

The Bede Griffiths Sangha Newsletter

Volume 5, Issue 3

September 2002

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

Inside this issue:

| | |
|---|----|
| How I Pray Bede Griffiths | 2 |
| Letters to a Friend Winifred Dearden | 5 |
| Non-Duality Brother Martin | 6 |
| Letter from Iceland | 8 |
| My Heart Angelika Monteux | 9 |
| Self Love Michael Dillon | 11 |

Sangha support for social work projects in India

Brother Martin has written from Shantivanam with news of the ashram project to buy a van to enable local women to manufacture garments with material purchased in the nearby town of Karur.

Garment wholesalers were unwilling to let local people take material without a local guarantee that the ashram was able to provide. The van will allow material to be collected and for the garments to be taken to Karur for sale.

Members of the Sangha will be glad to know that members in the UK and Ireland, and friends in Germany, have donated a total of € 1,500, £ 2640 and 5000 Indian rupees for the project.

The van has been purchased at a cost of 250,000 rupees and 15 sewing machines have been bought. 15 women will be employed initially but it is hoped that the project will be expanded. Brother Martin writes, "I would like to thank everyone for their cooperation and generous help. May the Lord bless you all".

Much of this money has come from

appeals made during Brother Martin's talks and seminars during the summer months. The suggestion has now been made that it would be good to separate the fund raising for these projects from Brother Martin's talks. Sometimes it is not appropriate to ask people for money when they have come to receive teachings.

We would like to explore how this could be done. Perhaps we could establish a separate fund raising account, seek charitable status for this aspect of the work, ask people to covenant regular donations on a monthly or annual basis.

Brother Martin suggests that it would be good to have an annual target of raising between £2500 and £3000.

Father Bede emphasised in his own life the need to share resources to help people in need. What greater testimony could there be to his dedication to the village people of India than to continue the work he has started and which the ashram and the Swami Bede Dayananda Trust have continued.

Please write, or phone or email your suggestions so that we can take this forward and perhaps come up with some concrete proposals in the next newsletter

Namaste

Adrian



The village social work projects supported by the Sangha are also funded through the sale of greeting cards, hand stitched by young people in the village of Tannirpalli. You can help by selling these to your friends. If you would like to help please contact Jane Saunderson on 01285 651381 or Jill Hemmings on 01227 752871

How I pray Bede Griffiths

If anyone asks me how I pray, my simple answer is that I pray the Jesus prayer. Anyone familiar with the story of a Russian pilgrim will know what I mean. It consists simply in repeating the words: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." I have used this prayer now for over 40 years and it has become so familiar that it simply repeats itself. Whenever I am not otherwise occupied or thinking of something else it is almost mechanical, just quietly repeating itself, and other times it gathers strength and can become extremely powerful.

I give it my own interpretation. When I say, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God", I think of Jesus as the Word of God, embracing heaven and earth and revealing himself in different ways and under different forms to all humanity. I consider that this Word "enlightens everyone coming into the world", and thought they may not recognise it, it is present to every human being in the depths of their soul. Beyond word and thought, beyond all signs and symbols, this Word is being secretly spoken in every heart in every place and at every time. People may be utterly ignorant of it or may choose to ignore it, but whenever or wherever anyone responds to truth or love or kindness, to the demand for justice, concern for others, care of those in need, they are responding to the voice of the Word. So also when anyone seeks truth or beauty in science, philosophy, poetry or art, they are responding to the inspiration of the Word.

I believe that the Word took flesh in Jesus of Nazareth and in him we can find a personal form of the Word to whom we can pray and to whom we can relate in terms of love and intimacy, but I think that he makes himself known to others under different names and forms. What counts is not so much the name and the form as the response in the heart to

the hidden mystery, which is present to each one of us in one way or another and awaits our response in faith and hope and love.

When I say, "have mercy on me a sinner", I unite myself with all human beings from the beginning of the world, who have experienced separation from God, or from the eternal truth. I realise that, as human beings, we are all separated from God, from the source of our being. We are wandering in a world of shadows, mistaking the outward appearance of people and things for reality. But at all times something is pressing us to reach out beyond the shadows, to face the reality, the truth, the inner meaning of our lives, and so to find God, or whatever name we give to the mystery which enfolds us.

