

# The Golden String

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*SPECIAL ISSUE CELEBRATING THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF BEDE'S MAHASAMADHI  
(MAY 13, 1993) — PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF SOME OF HIS FRIENDS*

## **Pascaline Coff: Shantivanam in a Chalet, An American Experience**

My year (1976/7) with Fr. Bede Griffiths at his Shantivanam Ashram in South India was one of the highlights of my life. But the end was the beginning of subsequent contact with Fr. Bede during the following years until he died (5/13/93). It all seemed like, and in reality it was, a continuous and overwhelming gift of God's love. Fr. Bede's frequent and indepth letters written by hand and so full of spiritual enrichment always astounded and delighted me!

Our intermonastic dialogue board had invited Fr. Bede and several times brought him over from India to our U.S. monasteries to give input on the riches of Eastern spirituality, especially Hinduism which he knew best of all. During his more than two decades of living a simple monastic life of interiority in India, Fr. Bede had allowed the Spirit to bring about within himself a profound change. His attitude toward and appreciation of modern technology and science dispelled completely the former resistance of his college years. Retaining, however, his dislike for airports, the monk now began to travel more -- in America, Germany, Australia, and the U.K. Fr. Bede was delightfully energized by the depth of new life — body, soul and spirit — that he discovered in small contemplative groups both monastic and lay, emerging here and there, especially in the USA.

One of his visits to the U.S. was to be with some of his disciples and to assist and experiment with a small group who eventually hoped to form a lay contemplative community. Father had suffered for years with fibrillation of the heart and on arrival in California on this occasion he was very weak. Therefore, the other planned stops on the way were canceled and all involved were invited to join him in Harrison Hobbitzelle's chalet in the Vermont mountains. Harrison, incidentally offered the chalet to Father Bede if he would take up residence in the US permanently!

Wayne Teasdale, Russill and Asha Paul, myself and Fr. Bede were here in semi-community, praying together, cooking and doing dishes. Father even sat on a chair near the sink in order to help dry dishes, while sharing some of his English humor with us all. We took turns at Liturgy preparation, lighting oil lamps, incense and the camphor for the sacred arati — the Fire Blessing. We sang bhajans, read portions of the Scriptures from the East and West and Fr.

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## **Judy Walter: Seeker of the Hidden Mysteries**

O seeker of the hidden mysteries,

You moved among us as Spirit,

Clothed in the transient garb of the sun.

Known in your earthly form as

Alan Griffiths

Father Bede

Guruji

Dayananda, the compassionate one.

Now in your absence we wonder:

Who was this man who lived among us?

so familiar, always accessible,

a gentle presence,

whose eyes were a horizon of the Beyond.

In the combat of life,

many a disciple came for your counsel.

Whether in victory or defeat,

your message was always the same:

“Go Beyond.”

A message proclaimed by your very being,

as well as your words,

words softly spoken, yet resounding

in the ear of the heart,

speaking of inner mysteries, inner treasures.

You found the Pearl of perennial wisdom,

and became a cosmic pilgrim

to share the secret riches of your quest.

O archetype of Wisdom,

O ancient, transparent frame,

through you, we glimpse the birth

of a new transcendent age,

a deeply mystical breakthrough

into the very heart of the Beyond. ☼

*Pascaline Coff* (Continued from page 1)

Bede shared some of his favorite Tamil poetry. Faith sharing (satsang) after supper was always special, spontaneous and profound. His short homilies at Eucharist and at Vespers (Evening Prayer) were offered with that same radiant joy he manifested back at Shantivanam in South India. The Scriptures truly moved his heart and in turn each of ours.

### **The great awakening**

Every morning around 5:00 or 5:30 a.m. one of us would prepare “hot milk with tea in it” for Fr. Bede. Then we would gather at his door sipping hot coffee as he beckoned us into his room. He often said “I want to share with you a wonderful meditation I had about 2 or 3 a.m.” He was radiant and sometimes choking back the words. No one took notes but his sharing was always something about the Holy Trinity and the glorious procession of the Son from the Father, the Father beholding His Thought, His Word, His Son in exquisite ecstasy – and the Son being overwhelmed with beholding the Father. Then the intense stream of love that passed between the two, itself being the Holy Spirit. Fr. Bede’s joy was unutterable as he tried to share with us the experience that bathed and flooded his heart in the wee hours of the night, when most people would be annoyed at not being able to sleep. Sat-cit-ananda – the Being, Consciousness and Bliss of the Hindu tradition always fascinated Fr. Bede as a possible light on the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Describing the spiritual senses Origen wrote that the understanding of the Trinity is precisely the summit of the contemplative life – knowledge of God forms the heart of the contemplative life. “Dayananda” as Fr. Bede was called in the East, had been well named! This Mystery was the chosen contemplation of all three of the founders of Shantivanam. According to Fr. Jules Monchanin it was the very *raison d’être* for the initial foundation on the banks of the Kavery River: to contemplate the Holy Trinity in the heart of Hindu land. Abhishiktananda too, the second of the founders, had pondered deeply this Mystery both at Shantivanam and later in the Himalayas.

