

# The Golden String

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BULLETIN OF THE BEDE GRIFFITHS TRUST

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## ***THIS IS MY BODY - THIS IS THAT*** **Brian J. Pierce, O.P.**

*At the moment of death we pass beyond into the spiritual body. No longer in space and time, we are totally one with the whole and one with all the members of the whole. This would be our understanding of the mystical body of Christ. This means that Christ in the resurrection ...draws all humanity to himself, into that whole.*

The above words were spoken by Fr. Bede Griffiths during an informal *satsang* at Shantivanam Ashram in India in 1989. Present at that gathering was Sr. Pascaline Coff, OSB, who has been helpful in developing my own understanding of Fr. Bede's profound insights into the multi-faceted theology of the Body of Christ. The following reflections come mainly from the '89 *satsang* sharing, mixed with my own words and concepts in an attempt to draw our attention to these treasures that, as Sr. Pascaline notes, "flowed spontaneously from the lips of Fr. Bede."

In the talk, Fr. Bede begins by connecting the Hindu categories of *gross body*, *subtle body* and *spiritual body* to our Christian Scriptures. Jesus of Nazareth, who was born in the stable of Bethlehem and who was crucified on Calvary, lived his earthly life, as we all do, in his *gross body*, his incarnate body. "Then in the tomb he passed into what in India is called the *subtle body*, a body which in time and space is not bound by time and space." Fr. Bede calls attention to the many resurrection appearances of Jesus to Mary Magdalene and the disciples to point to this intermediate *subtle body* state. And finally, explains Fr. Bede, Jesus disappeared, ascended to the Father, entering into the final state of the *spiritual body*, the risen body. It is this body to which St. Paul refers in 1 Cor. when he says, "So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown corruptible; it is raised incorruptible...It is sown a natural body;

*(Continued on page 2)*

it is raised a spiritual body" (15:42-44). For Fr. Bede, it is

## ***Inside This Issue***

The Mystical Course of Love: II	Wayne Teasdale	6
Bede Griffiths and Buddhism	Cyprian Consiglio	7
An Indian Christology: The Shantivanam School (Part I)	Chacko Valiaveetil	9

## **WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?**

**John Martin, O.S.B. Cam.**

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked his disciples. (see Lk 9:18-22) Jesus asks this question to each one of his disciples. The answer that we give will be our liberation or our bondage. Every disciple has to respond to this question personally. Each disciple has to speak his or her discovery.

The human mind always seeks for an identity. It always searches for definitions. It wants to know the truth and put it under its control. It always wants to name the 'other.' This 'other' can be God or a human being or a created being. Only when it names the other can it communicate with the other. When we encounter someone for the first time we immediately ask, "Who are you?" "What is your name?" Which means, "What is your identity?" Only then can we communicate with the other. Otherwise the other remains unknown.

When Moses encountered God, he asked God to tell his name. First God answered, "I am who I am." Which means, I do not have any name. There is no other reality outside of me by which I describe myself. I am the only God, and there is no other God beside me. This reveals the transcendent aspect of God. But with this transcendent aspect of God nobody can communicate, no relationship is possible. There remains a gulf between God and humanity. Then God says, "Say to the Israelites that the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob has sent me to you. This is my name for ever." (Ex 3:13-15)

The God so named is immanent, the God who communicates with his people, the God who reveals, the God who guides his people, who guides their history, the God who is manifest in time. But God is more than what he has revealed, he always remains transcendent. We can say that the God transcendent is like an ever flowing river and the God immanent is like a pot of water which he has given us. The pot of water is not equal to the river, though the quality of river is present in it. The God manifested is always the God of the past, the God who was, the God of memory. With this memory people can recognize their God, they can communicate with God, they can have relationship with God. But God always transcends our memory. God, in this way, reveals to Moses his two aspects: his transcendent and eternal aspect, "I AM," which transcends time and space, and his manifested and immanent aspect, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

*(Continued on page 4)*

***This is my body - this is that*** (Continued from page 1)

the particular understanding of the mystery of Christ's *spiritual* (i.e., risen and ascended) body that holds for us the key to entering fully into the experience of cosmic and divine wholeness for which we all long.

The first point that Fr. Bede wants to underscore is that the *eucharistic body of Christ* is *not* the gross body of the Jesus of history, a misconception held by many. As he says, "Jesus in the eucharist is the Jesus of the resurrection, in the glorified state where he is totally one with God. He becomes present by his will, simply by saying, 'This is my body. This is my blood.'" Responding to comments by some that in the eucharist we receive the same flesh and blood Jesus that hung on the Cross, under the form of bread and wine, Fr. Bede says emphatically, "That understanding is entirely mistaken." The *eucharistic body of Christ*, then, is an expression, a manifestation, a sacrament of the risen, spiritual body of Christ.