So I say the Jesus prayer, asking to be set free from the illusions of the world, from the innumerable vanities and deceits with which I am surrounded. And I find in the name of Jesus the name which opens my heart and mind to reality. I believe that each one of us has an inner light, an inner guide, which will lead us through the shadows and illusions by which we are surrounded, and open our minds to the truth. It may come through poetry or art, or philosophy or science, or more commonly through the encounter with people and events day by day. Personally I find that meditation, morning and evening, every day, is the best and most direct method of getting in touch with reality. In meditation I try to let go of everything of the outer world of the senses, of the inner world of thoughts, and listen to the inner voice, the voice of the Word, which comes in the silence, in the stillness when all the activity of mind and body ceases. Then in the silence I become aware of the presence of God, and I try to keep that awareness during the day. In bus or train or travelling by air, in work or study or talking and relating to others, I try to be aware of this presence in everyone and in everything. And the Jesus prayer is what keeps me aware of that presence.

So prayer for me is the practice of the presence of God in all situations, in the midst of noise and distraction of all sorts, of pain and suffering and death, as in times of peace and quiet, of joy and friendship, or prayer and silence, the presence is always there. For

me the Jesus prayer is just a way of keeping in the presence of God.

I find it convenient to keep in mind the four stages of prayer in the medieval tradition – *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*. *Lectio* is reading. Most people need to prepare themselves for prayer by reading of some sort. Reading the Bible is the traditional way, but this reading is not just reading for information. It is an attentive reading, savouring the words as in reading poetry. For this reason I prefer the authorised or revised versions of the Bible, which preserve the rich, poetic tradition of the English language.

Lectio is followed by *meditatio*. This means reflecting on one's reading, drawing out the deeper sense and preserving in the "heart". It is said that Mary "pondered all these things in her heart". This is meditation in the traditional sense, bringing out the moral and symbolic meaning of the text and applying it to one's own life. The symbolic meaning goes beyond the literal and shows all its implications for one's own life and for the life of the Church and the world. It is a great loss when the literal meaning, of which today, of course we have a far greater knowledge, leaves no place for the deeper, richer symbolic meaning which points to the ultimate truth to which the Scripture bears witness.

Meditation is naturally followed by prayer – *oration*. Our understanding of the deeper meaning of the text depends on our spiritual insight and this comes from prayer. Prayer is opening the heart and mind to God, that is, it is going beyond all the limited processes of the rational mind and opening the mind to the transcendent reality to which all words and thoughts are pointing. This demands devotion – that is, self-surrender. As long as we remain on the level of the rational mind, we are governed by our ego, our independent rational self. We can make use of all kinds of assistance, of commentaries and spiritual guides, but as long as the individual self remains in command we are imprisoned in the rational mind with its concepts and judgements. Only when we surrender the ego, the separate self, and turn to God, the supreme Spirit, can we receive the light which we need to understand the deeper meaning of the scriptures. This is passing from

ration to intellectus, from discursive thought to intuitive insight.

So we pass to *contemplatio*. Contemplation is the goal of all Christian life. It is knowledge by love. St Paul often prays for his disciples that they may have knowledge (*gnosis*) and understanding (*epignosis*) in the mystery of Christ. The mystery of Christ is the ultimate truth, the reality towards which all human life aspires. And this mystery is known by love. Love is going out of oneself, surrendering the self, letting the reality, the truth take over. It is not limited to any earthly object or person. It reaches out to the infinite and the eternal. This is contemplation. It is not something which we achieve for ourselves. It is something that comes when we let go. We have to abandon everything – all words, thoughts, hopes, fears, all attachments to ourselves or to any earthly thing, and let the divine mystery take possession of our lives. It feels like death and is a sort of dying. It is encountered with the darkness, the abyss, the void. It is facing nothingness – or as Augustine Bakes, the English Benedictine mystic said, it is the "union of the nothing with the Nothing".

This is the negative aspect of contemplation. The positive aspect is, of course, the opposite. It is total fulfilment, total wisdom, total bliss, the answer to all problems, the peace which surpasses understanding, the joy which is the fullness of love. St Paul summed it up in the letter to the Ephesians – or whoever wrote that letter which is the supreme example of Christian *gnosis*: "I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory, he may strengthen you with his spirit in the inner man: that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, that being rooted and grounded in love, you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and breadth and height and depth, and may know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

This article was first published in The Tablet to which acknowledgement is given.