Russill brought to the chalet his music synthesizer and his Indian musical instruments, often used at Shantivanam during the sacred liturgies there. He suggested that we create here a music tape entitled “An Experience of Shantivanam.” Wayne coordinated the program and had each of us take turns reading a text in English or translating one of the Sanskrit chants we had all just sung. Even the bells for the sacred arati could be heard resounding. Fr. Bede’s voice was weak but firm as he read some of his favorite passages from the Upanishads and the Gita. This was probably one of the last recordings made of the beautiful Shantivanam liturgies with Fr. Bede’s own voice.

One other gift of the few days in these mountains was the opportunity to walk down the road with Fr. Bede after dinner in the beautiful Vermont countryside. He wore large plush slippers given him by friends in Germany plus a very heavy overcoat – a humorous sight for those who knew

him only in S. India barefoot and wearing just a kavi prayer shawl and lungi. But Father’s ever grateful heart appreciated these gifts of love and he used the coat to keep the wind from his throat. I loved these noon walks and looked forward to this time to be with Father in another mode. His mind was clear as a bell and he would laugh like a child describing some of the more delicate moments and experiences before his time in Shantivanam, entrusting to me some of his deepest heart.

Whether at home or abroad, Father was for me a true icon of integrity. He was indeed “the man, the monk and the mystic” – and for necessary emphasis today I add “the perfect priest.” He always offered the daily Eucharist with profound reverence, respect and mindfulness, overflowing with joy as he read the Scriptures. His prayers of the faithful always embraced the entire human family. He enjoyed telling of his ordination card on which he had printed “priest according to the Order of Melchisedech” – beyond the systems and structures that can crumble. He loved his priesthood though he knew some forms must needs go, yet he was with Christ, in Him and through Him, “a priest forever”.

We are here in this world to enable the Divine to manifest, radiate through us. This was what Fr. Bede did so well for me and for so many others! ☼

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### **Michael von Brück:**

#### **Encounter with Bede Griffiths (Part I)**

It was in summer 1976 that I arrived in India. I was on a scholarship from the World Council of Churches to engage in research on Indian theology and the dialogue of religions at the United Theological College in Bangalore. Soon after my arrival I discovered that the theology taught at the college was not much shaped by Indian cultural patterns but was basically a second hand theology of Western origin. Therefore, I looked for other options and met the Indian artist Jyoti Sahi, a disciple of Bede Griffiths. The name of Fr. Bede sounded familiar, for Father Enomiya-Lassalle, the German Jesuit who had become a Zen master in Japan, had introduced me not only to Zen earlier in Germany but had mentioned his visit to Shantivanam as an extraordinary experience in his life. During the Zen sesshin he had quoted from Abhishiktananda’s book on prayer, and he told us that he had met Bede Griffiths in India, a wonderful companion on the journey of discovery of a mystical life. Jyoti explained to me how to board the Island Express train from Bangalore to Kulitalai, and off I went the next night.

Just before sunrise the train arrived at Kulitalai station. I got on a small oxcart and traveled through a time machine into the past – small huts which allowed the smoke of the cooking fire to escape through the roof, women busy preparing the early breakfast before dawn, small circles of men squatting in the bushes to relieve themselves, smoke a

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**Michael von Brück**

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pipe and discuss God and the world; no cars yet, a sleepy Indian morning. Some temple bells were ringing far away indicating that a morning puja was underway. Half an hour later I arrived at Shantivanam Ashram just before the morning mass in the chapel. I was guided to the small hut of Father Bede who looked curiously out at the new arrival through his window, came out of the door and greeted me with Anjali mudra and one of the warmest smiles I have ever been given in my life. Not strangers, but old acquaintances seemed to meet here. It was an encounter that should deeply alter my life.

I had intended to stay for a week, but I remained in Shantivanam for six months, in the company of Bede and a whole group of Benedictines from all over the world. These months were filled with study and talks, work in the library and countless hours of dialogue with Fr Bede. Every afternoon all the visitors would meet with Bede under the coconut trees and Fr. Bede would give his famous discourses on the Bhagavad Gita which later were edited as the book "River of Compassion." Late in the evening we would meet for satsang, the traditional Indian meeting with the guru, where small talk and deep philosophical reflection would go hand in hand, no artificiality there, but a deep sense of humanness, friendship and caring for each other. I remember one trip we undertook together to Shembaganur, a Jesuit centre in the mountains near Kodaikanal, to attend an interreligious conference. On the bus Bede asked me what I had read recently, and I reported my studies of Goethe's Faust. I explained the deep philosophical meaning of the famous German drama as I understood it and as we had discussed it at university. After some time, Bede replied: "Well, it sounds interesting, but all this human confusion...I think I have gone beyond it!" Many years later we would recall this first encounter with joy.

Later, when I came back to India in the 1980s with my wife and three children to stay and teach at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in Madras, we would spend Christmas and Easter, many different Hindu holidays and much of our vacation at Shantivanam. The three girls enjoyed the simple life under the palm trees, the idlis for breakfast and the cleaning of the vessels afterwards, the cows (not so much the mosquitoes) and the Sanskrit chanting in the chapel, but most of all the gentle company of Father Bede. He was a father, friend, guru, grandfather to the children – all in one. Once in the early 80s my wife Regina, the three children, Fr. Bede and I traveled together by train to visit Tibetan monasteries in Northern Karnataka. During the long journey our daughter Angelica who was about 8 years old at that time, asked Bede again and again why he was not married. With painful patience he explained the one-pointedness in the search for truth to a child, an explanation that we vividly remember, because it was so simple and beautiful but at the same time without any pretention. After we had visited the great Tibetan monastic

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universities at Drepung and Gaden, Bede commented that he was impressed by the learning and the charm of the humorous lamas, but at the same time he felt too much hierarchy, too much organization and scholastic routine—very similar to the Christian monasteries with all their grandeur.