From there Fr. Bede makes his usual connections with the new physics, especially the theory of "implicate order" proposed by David Bohm. "The whole physical universe today is understood as a vast field of energies vibrating at different frequencies," says Fr. Bede. He then likens these varied energy vibrations to whirlpools in a river, concluding that "my body is a particular whirlpool, and yours, and so on...All the energies of the universe are interrelated and interdependent, and nothing happens at one point which doesn't happen at every other point." What Fr. Bede does is to broaden his concept of *spiritual body* to include its cosmic dimensions. The whole universe is one great blossoming forth of that body which is originally implicated, folded up together, in its essential oneness. In *The Marriage of East and West* Fr. Bede says, "At the resurrection Jesus becomes the head of the cosmic whole, and the whole creation becomes his body, and this body of creation, redeemed from the forces of sin and division, is what constitutes the Church" (p. 95). Again it is St. Paul who captures the breadth of this all-encompassing cosmic Christ: "In him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible...He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church...For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:16-19). All that dwells within *the cosmic body* of Christ.

Within the cosmic body of Christ, according to Fr. Bede's outline, is found the *mystical body*, the Christ who embodies all of humanity in himself, continually drawing all persons into the whole. "The whole creation constitutes the body of the Church," he says (MEW p.194), but through illusion, ignorance and sin human beings have become divided, literally *dis-integrated*, fragmented. This is seen in the Genesis story of creation and the fall. "The Fathers say Adam is in all men and women," says Fr. Bede. "The one person is in all persons. And so [through the resurrection] all

humanity is taken up into this unity in Christ." Christ is the new Adam in whom our dis-integrated human family is healed and so made one again (1 Cor 15:45ff). In the 1989 *satsang* he connects this image with the Hindu figure of the Purusha, a theme which he develops further in chapters six and seven of *A New Vision of Reality*.

In a separate talk given at Shantivanam in 1992, a few months before his death, Fr. Bede links this reunification of the fragmented body of humanity to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the "mode of divine presence" which enters into our disintegrated, dissipated humanity drawing all people back into the resurrected, *mystical body of Christ*. In other words, the Holy Spirit is the energy and power of the resurrected body of Christ at work, *oneing* humanity into wholeness. "Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one (Adam), we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one" (1 Cor 15:49). Fr. Bede speaks of the mystical body's process of re-integration or oneing as a *re-membering*, literally a *bringing the members back together*. In this way he shows the essential connectedness between the mystery of the mystical body and that of the eucharistic body of Christ. Jesus' "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24) is more than just a looking back into history, according to Fr. Bede. The eucharistic re-membering actually effects in us, the members of Christ's body, the oneness which was planted in us at our baptism (Gal 3:28) and for which we long in the dawning of the "new heaven and new earth" (Rev 21:1).

This insight into the mystical body's eucharistic re-membering opens up infinite avenues for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, as well as a renewed commitment to world peace. Humanity's oneness, according to Fr. Bede, is a reality which is always present in us, although not always on a conscious level. "Just as the universe is one (cosmic body), humanity is one (mystical body), and every individual being is a part of this one humanity...evolving through time and space and throughout all the races and religions of the world, moving toward the point when it finally converges in the One." He goes on to say that although we experience this as a gradual convergence over time, it is a reality which is always present. "We are all in the ultimate state *now*. There is only one *now*...It is always there."

Again we see the connections between this *eternal now* (a favorite concept of Meister Eckhart) and the eucharist. Jesus' words at the Last Supper point to the *here and now* nature of the paschal meal shared with the disciples. "This is my body. This is my blood." The eucharist is never an *over there*. The resurrected, spiritual body of

*(Continued on page 3)*

Christ is always a *this*, a present, eternal reality here and now. The eucharist is intended to awaken us to the present moment as the "day of salvation." If we lose ourselves in the remembering in such a way that we get stuck or romantically fixated in the past, or if we postpone the *oneing*

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## The Golden String

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### *This is my body - this is that* (Continued from page 2)

to “when we get to heaven,” then we truly miss the transforming power of the eucharist. Christ is the *body of the eternal now*; any denial of this immediacy of grace is akin to falling asleep at the moment of the bridegroom’s arrival (Mt 25:1-13).

What Fr. Bede presents in this spontaneous outpouring is a marvelous kaleidoscope view of the rich Pauline image of the Body of Christ. First, there is a phase in which the body of Christ, the Jesus of history, is working within the limited or semi-limited confines of space and time. This phase, the *incarnate/paschal body of Christ*, coincides with the Hindu concepts of gross and subtle body. But once the body of Christ is risen and passes into the fullness of God in the ascension, there is a kind of explosion. This spiritual Big Bang transforms all of creation and begins the final phase of *oneing*, re-integrating the *spiritual body of Christ*, “the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way” (Eph 1:23). This process of re-integration or re-membering appears to us as a process working within time, but as Fr. Bede points out, it is the fullness of the eternal now breaking into consciousness.

Every dimension of this process manifests itself to us as a *sacramental* expression of the body of Christ. These sacramental moments are to bring about in us and in all of creation the full awakening to the oneness, the wholeness which lies at the heart of Ultimate Reality. But, as Fr. Bede points out, these moments or sacramental expressions of that oneness are *not* to be confused with the *One Reality* itself. To make this point Fr. Bede calls attention to St. Thomas Aquinas’ definition of sacrament, as well as to the Hindu concept of *maya* or “measured universe.” The medieval scholasticism articulated by St. Thomas distinguished between the sign and the reality behind the sign. “All sacraments are signs,” says Fr. Bede. “The [eucharistic] bread and wine themselves are a *sacramentum* - a sign - but through and with and in that sign the reality of Jesus is present...totally transformed in the new creation.” And referring to the concept of *transubstantiation*, Fr. Bede continues, “In the medieval view, a *substance* is what *stands under* all the accidents and appearances. So what it really means is that what *stands under* the substance of the bread, making it bread, is transformed into the body of Christ... *That* reality is the spiritual body of the resurrection.”