Letters to a Friend Winifred Dearden

Continuing our series of extracts from letters written by Father Bede to Sangha member Winifred Dearden who lives in Hove, Sussex

Father Bede's letter to me dated 12th December 1963 is in answer to several questions I had asked concerning his opinion on the teachings of the Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner, the founder of the Anthroposophical Society, and also on the question of 'experiences':

I had been introduced to Steiner's Spiritual Science through a friend and was anxious to know whether Father Bede would give his 'seal of approval' or tell me that Steiner's teachings were contrary to Church teachings. This is his reply:

"I was very interested in the pamphlets you sent me on Rudolph Steiner. He is much more orthodox than I expected, and it seems to me that his method is quite consistent with Catholic teaching. I would say that his three stages of Imagination, Inspiration and Intuition correspond roughly with the transformation of the intellect, the transformation of the will and finally, in what he calls the 'Mystery of Golgotha', the transformation of the 'person' or the depth of one's being in Christ. The whole is the process of Christ taking possession of all the faculties of one's being, until the self is transformed into the New Man.

The process begins in Baptism when the divine life enters into the unconscious depths of the soul (symbolised by water) and our nature is 'divinised' in its ground. It continues in our daily life which is a perpetual death and resurrection – death to the illusory world and self and rebirth to the true world and the true self. This is 'represented' in the Mass, where the death and resurrection of Christ are made present under the symbols of bread and wine, so that we can partake of them and enter into the new life in Christ. Our personal prayer should be an extension of this, a continual effort to 'die' in order that we may live and separate from our selfish nature and its preoccupations, and to live in Christ; that is, in the world but

transformed by the power of Christ.

I don't think one should worry too much about 'experiences' – for this reason I am again SUBUD, which can be dangerous: I had a friend who gave it up for that reason. One should be concerned rather to get beyond the wall of 'experience', that is, of feeling and imagination and into the interior depth and darkness, where we meet God in the 'mystery of Golgotha'.

I find everything in St Paul, especially Ephesians and Colossians. He was drawing on a lot of esoteric wisdom and is full of deep meaning."

2003

**For the 10th anniversary of
Father Bede's death there will
be a special Sangha Celebration
of the Life and Vision of Father
Bede at Gaunt's House,
Wimborne Minster, Dorset, July
17th—20th 2003**

***Sangha Advent Retreat, St
Peters Grange, Prinknash
Abbey November 29th—
December 1st 2002. Please
use the registration form
with this newsletter.***

**We look forward to seeing
you all.**

Non-duality in the Vedic and Biblical traditions

John Martin Sahajananda

The Vedic Tradition

The Vedas are the sacred scriptures of Hindus and the Upanishads are the culmination of the Vedic search for Truth or Reality. The Upanishads reveal the ultimate experience of God in which a person can declare 'I am Brahman', or 'I am God', which is described as a non-dualistic, or advaita, experience or ontological non-duality.

The Vedic tradition reveals a progressive growth of divine-human relationship in four stages: *samhithas*, which is the relationship with God through poetry, *brahmanas*, the relationship through ritual or sacrifices, *aranyakas*, the relationship through meditations in the forest, and finally self-realization, that is, the *Upanishads*.

The Upanishads speak of four levels of consciousness, which again show the progressive growth in divine-human relationship: these are, waking consciousness, dreaming consciousness, deep sleep consciousness and the *thuriya*, which literally means the 'fourth'. In waking consciousness one identifies with one's physical body and lives to satisfy one's physical desires and ambitions. In the dreaming consciousness one identifies with ideals and ideal persons taken from the past or the memory and tries to follow and imitate them. Here a person might say I am a Hindu, Christian, and Muslim, etc. In the deep sleep one is freed from the personal and collective ideals and from ideal persons of the past (that is, from time) and one enters into the realm of originality and creativity (that is, eternity) and one becomes an original and creative person. In this level one is able to say, 'I am'. In the *thuriya* or the fourth state one realizes one's identity with God and says 'I am Brahman'. The statement, 'I am Brahman' may appear to be a statement of spiritual arrogance but in reality it is a statement of utter humility in which the ego is completely renounced and

only Brahman remains. To say that 'I am God' *does not mean that a human being becomes God but it is to affirm that God is the only Reality.*

The Vedas should not be seen as the systematic treaties of philosophy but the collection of philosophical discoveries and experiences of the seekers of Truth or God. The ultimate experience is expressed within four or five 'great sentences', or *mahavakyas*. These are 'I am Brahman' (ahambrahmasmi), 'You are that-Brahman' (tatvamasī), 'Atman is Brahman' (ayatmanbrahma), 'All this is Brahman' (sarvametatbrahma) and 'Brahman is non-dual' (prajnanambrahma).

I am Brahman' (ahambrahmasmi),
'You are that-Brahman' (tatvamasī), '
Atman is Brahman' (ayatmanbrahma),
'All this is Brahman' (sarvametatbrahma) and
'Brahman is non-dual' (prajnanambrahma).