We would organize conferences together, especially with Tibetan Lamas and Western scientists on the exploration of consciousness and the limits of knowledge. Bede was so curious, always eager to learn something new and to integrate it into his worldview which was never closed but open and in the making. We invited a Tibetan shaman whom I had met during one of my visits to Gaden monastery, and he spent a whole week at Shantivanam, relating his story and experiences. Later I made the transcripts of his talks into one chapter of one of my books on Tibetan Buddhism. Bede asked and wondered and was excited about the unfathomable depths of our conversations. We realized that the gift of shamanic trance was a deep responsibility, full of suffering for the medium, because the many trances made the medium tired, both physically and mentally. On another occasion there were Samdhong Rinpoche and Rupert Sheldrake talking about science and consciousness in the mystical traditions. Samdhong Rinpoche, the head of the Tibetan Buddhist University and today head of the Tibetan Government in Exile, was so deeply impressed by the life style in Shantivanam and the genuine radiance of Father Bede. He felt, as he said, very much at home. And later, in January 1985, I was fortunate enough to organize a conference at Gurukul in Madras which was attended by Bede Griffiths and the Dalai Lama (Raimon Panikkar, Mar Gregorios and Swami Chidananda were present as well), and I had the joy of introducing the two great personalities right in my house where cake and tea was served by my wife and the three daughters. Observing the Dalai Lama and Bede Griffiths in conversation was like seeing two hearts and minds in a rhythmic exchange that sparkled with joy, the mystery of ananda in a perfect union of consciousness. (to be continued)

1. Charles A. Moore (ed.), *Essays in East-West Philosophy*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1951, page 45. ☼

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### Milo Coerper: My Time with Bede

My wife, Wendy, & I had one glorious week with Fr. Bede when he was in New Harmony, Indiana as the spiritual leader of the John Main Seminar, 1991 & then stayed on with us to participate in the formation of the World Community for Christian Meditation. It was a graced gift to me to have had a number of private moments with him during this week. He shared with me that discernment was the most important thing to understand in our ongoing spiritual life & that in our seeking we must always go beyond those two words—"go beyond"—will always remain with me — as will his truly holy presence. ☼

**Russill Paul:**  
**Remembering Bede — A Poignant Moment**

January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1990. Asha and I were living in community at the Benedictine Priory in Montreal, Canada, on the invitation of Fr. Lawrence Freeman. Our bedroom window in the converted coach house, a building formerly used to keep horse and carriage, overlooked a picturesque section of the property. It was covered then in snow and ice. We had built an altar just beside the window; the centerpiece was a portrait of Fr. Bede encased in an ornamental gold frame, the circular glass portal revealing his gentle face and beautiful blue eyes. On either side of the portal were two gold peacocks – symbols of infinity, beauty and omniscience – their own faces peering closely into Bede’s eyes. Towering above Bede, the altar was dominated by a large and colorful batik of Krishna playing his flute and surrounded by animals, the top end of the cloth tucked behind a large wooden board that sloped down from the wall to the dresser on which the altar was arranged. Incense, sandalwood paste, vermilion powder and sacred ash were ceremonially placed around Bede’s picture. It was the one corner of the room that captured India, most particularly Shantivanam, and we desperately needed its smells, its colors and its images to stay alive emotionally.

Canada was wonderful, the community at the Priory was extraordinarily kind and the people of Montreal were hospitable and generous; but we were a newly married couple in our early twenties, born and raised in the humid, tropical climate of Southern India, and we had never been out of our native land before. We were lonely, 15,000 miles away from home, the winter only adding to our isolation, and we missed Fr. Bede dearly.

My life at Shantivanam for almost five years had made me attached to Bede’s loving presence: his kindness, his gentleness, his availability at any hour of the day or night, and above all, his willingness to listen – not just with his ear, but his entire being. I remember distinctly – as many others would – his welcoming smile, the wave of his hand, an invitation to sit on his bed while he took the solitary chair in the room, the smoothing of his hair, and the single word that often paved the way for conversation. “So,” he would say, his eyes widening and puckering up the flesh on his forehead, as though that one syllable was sufficient to invite you to speak out your heart. And it did. He would sit still, his hands joined together, finger-tips touching gently, eyes watery and brimming over with curiosity as you spoke. From time to time he would lean forward, ever so gently, as though not to miss a single word you were saying.

It was about 4 P.M. that 24<sup>th</sup> of January, and it was my birthday. We had decided to go for a walk, and since it was a record awful winter in Quebec, we bundled up in layers of clothing: thermal underwear, socks, boots, flannel shirts, sweaters, scarves, hats, mittens, earmuffs, even warm

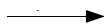
padding around the abdomen that someone had recommended. Bede was very present in our mind as we walked because he was coming to North America. He was scheduled to give a few lectures, but most of the 4 months we would spend with him in retreat and recollection. This extended private retreat was to birth an informal community in the West, a foundation dedicated to bringing the contemplative life to married couples, working people who would be committed to meditation and to living an alternative lifestyle that bore witness to contemplative depth in the world.

