposite direction from that taken by the three wise men of Matthews's gospel. They left the West and came to India in search of the light of God they had observed in the East. They were Father Jules Monchanin (Swami Parama Arubi Ananda), Father Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda) and Father Bede Griffiths (Swami Dayananda). In different ways and at different times the Lord led their decisive meeting with him here, the Ashram of the Holy Trinity (Saccidananda Ashram), in this 'Forest of Peace' (Shantivanam) on the banks of the River Cauvery.

Through the insight given them by faith they realised the indwelling of the Heavenly Father, visibly manifested in the person of the Son, Jesus, in the heart of every man and woman, by the working of the Holy Spirit, the divine breath that blows where so ever she will. The three wise men of the West headed East, convinced that in the great faith traditions of India the Spirit of God had built a very special, transparent, dwelling place. The people of India bear the divine imprint, and their search can find in Christ the One they aspire to, the Self that fulfils all.

They advanced with quiet steps and with a burning heart, their soul filled with wondering contemplation of the surprising signs of God's presence in Asia. While ready to render humble and loving witness to the gift of their faith in Christ, they were also ready to sit listening and learning at the feet of India's spiritual masters. Above all they sought to father whatever seeds the Lord had scattered and made to sprout in the heart of these extraordinary spiritual experiences. Strengthened and enlightened by their faith and hope they awaited the Lord's accomplishment of the manifold harmony and unity of what today, in human eyes, seems impossible to hold together.

The birth and the continuation, humble and persevering, of this ashram, are an eloquent sign of the faith of the three founders, of their courageous choices, motivated by faith, and of the precious inheritance they have left us. In response to the grace that the Lord manifested in them we are committed not only to preserving the memory of these wise and holy teachers, but also to cultivating, faithfully and creatively, their spiritual legacy.

All three were incomparable witnesses to the Spirit – true *acharyas* of the Param-atman. They let themselves be buried in the history of our times, like the seed of corn or rice entrusted to the earth. They did so with trust and hope that the Lord would make the dying seed sprout and grow in a superabundant harvest, in the way and in the time established by his wisdom.

For the strength of their faith in God and for the hidden fecundity guaranteed by the spirit, we venerate them as the ‘fathers’ of this ashram. If our hearts remain watchful and our minds open, we shall discern the Lord’s voice vibrating in the events of today, for us as it did for them, and we shall be able to follow in their steps and realise their teachings as obedient and wise sons and daughters. The three founders of Shantivanam have been granted as a precious gift to the churches of East and West; from the witness of their lives may we receive the guidance we need in preparing the marriage of love between East and West.

Our monastic fellowship in the ashram and in the Camaldolese Benedictine Congregation teaches us to live in mutual communion and respect, recognising the value of our different cultures and experiences. In the spirit of Saint Romuald and of the three founders, may this place and the ashram experience become for all the guests and for the church in India, a centre for experiencing God, for listening to the rich spiritual teachings of this land, and for bringing persons of every ethnic group, culture, and religion, into fellowship and communion.

The brotherly relationship between Saccidananda Ashram and Camaldoli came to birth in virtue of the spiritual affinity that brought together two great men of the spirit, Father Bede and Father Benedetto Calati (who departed this life on November 21, 2000). Their meeting was an authentic Epiphany of God for our times. We have seen their great hearts open to each and all with the same generosity of the heart of God, their broad understanding of the spiritual realities of our day, and their prophetic gaze that looked beyond the reach of hope. May we take from them inspiration for our commitment to mutual fellowship and shared witness to Christ, in the service of the Lord’s Good News.

Brother Martins visit 2001

Many members of the Sangha enjoyed the presence of Brother Martin, long time friend of disciple of Father Bede, during his visit in June and July 2001.

It seems a long time since we sat at Park Place enjoying our soul friend, our *anam cara* talking about three of the great Upanishads. It also seems a long time until next summer when he comes again to Park Place, when again we will be able to enjoy the inspiration of his talks and the love of his companionship.