These mahavakyas are different ways of expressing the same advaitic experience. Later the great teachers, the acharyas, tried to define the teachings of the Upanishads into various systems of thought. There are three main schools of thought. Firstly there is advaita, or non-duality, then there is visistaadvaita, or qualified non-duality, and there is dvaita, or duality.

According to advaita, propounded by Shankara, who lived in the 7th century A.D, and who came from Kerala, in Southern India, Brahman or God alone is real and the world is an illusion or maya. The human soul is ultimately identical with Brahman. The mahavakya 'ahambrahmasmi', 'I am Brahman or God' is the experience of this non-duality. Brahman is nirguna without any attributes. The way to realize this truth is jnana marga, the path of knowledge.

The system of visistaadvaita propounded by Ramanuja, who lived in the 12th century, and who came from Tamil Nadu in Southern India, states that God and creation are like soul and the body (or body and the hair that grows on the body). That is to say they are inseparable. God and human beings, like the soul and the body, are

inseparable but are not identical. God lives in human beings, and creation and creation and human beings live in God, but they are not identical. The soul, though of the same substance as God, emanated from him rather than being created by him, can obtain bliss not in absorption but in existence near him. The way to have this experience is through self-surrender. He proposed the path of devotion or bhakti as a way to this realization, which comes through the grace of God. A person might say 'I am in God and God is in me' but person cannot say 'I am God'. For Ramanuja God is saguna, with attributes like omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence.

Madhava, who lived in the 13th century, and who came from Karnataka, proposed the system of dvaita, duality. He clearly distinguishes between God, human beings and creation. God is the only Supreme Being and there is nothing or no one equal to him. He proposed the path of devotion and also the path of good actions, karma. To reach God one needs a Guru. In this system a person might say 'God is greater than I' but cannot say 'I am God'.

Interestingly all these three masters are from the South of India. Though the majority of the Hindus believe that the non-duality of Shankara is the supreme truth most of them practice the path of devotion and worship to the various manifestations of Supreme Being, that is, Vishnu, Siva, Krishna and Rama, and they practice the path of self-less action.

Thus the path of knowledge, jnana, the path of devotion bhakti and the path of action karma are the three typical ways proposed by the Indian sages as ways to reach God.

The Biblical Tradition

In the Biblical tradition there is also a progressive growth in divine-human relationship. Firstly there is relating to God through prayers and psalms; secondly there is relating to God through rituals, the sacrifices in the temple; then came God's promise of New Covenant and John the Baptist preaching in the desert, which can be taken as a symbol of *aranyakas*, the end of the old and the coming of the new. Finally there is Jesus' experience of God as non-dual, 'I and the Father are one' and the

inauguration of the new relationship with God. We can say that the New Testament is the Upanishads of the Biblical Tradition.

We also find four levels of consciousness in Jesus. Firstly there is Jesus as a human being (waking consciousness), then there is Jesus the Jew (dreaming consciousness as Judaism was his spiritual ideal), then Jesus, the Son of God, the universal consciousness freed from the Jewish memory (deep sleep consciousness in which he says 'I am the way, the Truth and the Life'), and finally Jesus as God, the *thuriya*, in which Jesus can experience ontological non-duality and say 'I and the Father are one'.

Just as there are the Mahavakhyas of the Vedic tradition, Jesus uttered many 'great sentences' each of which contains the totality of his message to humanity. These include 'I am the light of the world' (I am Brahman), 'You are the light of the world' (You are Brahman), 'I and the Father are one' (Atman is Brahman) and 'this is my body and this is my blood' (All this is Brahman).

Jewish religion is basically a dualistic religion. God is the transcendent reality and creator and human beings are creatures of God. Nobody can see God and live. No one should make any image of God. No one can come near to God as He is Holy. This God can speak only through the prophets. But the prophets also foresaw a new relationship with God in which God would write the law in hearts of the people. God will be Emmanuel, with us and within us (that is to say, the visistaadvaitic experience). Jesus inaugurated this new covenant at the moment of his baptism and takes it further into advaitic experience. He could say boldly that he and God are one. This experience was not in the memory of Jewish tradition for the theory that God is our creator and that we are his creatures makes this experience impossible. Indeed it would be blasphemous if any one were to claim that experience.

In this way Jesus brings a revolution into his spiritual tradition and at the same time fulfils the spiritual search of his spiritual tradition. Jesus does not abolish the dualistic and qualified non-dualistic relationships

with God but opens them to a new possibility of non-duality. 'I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfill the law', he said.