This distinction between the outward appearance of the bread and the transformed reality beneath the bread closely resembles the Hindu view of the whole physical universe as *maya*, which is sometimes translated as illusion. Fr. Bede says it this way, “*Maya* is the measured universe, what Bohm calls the ‘explicated universe,’ the unfolded part, and behind and within that unfolded, explicated universe is the implicated one, the whole. And you enter into the whole and pass from ordinary consciousness in space and time into the consciousness of the whole.” Both

religious traditions point to the same great truth, namely that there is a oneness, a fullness which runs beneath all of creation, and the spiritual journey is an invitation to pass beyond the many manifestations of that oneness to be in communion with the One itself.

This *One* is the risen, spiritual body of Christ, and we glimpse and taste and are kneaded into that Ultimate Reality, the Whole, through our participation in the sacramental manifestations of the Body. We are not to avoid the created world as something evil, nor are we to cling to it as ultimate Truth. “The outward form of this world, as St. Paul called it, is passing away; but,” says Fr. Bede, “beneath the outward form there is being built up continuously the body of Christ which is the unity of [hu]mankind in Truth and Charity. It is a hidden and mysterious process, which will only be realised in its fullness when this world of space and time has passed away altogether” (GS p.177). Just as the eucharistic bread is a sacrament of the risen body of Christ, so, too, are the cosmos, the word of God, the Christian community, and in fact, all of humanity, symbolic, sacramental manifestations of the One. All that exists calls out to us to “taste and see the goodness of the Lord,” to penetrate to the banquet of Truth and Ultimate Reality which stands under and flows through our universe, sustaining us in one eternal moment of loving presence, *real* presence. Jesus invites us to that same *real* presence through the eucharistic gift of his life, death and resurrection: “*This is my body. This is my blood.*”

In the *Chandogya Upanishad* the guru tells the disciple to take a fruit from the tree, break it open and then take a seed and break it open, and he asks the disciple what he can see. The disciple says, “I see nothing,” to which the guru replies, “In that nothing, that hidden essence which you cannot see, the power of the growth of the whole tree consists...*Tat Tvam Asi, Thou art that.*” (NVR p.64)

The ancient wisdom of the Upanishads points to the eternal Truth which Christ claims and embodies through the power of his resurrection. The risen, spiritual body of Christ is *that*. It is “that hidden essence [in which] the power of the growth of the whole...consists.” When the sacramental elements (What St. Thomas called the *accidents and appearances*) are removed, unveiled, what remains is *that*, the fullness which stands under and flows through the Whole. This fullness of the risen body of Christ flows Christian community, through the eucharistic breaking of the bread and the word of God, and through the eternal Now of God’s *kairos*. When St. Paul says that “we are the body of Christ,” he is calling us to awaken and claim for ourselves the body of the risen Christ which is our true, hidden essence, our link to the interdependent oneness of all that is. Each time we participate actively, consciously, in the eucharist, as Fr. Bede notes, “each member is transfigured a little more into the One Body.”

(Continued on page

***This is my body - this is that*** (Continued from page 3)

through the whole cosmos, through humanity and the theChristian

At the heart of the universe this *transfiguration*, fruit of the paschal mystery of Christ's dying and rising, is being carried out within each of us and all of creation. Our True Self as members of the One Body is being revealed, discovered. We celebrate this transfiguring power in the breaking of the bread. "This is my body," says Jesus to his disciples and to us. Break it open on the cross, and what do you see? Thou art *that*. *This is that*."



***Who do you say that I am?*** (Continued from page 1)

Communication with the transcendent aspect is not possible, but only communion. In communion there is no place for words, forms and memory. Communion is an encounter of emptiness with emptiness, nakedness with nakedness. It is a profound and intimate relationship. It is a relationship between the essential nature of a human being and the essential nature of God, without any mediations. Words may flow out of communion; if so, they have a liberating quality.

God has created humanity in his or her own image and likeness. This means that in every person there is a transcendent aspect, a transcendent mystery, "I am", which is without a name, without a form, without clothes, naked and empty. This aspect cannot be put under the control of the mind. This is the natural and essential element of every human being. There is also an acquired and immanent element which has a particular name, a particular color, a particular sex, a particular nationality, a particular language, a particular religion, a particular age and a particular psychological disposition, which makes us different from others. Everything that separates us from others is artificial and does not belong to the transcendent aspect of our being. These are the names and forms which we have acquired, sometimes without our own free will. Rather, we are placed in these conditions. They are what *we have* and not what *we are*. All our relationships with God and with one another are based on these immanent aspects, on the names and forms. These names and forms give us a sense of belonging, but they are also the cause of separation and conflict.