We were thrilled with the prospect. We had been communicating profusely with Bede and sharing our ideas through the mail. He was present to us through these letters, but we missed him. We missed his smile, his warmth, even missed his gentle and charming displays of irritation – his frowns always broke into smiles because he rapidly realized that the matter was of no consequence. Love always prevailed with Bede, perhaps as much as truth prevailed with Gandhi or compassion with Mother Teresa: the thought of his coming west in the summer brought warmth to our hearts on that cold, winter’s day.

We returned from our walk with lips chapped, eyes watering and teeth chattering: our bones and blood could not handle 20 degrees below zero. Glad to remove our outdoor clothing and savoring the radiator’s warmth in the coach house we entered our room; that very instant, in a perfectly-timed synchronization of events, the entire altar came crashing down. We stood there stupefied, looking down at the shattered glass, clouds of powdered incense swirling in the air and vermilion powder strewn about the floor, like blood, which is precisely what it represents for Hindus: it is “the mark of the goddess.” The room was quiet, airtight because the dual paned windows were shut to keep the warmth in and the cold out; there was no fan operating, no draft, no one else in the house. It was eerie, and the dramatic timing quite perplexed us. Something must have happened to Fr. Bede; it was the only rational explanation.

Several weeks later we came to know that Bede had had a stroke in India around the same time our altar had come crashing down – the thirteen-hour time difference placed it about 5 A.M. on the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> of January. Bede describes the moment in the video *A Human Search*: “I was on my porch, getting ready to meditate, when I felt this tremendous force coming from the right side. It hit me on the head and everything went fuzzy, like a television set: (here, he waves his hand to demonstrate visual static). I think I had been living too much from my rational mind for most of my life and now I was being called to discover the feminine. I heard a voice say, ‘surrender to the mother’ and so I just made some sort of surrender to the mother.”

Now that you are with her, Fr. Bede, we ask that you keep us all in your prayers and in your love, as much as you did when you graced this earth with your presence. ☼



**Douglas Conlan:**

**“This is what I’ve been looking for all my life!”**

I had just brought Father Bede from the Perth International Airport at the commencement of his Australian Tour in 1992. The weather was a little chilly, so I made sure that he had a warm room, overcoat and warm pullover and warm food. He was tired after such a long flight, though nothing could have dimmed the light in his eyes, a light that was always there, I recall, to the end of his life. It was one of the most disarming things about him, and I suspect may have been one of the main sources of attraction for the many people who, through those eyes, sensed the revelation of a heart that was always open and childlike in its desire and readiness to learn something new every day. Let me illustrate how open I always found him to be.

I’d brought him through my old fashioned garden of colorful vinkas and impatiens, palms and marigolds. He fell in love with that little space and would spend some time each day just sitting among the trees and flowers in contemplation as the breeze sifted through the tall, overhanging eucalyptus trees. But what he really loved was my library. As soon as he saw it his face lit up and he exclaimed, “Oh! What a marvellous library. You have all the best books. The most important.” And straight away he went to the shelves and began fingering the books and reading their titles. He was a young graduate again, lost in a world of his own. I quietly left the room to prepare his simple vegetarian lunch.

After he’d eaten he produced from his ever present, hand woven, multicoloured shoulder bag a small photocopied book with string stitching holding it together. He held it up and said, “I was given this to read recently. It’s really one of the most profound books I’ve ever read.” I recalled that several years previously he’d shared with me the same perception after he’d read the anonymously authored “Meditations on the Tarot.” He then carefully turned the first several pages of this now considerably tattered book by the Tibetan teacher Namkhai Norbu and read from the so called Six Vajra Verses, or Lines:

Although apparent phenomena  
manifest as diversity  
yet this diversity is non-dual,  
and of all the multiplicity  
of individual things that exist  
none can be confined in a limited concept.  
Staying free from the trap of any attempt  
to say it’s ‘like this’, or ‘like that’,  
it becomes clear that all manifested forms are  
aspects of the infinite formless,  
and indivisible from it,  
are self perfected.  
Seeing that everything is self perfected  
from the very beginning,  
the disease of striving for any achievement  
is surrendered,

and just remaining in the natural state  
as it is,  
the presence of non-dual contemplation  
continuously spontaneously arises.

He didn’t look up immediately. But when he did, his eyes had a far-away look as though seeing something that lay beyond the horizon yet was something he already deeply experienced within himself. It was a sacred moment for me to witness this look of his; like a child who sees something for the very first time and is left silenced, in awe and wonder. It was quite beautiful.

After a little while, holding the book in his right hand and tapping it with the fingers of his left hand, he said softly, “This is extraordinary truth. I have been searching for this all my life. And here it is: the truth in a few lines!” He didn’t say any more and I did not want to break the magic of the moment with questions seeking clarification of what he meant. What he was referring to, as far as I could see, was deeply experiential, and at a far deeper level than words, definitions and doctrines. Reading and reflecting upon those Six Vajra Verses brought him to a place of understanding that was, I suspect, part of a number of intuitive insights he had towards the end of his life. I had heard him speak often of “wisdom which can transcend reason and know the Truth, not discursively but intuitively, not by its reflection in the world of senses but in its [ultimate] Ground, where knowing is also being.” He was sure that if humanity was to survive at all, it must be through a complete change of heart so that the merely conscious mind “may be dethroned and acknowledge its dependence on the Transcendent Mystery.” I sat there and so did he, lightly tapping that book, looking out the window. I wondered then, by what I saw in his eyes, if he had a presentiment of what lay before him in life, and whether he knew his time here was drawing to a close.