Can we therefore see the teaching of Christ in terms of a system of thought and ask whether it is advaitic or visistaadvaitic or dvaitic? To look at this we can examine three important statements made by Jesus 'I and the Father are one' or 'I am the light of the world' (*advaita*, ontological non-duality of Shankara). 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (*visistaadvaita*, qualified non-duality of Ramanuja). 'My Father is greater than I; and my God, my God why have thy forsaken me' (*dvaita*, duality of. Madhava).

Is Jesus a non-dualist, a qualified non-dualist or a dualist? It seems to me that we cannot put Jesus into any category since he manifests all these experiences. It shows that these statements are not exclusive but they belong to the different levels of the human consciousness and can be present at the same time. These levels can be seen as states which can be present simultaneously, rather than as stages which follow on from each other. *Truth is not a static system but a dynamic living reality which cannot be defined in terms of any one system.*

Spiritual life is growth, and sin is a refusal to grow or to block the growth of other people. One has to grow from duality to qualified non-duality and from there to non-duality. Then from this experience one then has to come back 'down' to qualified-non-duality and back to duality.

But there is difference between a person who has had the non-dualistic experience of God and who then lives in the qualified non-duality and duality of the world, and a person who lives in qualified non-duality and duality without ever had the non-dualistic experience. A person who lives dualistically thinks that he or she is a creature of God. He or she praises and worships God. On the other hand a person who lives qualified non-dualistically is a mystic. He or she might say that 'I am in God and God is in me'. A person who experiences non-duality is a 'realized' person. He or

she can say, 'I am God' or 'My Real I is God'. But he or she also can be a mystic and a worshipper of God.

Shankara had non-dualistic experience of Reality but he also wrote devotional hymns as if he was a dualist. Ramakrishna had non-dualistic experience but he had great devotion to the Divine Mother. Jesus had non-dualistic experience of God but he also prayed and spoke to God dualistically. Spiritual life is not only an upward movement towards God but also a downward movement towards human beings and the world: the love of God and the love of neighbour of the biblical tradition. *When one is growing spiritually the dualistic experience, the qualified non-dualistic experience and the experience of non-duality appear as stages but when one is coming down these stages turn into states of consciousness.*

In general the Christian tradition presents divine-human relationship in a dualistic sense. To a certain extent it is seen as 'qualified non-duality in the case of mystics, but the non-dualistic experience is reserved only to Jesus and is closed to Christians. In the same way the three paths of jnana, bhakti and karma should not be seen as exclusive. The good actions lead to devotion and devotion leads to jnana. This jnana manifests in devotion and further in selfless action. In spiritual life there is a movement of ascending and there is also a moment of descending since nobody can remain on the top of the ladder. Meanwhile life is not only to 'be', that is, jnana, but is also to relate, bhakti, and to act or to share, karma. All three are integral aspects of being alive. Relationships and actions should be based on the strong foundation of our Being, otherwise they can be superficial.

The non-dualistic interpretation of the Upanishads by Shankara seems to focus entirely on the ontological non-duality and neglects the functional duality, though he himself wrote many devotional hymns later. For this he had a justifying reason. He found that the spirituality of that time based on devotion and rituals was very superstitious, superficial and sentimental and closed the door to the highest divine-human relationship. He wanted to throw away the chaff and hold on to the kernel. But his ideal be-

came unreachable for the common man.

With his zeal for the absolute Shankara refused to give value and meaning to the world and to human relationships and he held to the view that the world is an illusion. Thus he moved towards monism. Ramanuja tried to correct this extreme position and gave some meaning to the world and human beings but he was suspected of moving towards pantheism. Madhava, while trying to keep the balance between monism of Shankara and the pantheism of Ramanuja, created an unbridgable gulf between God and human beings. Though Ramanuja and Madhava, with their qualified non-dualistic and dualistic interpretations, tried to give meaning to the divine-human relationships and bring God closer to the ordinary people, they also closed the door to the non-dualistic experience of God. As long as we have a physical body and live in this world of time and space, we need to relate with God and with one another in a functional duality though we know that we are one with God, and with one another, in our being as there is only one Reality.