Human beings are not created to settle into names and forms; they are created, rather, to travel upon the path of self-discovery, the discovery of their transcendent aspect.

which alone gives them final fulfillment. We can never say who a person *is*, the *now* of a person, the *present* of a person. We can only say who a person *was*, the *past* of a person. The *now* of a person always remains a transcendent mystery. We can also say who God *was* but we can never say who God *is*, who God is *now*. We know what God has revealed, we know what God did in the past. The *present* of God, however, is always a mystery, always transcendent, "I AM." Only in our transcendent mystery, "I am" can we enter into communion with the transcendent mystery of God, "I AM."

Jesus was concerned about the image of him that people had. Naturally, people must have an image of him. Whether it is a positive or a negative image is another matter. Without forming an image of the other, communication is not possible. But how does one form an image of the other? What is the standard by which one forms the image of the other? What is the instrument that one uses to form an image of the other? Certainly it is the memory. The people knew John the Baptist, they have read and heard about the prophet Elijah, they have heard about Jeremiah and other prophets. The Scriptures also speak of a Messiah, who will liberate the people. At that time people were also expecting a Messiah who would liberate them from the Roman oppression. The Messiah was their hope. The past (the old prophets) and the future (the Messiah, the hope) is the memory of the people, by which they are to recognize Jesus. Therefore the people project the past and the future onto Jesus. "Some say that you are John the Baptist, others say that you are the prophet Elijah, and others say that you are one of the old prophets returned." These were the projections of people other than the disciples themselves. Then Jesus asked his disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter, representing the disciples, replied, "You are the Messiah, the Christ promised by God." While the people have projected the past on Jesus, the disciples have projected the future, the messianic hope and the promise on Jesus. To see the promised one in Jesus is really and certainly the grace of God. This promise is not something new; it was already predicted in the Scriptures, though there was no clarity in the predictions. In the beginning, this projection was according to their image and need. They have projected a glorious Messiah, a political king who will liberate them from the Romans, one who becomes a king like David, on whose left and right side his disciples can sit. Jesus accepts the response of Peter and praises him for this response. He really is the hope of Israel. But immediately Jesus puts Peter in his right place by saying  $\text{Ἐὶ ἄγε ἵνα ἴδωμεν ἂν ἴδωμεν ἂν ἴδωμεν}$  that the disciples understood Jesus only after his resurrection, and not before.

The tendency of the human mind is always to project the past into the present, or to project its hopes into the present. It is very important that the disciples do not project their own aspirations, their own image on their master, but

*(Continued on page*

***Who do you say that I am?*** (Continued from page 4)

difficult for Peter to accept. "And Peter took him and began to leave the master to be as God wants him or her to be. This is also necessary on the level of human relationship. We must not project our aspirations, our ambitions on others and instrument, but in fact they are doing disservice to him. By projecting superlative titles on the master, they make him an impossible ideal for the common person to reach. This gives tremendous power to those who represent the master, and the master becomes a heavy burden for the people to carry, a nearly impossible burden which keeps people in eternal submission and oppression.

A true master comes to free people from all the burdens, including the burden of himself or herself. A true master is meek and humble and refuses any title that creates distance between him and the disciples. When people take back their projections of past and future, their fears and hopes, then God becomes free, the master becomes free, and the disciples also become free. In this liberty, human beings discover their transcendent mystery and so discover the transcendent mystery of God, the transcendent mystery of the master and the transcendent mystery of the other. In this transcendent mystery there is no place to give a name, no place for words, there is no place to give an identity. There is only a profound communion, without words and without names and forms. All the walls between God and humanity are broken down, all the walls between a master and a disciple are broken down and all the walls between one human being and the other are broken down. From this communion words may come, forms may come, names may come, but these names give a new name, as Abram becomes Abraham, as Jacob becomes Israel, as Simon becomes Peter. They do not create walls, but communion. They do not divide people but unite them.

Jesus asked God, "Who am I?" God replied, "You are my beloved Son." This was not in the memory of Jesus, which was the memory of his religious tradition. To say "You are my beloved Son" also means to say, "I am your beloved Father." To give an identity to the Son is also to give an identity to the Father. But this name, this identity does not create a duality, a distance. It creates communion between the Father and the Son by which they are no longer two but one, "I and the Father are one." This identity breaks down the walls between the two. God also asked Jesus, "Who are you?" And Jesus replied, "I am your beloved Son." This response does not come from the memory of Jesus. It was Jesus' *original* response. It was the first time in the Jewish tradition that someone gave this answer in the way that Jesus did and meant. It is a response which does not create walls but breaks down the walls and creates communion between the Father and the Son. Jesus asks everyone, "Who am I?", which also means, "Who are you?"

Do we have the answer ready in our memory? If we

stop our memory, what answer can we give? Everything depends on the response which we give. Our response will be our liberation, which breaks down the walls, or our response will be our bondage which builds a wall between us and creates distance.

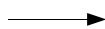
Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the Christ promised by God." But this answer also comes from the memory. People were expecting a Messiah, though the way he was to come and the nature of his mission were debated. To recognize in Jesus the promised one and to affirm it publicly is something extraordinary. But Jesus was not only the Messiah but more than the Messiah. Messiah is only the manifested aspect of the Son of God (for all are not called to be the Messiah, but all are called to realize that they are the sons and daughters of God). His real identity transcends all our expectations and projections. Jesus himself found it difficult to define his identity. And in fact, nobody can define one's "I Am."