This was just one of those small vignettes in my many experiences of Father Bede, one that has left a deep impression upon me. I can never read those Six Vajra Verses from the Tibetan Zogchen teachings without thinking of him and of his remarkable openness to and valuing of the wisdom of all of humanity’s sacred traditions. I feel completely blessed by the example of his humility. And also of his conviction that the One Spirit of all and in all has truly guided and never been absent from any seeker, anywhere in history’s long human search for wisdom, holiness and happiness. ☸

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**Nan Pulsifer: Bede the Listener**

Father Bede’s influence on us was far more immediate [than numerous pedantic articles in *The Golden String*], and almost free of language. He sat silent when he met with us, listening attentively to whatever we said, no matter how judgmental of the church we were, or justifying of ourselves, or completely lost... I walked on air when I left our weekly meeting in his tiny hut and finally asked myself, “Why? Why does he make me feel so happy, so liberated?”

He says nothing, he just sits there and listens with total attention." I could tell him anything. I described my own strange path to God, after I left Fundamentalist Christianity as a child, and he listened carefully. His silent attention was my comfort. He was seeing the "Light within the cave within the heart" in me, in each one of us, affirming it, activating it to do the work of spirit in each individual according to his or her nature and life experience. . . ☼

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## **Wayne Teasdale:**

### **Father Bede as Sage of a New Age**

Again and again, over the years, and in various forums, Bede Griffiths spoke of a new age into which the world was moving. In writings, articles, lectures, interviews, letters, homilies, and personal conversations, Bede often would say: "We are entering a new age". He was quite insistent on this point. In many ways Father Bede was a living prophet of this new age, this totally different period of human history. It is a vision that sees beyond where the planet presently is, beyond terrorism, war, oppression, inequity, and ecological deterioration as facts of life. Bedeji had in mind the new order that would arise out of the collapse of the old order. In what follows, I'd like to present a personal reflection on Father Bede's person, his life and work.

#### **Personal Impressions**

Father Bede and I knew each other for some twenty years in this life, stretching from 1973 till his death in May 1993. From 1973 to the summer of 1979 our friendship was through correspondence, but in the summer of 1979 we met for the first time during his second visit to America. My very first impression of this sage-like English monk was his refreshing openness. He got off the plane, and as he came into the airport from the tunnel that connected with the Air India jetliner, he was radiant in his quality of taking everything in, like a child on Christmas morning! It was incredible to experience this attribute of Bedeji's. This first impression has become a lasting one, and a defining, indeed governing characteristic of his character and personality. Sister Madeleine Simon, a member of the Sacred Heart Congregation in Britain, a friend of mine, and long associated with the Christian Meditation movement, once remarked to me: "You're really only ready for heaven when you're completely open." When I remember these words, they immediately remind me of Father Bede, who so exemplified this readiness.

Along with his openness, I recall with great fondness his warmth, his love, acceptance of others, and his contagious, gentle, self-deprecating sense of humor. Every person who visited the ashram was personally welcomed by Father Bede, and he would spend a lot of his precious time engaged in conversations with countless guests who came to Shantivanam. His ability to accept all sorts of people, from various backgrounds, ages and conditions, was another inspiring element of his character, one that illustrated his evi-

dent sanctity. Even persons who were psychologically unbalanced were welcome at Shantivanam, and Bedeji showed them great kindness.

#### **His Life and Work**

One of the characteristics of Bede's mind that I noticed quite early in our friendship was his ability for synthesis. He was always drawing parallels between and among the traditions, and he could see implications of scientific research/discoveries for mysticism and faith. In this intellectual capacity for synthesis he reminded me of Thomas Aquinas. This drive towards a synthesis was a constant theme of his mature thought, and spoke and wrote about it on numerous occasions. His book, *A New Vision of Reality: Western Science, Eastern Mysticism and Christian Faith* represented the fruit of this movement in his thought to achieve some tangible kind of enhanced coherence among mysticism, science and faith. I really think this book was the clearest expression of his wisdom. The task of synthesis is always ongoing, and it is his example here, as in other areas, that has made an indelible impression on my own attempts at articulation, and has inspired the Synthesis Dialogues in Darmsala, Trent, and next year, in Castelgandolfo.

Father Bede's faith was firmly rooted in his Christian identity, and he was very clear about who Christ is, a faith he never compromised. As deeply committed as he was to the rich treasures of Hindu contemplative experience, he would not relativize Christ in his life and vision. His own contemplative life was greatly enlarged by his assimilation of Hindu spirituality, particularly the practice of meditation. Father Bede's contemplative vision embraced and exercised a mysticism of love, which was translated into his relationships, and with his community. His mysticism was informed by a healthy interspirituality, an enthusiasm for the spiritual depth of all traditions, exploring those depths, and incorporating elements from them, as he did in Shantivanam, and more personally, in his own life. Shantivanam, in its own unique way, is an enduring monument to the wisdom of interspirituality as Father Bede practiced it, without his actually using this term, since it was coined after his death. He saw that the Church had an important task here: the gradual sifting through and careful absorption of the authentic spiritual insights, practices and experiences that have existed for millennia in the other traditions of spirituality.