Christian tradition also focuses too much on functional duality and has closed the door of ontological non-duality to its followers. Though Jesus opened this door for every human being, Christian tradition has reserved the experience only to Jesus and does not allow Christians to have the direct experience of God (at least until they die). The Christian mystics could go to the experience of God's indwelling presence but they could never claim the non-dualistic experience. The one person to make the statement 'I am God' was Master Eckhart, who said that a spiritually poor person is one who says, 'I and God are one'. But he was condemned as a heretic. Perhaps in that particular time and spiritual tradition no one could have imagined the possibility of non-dualistic experience. But to day Christians are ready for it. Jesus did not relate with God as his creator but as his Father. That was a revolution, and he invited his brothers and sisters to grow into this

deeper relationship with God. Jesus did not abolish the dualistic experiences of God but he used them as preparatory ground for his non-dualistic experience and came back to them to live functionally. He was not only a non-dualist when he said 'I and the Father are one', but he was also a qualified non-dualist when he said 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' and a dualist, 'My Father is greater than I'. To realize oneness with God in one's being, and at the same time to live dualistically in the world of time and space at the functional level, is the miracle of life.

brothermartin111@hotmail.com

Letter from Iceland

Dear Friends

Many thanks for your March 2002 edition of the Bede Griffiths Sangha Newsletter.

On Page 10 I read a most profound statement, namely, "When the light that is in you is darkness, how dark is that darkness!"

As a former student of astronomy I have always had a great interest with regard to light and darkness in our universe. There are phenomena known as Black Holes in outer space that can absorb light, which is a most disturbing thing indeed.

In the meantime my kindest regards

Yours sincerely

William Alfredsson
Reykjavik

My Heart as the Altar of Christ

Angelika Monteux

Angelika is a Sangha member who works with the Camphill Community near Aberdeen.

Last year I had reached a crisis point. My life seemed meaningless, without joy. My inner resources had run dry. Nothing felt right any more. I followed the advice of friends to take time off and travelled to India, hoping to get away from stress and worries, and to find exciting, new experiences.

In a very mysterious way this outer journey became an inner journey and I was helped to find a degree of inner peace, strength and joy which I had never dreamed could exist. Not only was I a new person when I returned, but the world seemed to be a new one as well. How did this come about and what were the stages of this inner journey? First, I was allowed to stay with Hindu families and witness how their everyday life is penetrated by a deeply religious attitude and a natural awareness of the presence of divine beings. Daily life and religion are not separated into time spent in the temple and at home or at work, but every deed can become an act of worship.

Now I was prepared for my next adventure where this experience was put into a Christian context. I arrived at Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam, where Indian Benedictine Brothers live their Christian, monastic life, bringing into it inner and outer elements of Hindu, Vedantic spirituality and ritual. This Ashram was founded in 1950 and was home to Dom Bede Griffiths, one of the great mystics and spiritual teachers of our time. The setting had an almost unearthly beauty. The Ashram is situated on the shores of a wide river, with blue silhouettes of mountains in the distance. Ox-carts are driven through the ford, cows graze peacefully, local people wash their clothes or take their daily bath.

Brother Martin, the guest-master, showed me the

buildings, small thatched huts set amongst flowering bushes and tall coconut trees. He explained the daily routine saying that it was my choice how much I wanted to participate in, as long as I respected the atmosphere of silence needed for prayer and meditation. The warm and open welcome made me feel very much at home. However the first early morning service was a very strange experience. Sitting on the ground amongst the monks, nuns, visitors and people from the village I tried to follow the events, and was confused right from the beginning. The priest, dressed in an orange robe, was also sitting with legs crossed on the ground in front of the altar, behind a small lotus flower-shaped table. The cross hanging above him looked like an Irish sun-cross, but had the word 'OM' written at its centre. Everybody chanted 'OM'. Then followed a mixture of catholic liturgy, Hindu and Sanskrit mantras, readings from the Bible, Vedas and the Book of Tao. The priest and congregation performed rituals I had seen in temples before: weaving of lights, marking their foreheads with coloured powder and prostrating themselves on the ground. At the end Holy Communion was shared out, the host being a big chunk of chapatti. Could this be a Catholic church? I was surprised and critical, but I decided to stay and find out what stood behind all this.

Very soon I was deeply moved by the personalities of the monks who were so open to receive guests, to answer questions and exchange thoughts. They had surrendered their lives unconditionally to the will of God, yet I never experienced the pressure of duty in their attitude, only peace and joy. In spite of the very regular daily structure their inner freedom and striving to understand and build bridges to the other religions created an atmosphere that was at once holy and light-hearted, sincere and free, occasionally full of fun and laughter.