The answer which Peter gave was alright at that time, for it began a movement which gave meaning and direction to billions of people for two thousand years. But that answer of Peter should not be taken as the only, final and ultimate way of responding to the question of Jesus. Certainly the response of Peter elevated humanity to a deeper level of relationship with Christ and God but it also created an unbridgable gulf between Christ and Christians; it created an unclimbable wall between Christ and Christians. It opened the possibility of communication between Christ and Christians, but it closed the door for communion. In giving an identity to Jesus as the Son of God, humanity has received an identity as the adopted children of God, second grade children, and thus created a spiritual apartheid between Christ and Christians. That identity has security beyond the child's need, the cradle becomes a prison. Now the time has come in which humanity must grow out of this system of apartheid and liberate itself from this spiritual slavery.

The statement of Peter can be interpreted in two ways. When he said, "You are the Son of God," if this is a possibility that every human being can realize in his or her own spiritual journey, then it is liberating and it can be a stone on which one can build one's house. If it means the elevation of Jesus to a higher level and the condemnation of the rest of humanity to the second place, then it is oppressive and cannot be a stone on which one can build his or her house. Until now, it has been interpreted in the second way. One cannot find fault with this, as humanity could understand only in that way, and it was a progress. But that is not the ultimate way of understanding, for it built a wall between Christ and Christians. We have to seek for the ultimate answer which breaks down the walls and creates communion between Christ and Christians, between human beings and God.

Jesus has found the answer for every human being. He was born in the cradle of Abraham, as the son of Abraham,

*(Continued on page 6)*



**Who do you say that I am?** (Continued from page 5)

and nourishment, but if one keeps the child in the cradle but he grew out of it and became the Son of God. He had to renounce his spiritual father and mother, his spiritual brothers and sisters, his spiritual wife and children in order to enter into the kingdom of God, which is to become the Son of God. If God had asked Jesus, "Who do people say that I am?", Jesus might have replied, "People say that you are the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." Then God might have asked him, "But who do you say that I am?" Jesus might have replied solemnly, "You are my beloved Father. You and I are not two but one." By giving this answer Jesus frees God from just being the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob and, in a way, elevates him into the God of the whole humanity and the whole creation - since the 'I' of Jesus, freed from his Jewish memory, has become the whole humanity and the whole creation. This answer of Jesus does not come from the Jewish memory of Jesus. It comes directly from his direct encounter with God.

Then God might have told him, "It is I who brought you to realize this truth. This is the keys of the kingdom of heaven that I have given you so that you may liberate those who are still bound to the cradle of the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." Jesus freed himself from the Jewish memory and realized for the first time who God is and who humanity is. He did not deny or reject the Jewish memory but he made it his own discovery and transcended it. *to be continued*

**THE MYSTICAL COURSE  
OF LOVE: II Wayne Teasdale**

O Nameless Mystery, Blessed Source  
joy of mystic sages in all times,  
you elevate us into infinite consciousness,  
enveloping those you choose  
with your unbounded Presence.  
Not a theory, opinion, or belief, not a fancy of imagination,  
but the pure subsistence of Love itself  
that neither begins nor ends, a divine gift  
beyond the comprehension of the human.

You are both personal, intimate relationship  
and transpersonal Absolute beyond form, senses  
and imagining, the abyss of Sunyata,  
the incomprehensible Nirvana.  
You are Christ and the Buddha, Godhead and the Tao,  
the ungraspable delight of prophets,  
saints and bodhisattvas.

To each you give yourself, one way or the other,  
awakening us to total immersion in that boundless Love  
you are, changing us into IT, making us *to be*  
what you have always been,  
and what we have always been in you.  
Who are we but prisms of Infinite Love and Compassion  
that fulfill themselves in that divine Awareness  
we call Sensitivity.

We ask you, united with all the mystic sages,  
saints and bodhisattvas  
to bring Tibet's agony to an end by pouring awareness  
into the hearts of the oppressors,  
allowing them to evolve into compassion.  
May they realize that the long journey to repentance  
must begin in tears.  
Let all spiritual leaders **lead**,  
and emerge out of their icy silence...

We stand at the precipice, and Tibet is your test.  
We flunked at the time of Hitler,  
and now you give us another chance.  
Let all our leaders **know** that if we fail this time,  
it may be too late for us!!!  
We hope in your mercy, your love, wisdom,  
and compassion,  
your healing kindness, and your Presence,  
that we may have the awareness  
and courage to act now in this moment of history  
before time swallows us up in eternity.

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## BEDE GRIFFITHS AND BUDDHISM Cyprian Consiglio O.S.B. Cam.

While it was not Buddhism but Hinduism that was Dom Bede's greatest area of concentration in the interreligious dialogue, he also mentions Buddhism quite frequently in his writings. The fact that India is the birthplace of Buddhism and of the Buddha himself is often forgotten, because Westerners know Buddhism mainly through the Japanese Zen tradition. Buddhism, if we must be reminded, is a child of India - indeed a child of what we now know as the Hindu tradition. It is interesting to think about the Buddha in relation to Bede Griffiths' thought, because the Buddha lived in the time of the Upanishads and of what Jaspers has called the axial period - to which Bede gave great importance. The Buddha would have been teaching around the time when this great movement of religious interiorization was going on simultaneously in many parts of the world: including certainly the Upanishadic tradition in India as well as the Greek philosophers, Confucius and Lao Tzu in China as well as the Hebrew biblical prophets.