His appropriation of advaita from Vedantic mysticism, in the way of an intermystical assimilation, found expression in his Christian understanding, especially in his formulation of a Christian form of advaita found, as he maintained, in the Gospel of John, especially in the metaphor of the vine and the branches: Jesus as the Vine, and we creatures, the branches. I believe this is a very important mystical parallel, so in line with the main premise of Bedeji's interspiritual vision. He realized that it is hopeless try-

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**Wayne Teasdale**

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ing to relate the religions on the basis of their diverse doctrines, or beliefs, and he knew that these great traditions do come together on their mystical level, just as the fingers of the hand, though separate, are grounded in the same palm, a favorite metaphor, and teaching device of his.

I must mention Bede's immense concern for the world in all its dimensions of need: the endangered environment, other species, the human community in its terribly divided state, with so much violence, poverty, ignorance, and greed in the world, not to mention the problem of human indifference to the sufferings of the vulnerable. Finally, Bedeji was eloquent in his challenge to the Church to become again a light to the nations and beyond. ☼

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**Robert Hale:**

### **Bede Griffiths in California**

In 1991, I had the great honor of showing Fr. Bede about the Graduate Theological Union campus in Berkeley when he was visiting California. He very much affirmed the open, ecumenical, and inter-religious character of the G.T.U. He explored the bookstore with particular relish and purpose—he was also purchasing for the Shantivanam library. He asked me what I would recommend as the best in the areas of feminist and black and Latino and native American and gay spirituality and theology. The G.T.U. bookstore in fact has shelves devoted to all of these specific areas. And I was amazed by his excitement and openness—as if he were a 21 year old beginning seminarian!

Some of our visitors from abroad (even from just beyond Berkeley!) remain perplexed, even threatened by the G.T.U. and its bookstore. But here was an elderly monk from afar who was delighted by these new areas of spirituality and theology. Clearly he was not locked into the past, the comfortable, the securely established. What an example for Catholics, I reflected to myself, for the Church, for the aging (Bede was himself going on 85), for everyone!

As I drove him south, towards New Camaldoli Hermitage, he expressed his appreciation of the beauty of the California hills and dramatic coastline. We discussed how the Native Americans had achieved such a harmony with nature, how the forests were their cathedrals and the birds and animals their angelic visitors and the seasons their liturgical year. He said that as he and the monks of Shantivanam were endeavoring to tap the deepest roots of Indian spirituality, so we in America should similarly endeavor to access native American spirituality.

We stopped in Santa Cruz and had lunch at one of its several vegetarian cafes. Then we visited their book stores, and Bede was again the enthusiastic student. And the Santa Cruz people were for their part delighted with him, this elderly, warm, obviously serene and loving monk with an English accent, in his flowing Indian, saffron robe.

The whole thing seemed to me a new instance of the marriage of East and West. ☼

**John Martin:**

### **Father Bede — A Sage and a Prophet**

This year as we celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Fr. Bede's death, I would like to reflect more personally on who Fr. Bede was to me and on his influence in my spiritual journey. Fr. Bede became my spiritual master before I met him personally. When I was studying my theology in St. Peter's Seminary (1982) Bangalore, South of India I happened to read an article of Fr. Bede on Christian advaita. Fr. Bede wrote saying that many Christians are dualists. They think that God and we make two. This cannot be so. God is the only absolute reality and we are only relative reality. The image that came to my mind was that of the earth and a tree on the earth. The earth can stand by itself but the tree cannot stand on its own. It is hundred percent dependent on the earth. This brought a revolution in my understanding of my relationship with God. I began to feel that I am walking on God and living in God. It was an experience of the universal presence of God. It led to an unconditional surrender to God as a choiceless choice. This experience made me look into the teaching of Christ in a new way. Fr. Bede became my spiritual guide even though I did not meet him personally. When I had a kind of spiritual crisis, as I could not relate with the traditional Christian spirituality, I heard a clear voice within me telling, "Go to Fr. Bede and he will tell you what to do." I wrote a letter to Fr. Bede requesting his guidance. He invited me to Shantivanam. The first day I met him and shared with him my spiritual journey and understanding. He listened with rapt attention and he simply approved it. I felt so liberated and joyful. Suddenly I looked into the face of Fr. Bede and I felt that I was sitting in the presence of a holy person. As I was leaving his room I remembered the words of Jesus, "Come to me all you who labor and are burdened of heart, and I will give you rest." In my nine years of staying with Fr. Bede I have seen hundreds of persons who went into his room and came out with this feeling of liberation and joy. . . .

Jesus in his experience of God brings together the wisdom tradition (as in the eastern religions) and the prophetic tradition (as in the Semitic religions). His spiritual search was not only to find God in the ground of existence but also the relevance of that experience to the social, economic and political problems of his time. "My Father and I are one" and "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, that you do unto me" are the two pillars of his teaching. He was a sage who climbed to the top of the hill and realized his identity with God and he was also a prophet who came to the plains to transform the human relationships with his non-dual experience. In him the non-dual wisdom and the prophetic spirit are married.