I felt very moved to be invited to join this ordered yet

free life where God is at the centre and all outer activity stops when the bell rings the Angelus. I felt as if I was entering a space where stress, restlessness, worry and pressure were gradually taken away from me and I could begin to find an inner centre of stillness. It is not for nothing that this ashram is called 'Forest of Peace'. This experience was intensified and supported by listening to Brother Martin's talks and having conversations with him. He showed very convincingly how Vedantic wisdom can be applied to understand and enliven the message of Christianity and how human beings in their search for God can only come to the experience of truth when they find liberation from all outer forms of religion, ritual or church tradition. When we realize that our true self is essentially one with God we no longer need to look for outer ways to find him. The final step is an inner one, an experience of the heart that can only be made individually, yet is at the same time a first step to find God in every fellow human being.

These thoughts were challenging, provoking many questions, but also very inspiring and exciting and showed me new ways of understanding what I thought I already knew. I discovered new horizons and began to understand what seemed so strange during the first service. I was helped to open up to my surrounding without critically comparing it to what I was used to and I allowed the various impressions to work on me. There as the steady daily rhythm of gathering in the church four times a day, silently waiting together to begin service or prayer. Each time one of the monks - without disturbing the peace - attended to the church with loving care for the smallest detail: arranging fresh flowers, sharing out prayer or song books and instruments, lighting oil lamps, preparing incense, making sure everything had its right place, finally ringing the bell. To experience this regular gentle care and feel his devotion to his God expressed in each gesture was already healing and comforting.

I could also feel how the regular and partly repetitive pattern of songs, mantras, prayers, readings of holy writings from different world religions, and daily evening sermons had built up this almost tangible atmosphere of being near to God. Only an attitude of total commitment and the absence of any dogma could cre-

ate and maintain this. What seemed so strange initially began to become very meaningful. A quotation from the brochure illustrates this: at each of the prayers we offer 'arati' before the Blessed Sacrament. Arati consists in the waving of lights or incense as a sign of honour of worship. It may be done before any sacred thing or person. The root meaning of arati before the central shrine in a temple seems to be this. The inner sanctuary of a temple is always kept dark to signify that God dwells in the cave of the heart. Lights are waved before the shrine to reveal the hidden God. We wave lights before the Blessed Sacrament to manifest the hidden Christ and we then take the light of Christ to our eyes by placing the hand over the flame which is passed round to all the congregation.

At the offertory of the Mass we make an offering of the four elements, water, earth, air and fire. Every Hindu puja consists in the offering of the elements to God, as a sign of the offering of the creation to God. In the offertory therefore, we offer the four elements as a sign that the whole creation is being offered to God through Christ as a cosmic sacrifice. We first sprinkle water round the altar. Then we sprinkle water on the people to purify the people. The priest then takes a sip of water to purify himself within, we then offer the fruits of the earth as the prayer of the offertory says, the bread and the wine, and then eight flowers which are placed around the 'tali' on which the gifts are offered. The eight flowers, which are offered with Sanskrit chants, represent the eight directions of space and signify that the Mass is offered in the 'centre' of the universe thus relating it to the whole creation. We then do arati with incense, representing the air and then with camphor representing the fire. Thus the mass is seen to be a cosmic sacrifice in which the whole creation together with all humanity is offered through Christ to the Father.

Very gradually all these impressions ceased to be outside me as objects of observation, but began to enter my soul, creating an inner mood of peace and certainty. All feelings of tension, confusion, worry and anxiety became outer layers that could be shed. My thoughts were ordered. I began to feel at one with my life and destiny and had no more fears of the future. Thoughts and words that had inspired my thinking

(Continued from page 10)

together with the religious atmosphere in the church and the living example of the monks finally reached my heart and I found the courage to open it to the reality that 'Christ lives and works in me!' It seems to be a contradiction that I needed the outer journey and the actual distance from life and people at home, the outer setting of the Ashram to make this one small yet momentous inner step. The last hurdle I had to jump was to overcome my self-conscious hesitation to join the ritual of prostrating myself and actually putting my head, the seat of all clever thinking and pride - on the ground in a gesture of surrender: I never felt such freedom and joy in my life before! I suppose I learned through all this where to find the altar of Christ: all outward searching, all outer ways lead to the heart! It is there that I can find Christ and receive the strength I need for my daily life if I can be still enough inwardly and outwardly to truly listen!

Maybe the cathedral builders of old knew about this mystery, for is the inner space of a cathedral not the image of a human heart, the flow of people like the blood circulation and the celebration of the Eucharist the life renewing power for both spiritual and physical man? Looking back I am aware that none of this came about through any of my own effort. I am full of gratitude for the mysterious guidance that led me into crisis and then on the journey to the people who helped me, to the place where this could happen. My head and my own little self could never have arranged and planned any of this, it came as an unexpected gift and now I feel that if I manage to keep this experience alive I will be able to continue to trust that whatever happens to me in the future is the will of God which is ultimately my own will. The strength to face and deal with whatever coming our way is the working of Christ, the burden of worry, fear and anxiety is lifted from me. And because my heart has woken up, I can now attend the services in a new way.