What I would like to concentrate on here is the Buddha's experience. Dom Bede once wrote that we can say, at the very least, that the Buddha had had a very profound experience. How does that experience relate to Bede Griffiths' own thought?

The story goes that the Buddha left his own disciples and wandered alone for many days until, exhausted and despairing, he came to a magnificent Mucalinda or Bodhi tree. He sat down beneath it in the manner he had been taught - alert, erect, stationary, attending to his thoughts but not pursuing them - and he vowed to himself that "So long as I have not done what I set out to do, I shall not change my position." The way Thich Nhat Hahn describes it is that he gave up his search for Nirvana as something to be gained from the *outside* and turned his contemplation *within*, seeking the truth in himself.

He remained there for forty nine days, neither eating nor drinking. On the last night, as the Pali legend tells it,

The victory was achieved while the sun was yet above the horizon. The Bodhisattva sank into ever deeper and deeper thought. In the first watch of the night he reached the Knowledge of Former States of being; in the middle watch he obtained the heavenly eye of Omniscient Vision; and in the third watch he grasped the perfect understanding of the Chain of Causation which is the Origin of Evil; and thus at break of day he attained to Perfect Enlightenment. (A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, Harper 1964, p. 35)

Many versions of the story add the detail that the first glimpse of the morning star provoked in him a state of perfect clarity and understanding. After another forty nine days wandering about in bliss, he went back to his former

disciples and tried to make sense of his experience for them. His articulation of it consisted of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path: what is known as the Sermon at Benares.

What the Buddha understood was that his quest up to that point had been misguided, because he had been attempting to escape the world of suffering through his asceticism and mortification; he had been attempting to subdue the anger, greed and ignorance that poisoned his mind. As one writer put it, he was attempting to deny the reality into which all human beings are born. What he came to realize was that such an escape was not possible - the only hope was to accept things as they are. Zen masters usually distill the Buddha's realization in two statements:

- 1) All beings, as they are, have the Buddha-nature.
- 2) Below the heavens and above the earth,  
I alone am.

But what did all this mean? First of all, the enlightenment that the Buddha experienced was not a singular, ecstatic experience, but an unavoidable fact of all human existence, of existence in general. Secondly, this enlightenment has its root in the dissolution of personal boundaries. It is in the particularized self that suffering congeals. The realm of thought, memory, the physical body and the whole spectrum of psychological conditioning are all a dream that dissolves when one wakes up, when one is enlightened to the true nature of existence. Thirdly, the Buddha's understanding of the true nature of existence is that it is transitory, that there is nothing to cling to, and most especially not any notion of "self." His awakening was that reality itself is groundless and impermanent, and so the best thing to do is wake up to the fact that any idea of continuity is illusion, pure delusion.

Laurence Shainberg says it this way: in effect, the basic equation of Buddhism is tautological - self equals ignorance; ignorance equals suffering; suffering equals self. So the great realization, available to all human beings no less than to the Buddha himself, is the dissolution of what has never actually existed at all, this idea of "self."

Let's look for a moment at the philosophy of the Upanishads as the point of departure for the Buddha's teaching. The Hindu, like the Buddhist, had already insisted upon the impermanence of the world. This is not the pessimistic and nihilistic doctrine which some Western critics suppose it to be. Transitoriness is depressing only to the mind which insists upon trying to grasp. To the mind that lets go and moves with the flow of change, which becomes "like a ball in a mountain stream," this very sense of transience or emptiness becomes kind of ecstasy. Another way of saying it is that all reality is *maya*, empty and illusory; or that *nama-rupa*, names and forms, are *maya*, empty - in the special sense of ungraspable and immeasurable.

(Continued on page 8)

But when this is understood, in the Hindu view, the world can then be seen as Brahman rather than *maya*. The formal world reveals its true nature the moment it is no longer clutched, the moment its changeful fluidity is no longer

***Bede Griffiths and Buddhism*** (Continued from page 7)

resisted. Hence it is the very transitoriness of the world which is the sign of its divinity, the sign of its identity with the indivisible and immeasurable infinity of Brahman.

This is not, then, the pessimistic or nihilistic doctrine that it seems to be at first glance. It merely points out the impossibility of grasping the actual world in the mind's net of words and concepts, and the fluid character of those very forms which thought attempts to define. The world of facts, name and form escapes both the comprehension of the philosopher and the grasp of the pleasure-seeker like "water from a clutching fist." The Buddhist, however, goes one step further: there is even something deceptive in the idea of Brahman as the eternal reality underlying the flux and of *atman* as the divine ground of human consciousness. In so far as these are concepts, they are as incapable of grasping the real as any other concepts.