Fr. Bede was brought up in the prophetic tradition of Christianity. He grew in the dualistic wisdom of Christianity. Until a certain moment of his spiritual journey he

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found fulfillment in that tradition but later he discovered that something was missing. He made his journey to India saying that he came to India to discover the other half of his soul. What was missing was this non-dual wisdom. He was longing for the non-dual wisdom in which alone we find our ultimate fulfillment. He found his deepest longing fulfilled in the advaitic experience of the Upanishadic sages. But he joins his prophetic experience to the advaitic experience. We can say that it was the marriage of non-dual wisdom and prophecy, the wisdom tradition and the prophetic tradition. In this sense he was the real follower of Christ.

**The Bhagavadgita**, the spiritual classic of India is this marriage of wisdom and action, jnana and karma which brings forth devotion. There is devotion which comes out of wisdom, and action which comes out of devotion. Krishna is the symbol of wisdom, the Sage, who is passive. He does not fight. He only gives advice. Arjuna is the symbol of a Prophet, the actor, the Fighter. His actions come from the inaction of Krishna. His actions come from wisdom. The actions of Kauravas are prophetic but without the guidance of Krishna, the wisdom. So they lost the battle. Wisdom without prophecy can be ineffective. Prophetic action without wisdom may end up in failure. Krishna without Arjuna and Arjuna without Krishna are ineffective. In the story of Bhagavadgita, Krishna and Arjuna are inseparable, jnana and karma are inseparable. Where these two are together, there is victory and success.

Fr. Bede tried to bring these traditions of wisdom and action into one, to bring Krishna and Arjuna together. . . . In the life of Jesus, Krishna and Arjuna have become one. “The works which I do are not my own but the Father who dwells in me does his works” said Jesus. Physically he was Arjuna but it was Krishna who was guiding his life and actions. Fr. Bede was a sage who meditated on “I am what I am” but he was also a Prophet who worked for the transformation of the world. In him the marriage of wisdom and prophecy has taken place.

Fr. Bede was a person of integration. He tried to integrate various aspects of human life. Human beings have various aspects like material, sexual, social, scientific, philosophical, psychological, theological and mystical. These aspects are like various points on the hill. When a person is climbing to the top of the hill s/he has to go beyond them as wisdom is beyond them. But when a person is climbing down s/he has to transform these aspects with the original non-dual wisdom. S/he has to bring that non-dual experience to the bottom of the hill, the material level. Fr. Bede was able to dialogue with the communists, the social workers, the scientists, psychologists, theologians and mystics. At the end of his life he spoke of how one has to transform sexuality into sacred. In the video of ‘Human Search’ he quotes D. H. Lawrence, who describes sexual union as non-dual experience, two become one. One has to look at sex not as something merely natural, or as sinful, but as spiritual. Fr.

Bede had tremendous love for the poor and suffering. He always supported the social welfare activities around the ashram and he participated in their programs. He had deep love for the poor and the marginalized. There was a touching incident, which I remember well. There was once a drug addict living in the ashram. He was a nuisance to the visitors and the community members. So the community had a meeting and discussed whether the drug addict could be sent out of the ashram. I could see tears rolling down from the eyes of Fr. Bede when he said, “At the end of my life if Jesus asks, I came to you hungry, thirsty, and homeless...what answer will I be able to give?” We were all moved by his compassion, and we had to stop discussing the topic.

Fr. Bede was very youthful in his capacity to learn. He was a voracious reader and had a photographic memory. He enjoyed reading *The Tablet* after dinner. One day after dinner I was passing by his hut and saw him fully absorbed in reading *The Tablet*. He was not only reading it but was enjoying it as if he was eating a delicious dish. I felt jealous of him and said to myself, “Look at this old man. He has such a desire to read and I am not even 35 but do not have such desire to read.” I went close to his window and stood there. After a minute he recognized my presence and called me inside saying, “come along,” his usual expression. I sat at his feet and said, “Father I felt jealous of you. You see, you are 82 years old and have such a desire to read but I am not even thirty-five and have no such desire to read.” He felt somewhat uncomfortable and said, “You see, I do not feel that I am 82 but I feel that I am only 18.” It was true that at the age of 82 he was only 18 and at the age of 35 I was already 82.

There was another incident, which I remember well. We used to read in the dining room during the lunch and dinner. One day Father Bede asked a layperson, who was in the ashram at that time, to read during the lunch. His pronunciation and accent was so bad that I thought that Fr. Bede would stop him on the second day. But Fr. Bede heard him the whole week without a slight feeling of discomfort. I felt myself ashamed of my judgment.

Though he was a prophet who tried to transform the various aspects of human life, his last words were those of a sage. We, all the brothers, gathered at his bed few days before his death and we told him, “Father, we will continue your spirit.” He felt a little uncomfortable and said immediately, “not my spirit but the Holy Spirit,” pointing his finger upward to the sky. ☼ *(Br. John Martin’s essay has been abridged because of space limitations in this issue.)*

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### **Daniel Pittman: Remembering Bede**

I was always dumbstruck by Bede — even when everything was intimate and informal. I never felt distant from him — rather, it was the opposite. I spent most of my time simply astounded at the beauty of the mystery that attended him. . . . Twenty years have passed now since I first

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## The Golden String

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**Daniel Pittman**

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met him but far from the memories dimming and the relationship falling into the obscurity of "something past," I continue to be amazed in ever new and more far reaching ways. . . .