When I returned home and attended the Offering Service in my Camphill Community and then the Act of Consecration of Man I could hardly sit still on my chair because it was a totally new experience. Words I had spoken and heard regularly for more than twenty years

had a new, exciting, deeper meaning and it seemed as if I had never heard them before. I believe it is because I have found truth and reality deep inside that I can offer and add what has become alive in my heart to the celebration of the service and it is no longer an outer event performed by the priest. The outer altar in church is a place where I can receive strength and spiritual nourishment and also a reminder that on the altar of my heart I carry Christ with me into the world, into every encounter with other people and also every deed I do.

Angelika@crss.org.uk

This article was first published in Perspectives The journal of the Christian Community, Movement for Religious Renewal in 1999

Self Love

Somewhere, from within the sea of SELF
 May arise something,
 With the quality of BEAUTY
 Inspiring a LOVE
 That finds its expression in pure JOY,
 rather than in the desire to change or to
 possess.
 A golden portal to the unity of hearts,
 That reflects the sublime beauty
 Of the Higher Unity of all things.

Michael Dillon
 Sheerness

IF not delivered please return to:

**The Bede Griffiths Sangha
Beech Tree Cottage
Gushmere
Kent UK
ME13 9RH**

For further information contact
Adrian Rance & Jill Hemmings
+44 (0) 1227 752871
+44 (0) 1227 750082 (fax)
bg.sangha@btinternet.com
www.bede Griffiths.com
<http://uk.msnusers.com/sahajanandaashram>

Regional Contacts

England

Beds: Bedford Peter Forrest 01234 831361
Bucks: Marlow Michael Day 01628 474034
Devon: Exeter Joan Uzzells 01392 276825
Essex: Chris Collingwood 0181 504 4476
Hants: Gosport Sue Howse 02392 528601
Kent: Canterbury Jill Hemmings & Adrian Rance
01227 752871
Lancashire: Moray Ketley 01695 556548
London N4. Ann O'Donoghue 0207 359 1929
London SE Hilary Knight 0168 986 1004
London N/Herts. Edgar Holroyd-Doveton 020
8386 4323
Nottingham Dorothy Plater 0115 9100 361
Oxon: Oxford Shirley du Boulay 01865 310332
Somerset: Taunton Valeria Ives 01823 432468
Somerset: Bath Kevin Tingay 01761 470249
Surrey: Guildford Therese O'Neill 01730 814879
W. Sussex Gillian Maher 01444 455334

Northern Ireland

Belfast Sighle Mary O'Donoghue 01232
287471

Scotland

Aberdeen Angelika Monteux 01224 867409
Dumfries Michael Giddins 01644 450689
Glasgow Steve Woodward 01355 224937

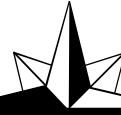
Wales

West Wales Joan Walters 01646 692496

Overseas contacts

Australia Andrew Howie iona@netspace.net.au
Denmark Vicky Lasheras: lasheras@mail.tele.dk
Eire Michael Woods +353 502 48696
India Br. Martin: brothermartin111@hotmail.com
USA Carolyn Cowan: cmission@home.com
Bob Ebert (California) bobeBERT1012@msn.com

If any one would like to have their names added as
local contacts please let us know

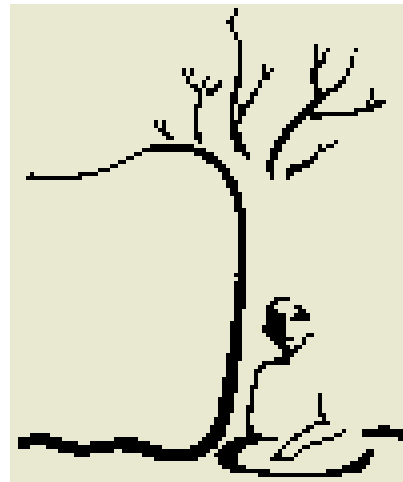


In the light

*Please put in the light Sangha members Winifred Dearden, Noreen
Read, Anne Dew, Yvonne Dinwiddy, and Angela Warner*

If you know of anyone you would like us to put in the light please let us know

The Sangha continues to grow and we can welcome our
first member from Ghana



Peace is every step

Thich Nhat Hanh