The second Noble Truth is expressed with the word *anatman*, no-self, no-*atman*. According to Watts this is not quite the bald assertion that there is no real Self (*atman*) at the basis of consciousness, but rather that there is no Self - indeed no basic reality - that can be *grasped* either by direct experiences or by concepts. Only this experience of the *ungraspability* of Ultimate Reality can be experienced, and participation in that ever-dynamic nature of Ultimate Reality is a participation in the Ultimate Stuff of reality.

It's as if the Buddha thought that the doctrine of *atman* in the Upanishads lent itself too easily to mis-interpretation, because it could itself become an object of belief, something to which the mind could cling. The Buddha's view was that a Self so grasped was no longer the true Self. The Upanishads had already distinguished between *atman*, the true supra-individual self and the *jivatman* or individual soul. It will continue to be fundamental to every school of Buddhism that this *jivatman* is a non-enduring entity, something that exists in the abstract only, something made from memory, but with the added feature that the Paramatman, the Great Self, also cannot be grasped.

It is precisely this realization of the total elusiveness of the world which lies at the root of Buddhism. This is the special shift of emphasis which, more than anything else, distinguishes the doctrine of the Buddha from the teachings of the Upanishads, and is the *raison d'être* for the growth of Buddhism as a distinct movement in Indian life and thought.

From the standpoint of Zen, perhaps we would say

simply that what the Buddha experienced can never be put into words. All doctrines, all teachings about this experience and all Scriptures are just "fingers pointing at the moon." They are none of them the moon itself, though we often mistake the finger for the moon. From the standpoint of Zen, the Buddha "never said a word." For his real message

always remained unspoken, and was such that, when words attempted to express it, the words themselves made it seem as if it were nothing at all. It is essential to the Zen tradition that what cannot be expressed in words can be expressed by direct pointing, by nonverbal means of communication.

This is illustrated well by the story of the first dharma transmission, when the Buddha wanted to pick a successor for himself. The Pali tradition tells the story of the Buddha passing on his teaching to his disciples immediately after enlightenment. The Zen tradition, however, maintains that when the Buddha wanted to transmit his awakening he gathered his monks together, and instead of offering them a spoken teaching, he simply held up a flower and remained silent. Those present were rather perplexed, but one of his disciples, names Mahakasyapa, smiled. He was the one to be chosen successor.

The last thing I want to mention here makes the connection, once again, with the teachings of Dom Bede. In a talk that he gave toward the end of his life on Dzogchen, the highest form of Tibetan meditation, Bede explains the Buddha nature in this way.

In Christian terms we would say you have your body, your physical organism, and you have learned to control a great deal of that energy. You have your psychological organism - senses, feeling, imagination, reason and will - and then you go beyond your body and beyond your psyche to your pneuma, your spirit (the Atman in Sanskrit), and there you open to the Divine, the transcendent, the infinite...what St. Francis de Sales called "the fine point of the soul," the point which Karl Rahner mentions as the point of self-transcendence...It is in every human being. It is what is called the Buddha nature.

There are those who think that Fr. Bede's teaching on this notion of the "spirit, soul and body" was one of his greatest contributions. He himself, during a presentation for the Fetzer Institute (published posthumously in 1994) said that the integration of these three levels had, at that time, become the focus of all his thinking. This is a valuable tool, then, for those of us who continue the dialogue with other traditions: we may think of the experience of "Buddha-nature" as simply the equivalent of that apophatic depth that we name "spirit."





## AN INDIAN CHRISTOLOGY: THE SHANTIVANAM SCHOOL

At the end of the 19th century, Brahamabandhab Upadyaya (1861-1907) had seen the Trinitarian mystery in the Indian experience of Saccidananda, and had composed a hymn to the Holy Trinity entitled *Vande Saccidanandam*. He had a dream to establish a Christian ashram in Indian form where

in the midst of solitude and silence will be reared up true yogis to whom the contemplation of the Triune Saccidananda will be food and drink. Here will grow ascetics who will, in union with the sufferings of the God-man, do penance for their sins as well as for the sins of their own countrymen, by constant bewailing and mortification...here will the Vedanta philosophy be assimilated to universal (Catholic) truth. (1)

His attempt to establish such a Christian ashram had to be abandoned because of opposition from Church officials. But it was to bear fruit about 60 years later with the opening of Saccidananda Ashram in Tamil Nadu in 1950. The founding pioneers of this ashram whom we may call the 'Shantivanam School' were Fr. Jules Monchanin (1895-1957), Swami Abhishiktananda (1910-1973) and Fr. Bede Griffiths (1906-1993). They were convinced that ultimately the meeting point between Hinduism and Christianity is in the depth of interiority or "in the cave of the heart" as Abhishiktananda calls it, where we encounter the divine mystery. This experience is both advaitic and trinitarian. They considered both experiences authentic and attempted to relate them in their own personal lives in Shantivanam, following the Indian ideal of sannyasa.