Our summer seminar with Brother Martin, enjoying the hospitality of the sisters at Park Place, is a familiar and much loved aspect of our life as a Sangha. The early morning Guyatri Mantra on the lawns, discussions under the spreading cedar tree, late night talks in the little sitting room, bhajans and chants around the shrine, and always, that wonderful end to the day with namjapa, the singing of the name of God, *Jesu Jesu, Jay Jay Namo*.

This year Brother Martin shared with us his teaching on the Isa Upanishad, the Kena Upanishad and the Mandhukya Upanishad. These explorations touched the hearts of many people who found in them food for their own spiritual journeys. The talks were tape-recorded and we are grateful to Edgar and Susanne Holroyd-Doveton for arranging duplication and making these available to Sangha members.

Brother Martin visited England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. There are growing networks of people inspired by his teaching and many groups who are looking forward to his return next year. His 2002 itinerary is almost completed and will be available in the next edition of the newsletter.

Many of you are familiar with his small booklets that

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Go Beyond—Bede Griffiths and the Ancient Wisdom

Harry Underhill

I visited Father Bede's place in South India a few years ago. He was very sick – he'd had a heart attack – so he saw people for only a few minutes, but even that was wonderful! He was the sort of man who when you met him gave you all his attention. He looked at you and you got that strange feeling that he had waited all his life for this moment. I talked to him for only a few minutes, but I had taken some of his books. So I then went away and tried to make sense not only of the written words in his books but of his effect on me just meeting him, and after lots of brain work, columns of key words and when they appeared in his books, suddenly came the flash that his theme is just two words, and they are 'Go Beyond'. Once you have picked that up you find them on almost every page of his later writing.

Although then 84 years old and in poor health, Father Bede still had the charismatic vision and vigour of the prophet. With his gentle face and deep-set eyes of wisdom and compassion, living a barefoot life in the saffron-coloured robe of the *Sannyasi*, he had the quiet authority of one who knows. Little wonder that many from East and West acknowledge him as their teacher and that with his books and lectures his influence was felt worldwide.

But it is not so much the man as his vision that I want to tell you about. 'All our conflicts,' he writes, 'arise because we stop at a certain level. Christians stop at the Christian religion, and if you are a Muslim you stop at Islam. If you are a Hindu you stop at your own symbolism and formalised structure. Each one feels separate from the others. Only when you go beyond

these distinctions and are open to the reality beyond can you overcome these conflicts. So also the conflicts between black and white peoples, Jews and Arabs, Tamils and Singhalese; they are fighting because they stop at some limited form and do not go beyond it to the formless'.

The formless is the Transcendent, which cannot be described except in paradox, for description is limiting and this is the Unlimited. This mystery is at the root of all religious faiths, but it is usually submerged under dogma and rituals and man-made structures.

Being aware of the Absolute, even in the smallest way, and whether recognised as such or not, is a mystical experience. Father Bede says it lies beyond mind, beyond intellect. That is why it has no place in our commonly accepted view of reality today. We have excluded it precisely because it is not amenable to study by the mind, by reason; it can only be experienced.

'So in each religion you see that they all indicate a transcendent reality which is beyond symbols. Symbols are necessary and you have to have a symbol to make the reality present to us. Every word we use is a symbol. These are symbols which we use to point to something which cannot be described, cannot be expressed and which is the Ultimate. This is the mystery of human life – that we are being pushed beyond ourselves, beyond our limits. That is why it is so difficult. We all want to stick with this world, to things we can understand, and our lives. But we are never satisfied. We are always being pushed to go beyond...The Atman, or spirit, has been drawing man on the from the beginning, but people always stop at something else, making it a substitute for the Atman. Whether it is a wife or children, or money, power, wisdom, science or philosophy, they are all substitutes for the reality itself. This is extremely fascinating and meaningful, particularly for us in India. This is where the West is discovering the East. And I would like to end by saying that it has great practical value.'

That final remark, that awareness of the Ultimate has great practical value, is as important as it is unexpected. Certainly our world today is torn by conflicts – political, social, economic, military, environmental.