Something was deeply struck in me the first time I met Bede. It intensified and was confirmed in my time with him at the ashram and in many ways I have yet to "recover" it — to integrate it into my life and person. In truth I feel I have done so very poorly but then perhaps I may be forgiven because of the magnitude of the force that struck me. I do not at all mean to imply that it was a violence or something negative — but some force of Spirit waved over me and I have not yet begun to integrate it. There is a line from a Sufi or Hindu poet that says: "Thy lovers well may pardoned be, for never was a love like thee." So I try to forgive myself for not having done more with the gift the Lord gave me then.

Recently I came across a story by Andrew Harvey recounting an encounter with Bede at the Ashram during his daily walks. Andrew greeted him and asked what he thought about as he walked. Bede answered that he didn't think, but tried to be open to the Divine Presence about him. Then he confessed that sometimes when he was very quiet and very open he could see that the trees were angels. That is the world Bede lived in. When I read this I remembered my encounter, shortly after Bede's passing, with the strong welcoming presence in the trees in Big Sur and how later I recognized it so strongly as an encounter with Bede and an assurance of his continued love and presence. He stands amidst and as one of those eternal Trees in the Forest of God now - in the company of the angels. ☼

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### **Eleanor Forfang-Brockman: Some Recollections of Bede Griffiths**

It is an honor to have been invited to share a few brief memories of Dom Bede Griffiths. I first encountered Fr. Bede through his book *Return to the Center* during a life-changing spiritual crisis in December 1980. I had the profound sense of being called home, and that the long and painful process of my conversion had been supported by his prayer and that of many like him. I resolved to go to Shantivanam. We corresponded, and four years later I arrived there for a seven-month stay in India.

My first actual meeting with Fr. Bede occurred the preceding autumn at a conference in Kansas City where he was speaking. When I told him about being in Oxford, he nodded, wrinkling his forehead sympathetically as his bright eyes peered at me from beneath the bushy white brows: "Oh, yes. Wasn't it just awful?" Of course, as I was to learn from *The Golden String*, Oxford had been awful for him; but to me it had been a shining city where I found God. And the weathered stones, the crooked lanes, the ripples of the Cherwell, the fog hanging over the park—these had been all the more alive with the Divine for me *because* Fr. Bede

had walked there before me, wrestling deep in his own spirit.

An image from Shantivanam in April conveys the effect of Fr. Bede's presence. The heat had become tremendous, and the Kavery was swelling with water when I received *brahmacharya diksha* during Holy Week. Immediately following Easter Sunday there was a mass exodus of ashramites. Soon after, Fr. Bede was bound for a conference in Jerusalem. Carrying his few belongings in a small cloth bag slung over his shoulder, he approached the waiting taxi. As he folded himself up into the small vehicle, the dairy cows in the adjacent barn began to low, and they continued their moaning for days. ☼

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### **Philena Bruce: Memories of Shantivanam**

When I first went to Shantivanam in the late summer of 1980, Father Bede and I were the only English people there. Everyone was into prayer and meditation and silence and I was very lonely. My health wasn't particularly good at the time and I decided to wait for it to improve slightly and then to leave. I was in India at the time on what turned out to be a two-year stint. I had heard about Shantivanam from a hippy program on India, on British TV, and was so happy to be able to go there, but then I found myself bored to tears with no-one to talk to. After two weeks of excruciating boredom an American girl turned up and we clicked. We talked non-stop around the clock for a week, after which she left. Then other people who were willing to talk turned up and I got to know Father Bede a bit better and suddenly I realized that I was very happy at Shantivanam. Thus started my great love for the place and for Bede. . . .

I got to know Christudas very well over my various long stays at Shantivanam. He ran the Ashram in those days and looked after Father Bede. Christudas was a very loving person with a great sense of humor, and he and Father Bede had a great love for each other. In Father Bede's eyes Christudas could do no wrong.

One day when I returned to the Ashram after six months away, I couldn't find the Ashram cat. I asked Christudas and he told me this long yarn about how cooked cat was good for paralysis and how one of the Ashram workers who had a paralysed arm had eaten the cat for his health. Of course, I knew that Christudas was pulling my leg. Later that day when I saw Father Bede, I said to him "You know that Christudas is a great liar." Before I got any further Father started to lecture me on the goodness of Christudas, and this went on for at least 10 minutes. Finally when I could get a word in, I said "So it's true then that one of the workers ate the cat." Father Bede's eyes twinkled and a smile slowly spread across his face and he giggled like a child. . . .

For me Shantivanam was a place of perfect peace. I learned to want for nothing when I was there. I found that the desire to accumulate stuff and buy pleasure comes when one is not happy in oneself, not at peace with oneself. I got

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## *The Golden String*

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**Philena Bruce**

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to the stage when I would want nothing. I remember my Mother sent me £100 one year for my birthday and I wondered what I was going to do with it as there was nothing that I wanted.

I never was one to go for silence, but then most of my childhood had been lived in silence, so I then did and still do require companionship, Shantivanam provided that. The diet was very basic; too basic, I thought, I remember often walking two miles in the baking sun to Kulithalai for the sake of a fried egg. One way or another I got myself fed adequately, I had lots of interesting people to talk to, a river to swim in and wonderful weather to live in. When in the presence of Father Bede I felt loved. I was emotionally exhausted when I first met Father Bede . . . Love heals all and Father Bede loved me, Christudas loved me and so did many nuns and novices. Their combined love gave me the strength to go back to England for good after about six years of globe-trotting and to sort myself out. . . . ☼

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## **The Golden String**

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