Fr. Monchanin did not live long enough to realize this ideal, but he had expressed his goal in prophetic words:

We would like to crystallize and transubstantiate the search of the Hindu sannyasi. Advaita and praise of the Trinity are our only aim...This means that we must grasp the authentic Hindu search for God in order to Christianize it, starting with ourselves first of all, from within. (2)

The mystery of the Holy Trinity was the focus of Fr. Monchanin's contemplation. He believed that the problems of Indian thought - the problems of the relationship between God and the world, of God as personal and impersonal, and of the place of the individual person in the divine Wholeness - can find their solution in the Christian message of the Trinitarian faith and the mystery of the incarnation. He believed that these mysteries could be better understood in the background of Indian heritage. He saw India as "the land of the Trinity" and dreamed of combining the rich Hindu heritage displayed in the Mechakhsi temple in Madurai with the

Christian revelation of the Holy Trinity. The way to realize this is the contemplation of the Trinitarian mystery: God the Father giving himself away in the Son and in the Spirit. He compared his situation to those of Moses and Charles de Foucauld who did not live long enough to see their dreams realized. In a letter to his mother, Fr. Monchanin wrote:

Oh! I wish that from my life - and from my dead body - a contemplative life in the Trinity might be born, which will assume, purify, and transfigure all the thought, all the art and all the millenarian spiritual experience of India. (3)

Swami Abhishiktanana's whole life may be said to have been focused on the experience of Saccidananda and the Trinity, and he is inclined to identify these two experiences. In his celebrated work *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*, he writes:

The experience of Saccidananda carries the soul beyond all merely intellectual knowledge to her very center, to the source of her being. Only there is she able to hear the Word which reveals, within the undivided unity and advaita of Saccidananda, the mystery of the Three divine persons: in sat, the Father, the absolute Beginning and Source of being; in cit, the Son, the divine Word, the Father's Self-knowledge; in ananda, the Spirit of love, fullness and Bliss without end. (4)

Fr. Bede Griffiths came to Shantivanam in 1968 and took over the guidance of the ashram from Swami Abhishiktananda. He records his appreciation and approval of the approach of his predecessors:

Father Monchanin and Father Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda) were both deep students of Hindu thought, but they also realized that the absolute ground of meeting between the Church and Hinduism must take place not in the realm of thought but in that of contemplation. (5)

The longing of these pioneers to relate in their own lives the advaitic and trinitarian experiences comes to a focus and becomes crystallized in the life and experience of Fr. Bede...

### An Indian-Christian Theology

To build an Indian Christian theology we have to go back to the deepest experience of the Absolute in the two traditions, Hindu and Christian. The Hindu experience is advaitic/saccidanandan while the Christian experience is trinitarian.

**Brahman, Atman, Purusha.** When we speak of God-experience in Hinduism, the terms that draw our immediate attention are Brahman, Atman and Purusha. The Hindu experience from the Vedic times stressed God's presence in

(Continued on page 10)

nature as well as in the depth of the individual person. As present in the cosmos, as the Ground of the universe, this Divine Reality is known as *Brahman*; as present in the human being it is known as *Atman*.

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## The Golden String

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### **The Shantivam School** *(Continued from page 9)*

The third essential term for the Hindu notion of the Absolute is *Purusha*, the Cosmic Man, the Lord of Creation. The *Rig Veda* (X,90) speaks of the whole universe issuing out of the primeval sacrifice of Purusha. Later Upanishads like the *Svetavatara* speak of Purusha as the personal God. In the Epics and the Puranas, Purusha, as the personal god Vishnu and his manifestations and descents (avatara) has a more significant place. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Sri Krishna is identified with Puruchama, the Supreme Person, revealed as a God of love. In this context, regarding the possibility of an Indian Christian theology, Bede speaks out forthrightly:

We seek to express our Christian faith in the language of the Vedanta as the Greek Fathers expressed it in the language of Plato and Aristotle.

Purusha will be one of the key words in an Indian Christian theology. Advaita would be another. (7)

**Advaita and the Holy Trinity.** How to reconcile Advaita with the Christian faith, particularly with the Trinitarian intuition, was one of the constant preoccupations of Swami Abhishiktananda. While speaking of this relationship it is necessary at the outset to make a distinction between Advaita as the name of the ultimate state of mystical consciousness and Advaita as a philosophical doctrine advocated by the great Vedanta philosopher Sankara. An interpretation of Advaita which is acosmic, which denies reality to the

world of phenomenal experience, is not acceptable when we speak of a Christian Advaita.

In Christ's consciousness of unity with his Father we have the basis of a Christian Advaita. ***to be continued***

#### **Notes:**

1. Quoted in Wayne Teasdale, *Toward a Christian Vedanta* (Bangalore, Asian Trading Corp., 1987), p.29.
2. J. G. Weber, *In Quest of the Absolute: the Life and Work of Jules Monchanin* (Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications), p. 73.
3. Quoted in Sten Rodhe, *Jules Monchanin: Pioneer in Christian-Hindu Dialogue* (Delhi, ISPCK, 1993), p. 23.
4. Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (Delhi, ISPCK, 1974), p. 78.
5. Bede Griffiths, *Christ in India*, p. 63.
6. Judson B. Trapnell, "Two Models of Christian Dialogue with Hinduism. Bede Griffiths and Abhishiktananda," (*Vidya Jyoti*, Vol. 60 (Feb 1966), p. 105.
7. Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, p. 76.

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## The Golden String

**Bede Griffiths Trust**  
**New Camaldoli Hermitage**  
**Big Sur, California 93920**  
**U.S.A.**

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