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The trick (if one may use the word) seems to be not more reason, intellect and rationality, which only reinforce our conflicts because those very conflicts have all arisen for good 'reason' – but to let them be and go beyond them. We can observe this in daily life when the solution to a paradox is often found not by one view proving to be right and the other wrong, but by proving both right in a wider context.

This 'trick' of solving problems not at their own level but by going beyond them, is very old, as old as human consciousness. It is in fact the secret of the Ancient Wisdom, and every religion has this at its core. 'I find it very important that each religion has a certain clearly conceived notion about this transcendent reality beyond thought and conceived it as beyond reality', says Father Bede.

Now duality or separateness seems to be inevitable; it is a part of growing up to discover one's own ego. But, as is found in the folklore of many cultures, the growth of the individual (and indeed of the tribe, human race and cosmos) demands sooner or later a leap over this obstacle of duality. And what do we then find? A meaningless ocean in which all differentiation is lost? Apparently not. What has been glimpsed by the great seers (and Father Bede is certainly among them) is a transcendent reality in which differences are preserved and valued, indeed are essential, but as a part of a greater whole.

Science and technology, the religion of our Western reality, is in fact now waking up to this vision. 'All is interrelated', 'No part exists without the whole', 'The whole is contained within every part', are some of the concepts that science is now grappling with. This is indeed the Ancient Wisdom, which Father Bede believes can only be sought by 'going beyond'.

Lest we should fear that this endangers our faith, Father Bede emphasises that 'to go beyond the sign is not to reject the sign, but to reach the thing signified'. This is a call to maturity, to risk growing

up spiritually, to be prepared to let go of established beliefs. These beliefs have been good, have served us well, have protected and supported us. But they have become out of date; have become crutches or, even worse, prisons instead of temporary supports and shelters. Letting them go and walking out into the unknown means becoming vulnerable, embracing the darkness. To do this, faith alone is not enough. It needs a deep trust born of personal inner experience of the workings of the Holy Spirit in the cosmos.

This is precisely where Father Bede's call to 'go beyond' converges with the recognition that the Cosmic Christ goes far beyond the historical Jesus, and that the same Christ has been glimpsed from time immemorial through the Ancient Wisdom, or Perennial Philosophy, in all societies and cultures.

Harry Underhill lives in Hastings and is a Quaker. This article first appeared in The Seeker in Spring 1994

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contain many of his reflections and teachings. These have now been brought together and edited into one volume that will be published by Medio Media next summer. It is hoped that the official launch of the book will be at the Park Place Seminar May 31st – June 2nd.

Brother Martin works hard to support the Swami Bede Dayananda Trust, an organisation that provides much needed services at Tannirpalli, the village near Shantivanam Ashram. Here Sister Rose Mathew runs a kindergarten, a tailoring school for girls, a typing school, and a computer school. These projects are largely funded by the sale of beautifully designed cards with pictures in silk thread made by young people in the village.

Due to the generosity of Sangha members we were able to send Brother Martin back to India with almost one thousand pounds for the work of the Trust. Thank you all for your wonderful support for this work, particularly when you buy these cards.

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We would like to ask you to keep in the light our Sangha friends, Winifred Dearden and Noreen Read, both of whom are in poor health.

Our congratulations and best wishes are offered to Karen (Sussman) and David Patterson who have just got married.

Also a welcome to Camille Barton, born 19th September, a new grandchild for Adrian & Jill.

Future Sangha Events

**The Sangha Winter Retreat, St Peters
Grange, Prinknash Abbey Nov 2nd—4th
2001**

**Spring Retreat at the Rowan Tree Centre,
The Skreen, nr Bulth Wells. May 3rd—6th
2002.**

**Seminar with Br Martin Sahajananda at
Park Place Pastoral Centre, Wickham,
Hants. May 31st—June 2nd 2002**

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Pamela Hardy who lives in Whitstable, Kent is offering her home for members of the Sangha to drop in or to stay longer as a base for exploring the area. Her phone number is 01227 282690.