



The Bede Griffiths Sangha Newsletter

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June 2002

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

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Editorial

So many Sangha members talk about their need for a local community of like minded 'seekers', making contact with people to find mutual support and encouragement in their spiritual journey. As Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us, the Buddha put great emphasis on the Sangha as being the community in which people can find support, and give support to others, in their practice.

The Guiding Council had a meeting before the Park Place seminar in May and there was a feeling that more could be done to support the development of local groups.

How can this be done? One way of looking at this is to ask what do individuals need to build up their own local community of support. The answers will be different as are people's needs. Some have meditation groups, such as John Main meditation groups, and we know of one member who invites people

to a showing of the video on Fr Bede's life, followed by discussion and sharing..

Many people are now building their own networks through arranging seminars and retreats with Brother Martin when he is in the country; it may be that groups will grow out of this.

I am sure the Sangha could do more to meet the needs of people where they live. We could make videos and tapes available and perhaps there are other ways we could offer support to those of you who would like to make contact with people you don't yet know.

What would you like? Please make contact with Jill and I or with your regional representative and let's see what can be done.

Namaste

Adrian

Supporting social work projects in India

Brother Martin's article in this edition is about our participation in the ongoing act of creation through the eucharistic transformation of our lives, through which each one of us can become 'food' for other people.

In a very practical way we can make this happen through our support for the social work projects that Martin was telling us about during his visit to the UK and Ireland.

So many of you were very generous in your financial contributions and in buying (and selling) the greeting cards to support the work of the Swami Bede Dayananda Trust, the project directed by Sr Rose Matthews in the village

near the ashram. The project provides a kindergarten, a computer school, a tailoring school and a typing school, all of which support training and employment in the village.

Also you gave generously to the ashram project which involves purchasing a van so that materials can be brought from the nearby town of Karur so that local people can manufacture garments and other goods for sale in Karur. Without the van and the support of the ashram these people would not have the chance of employment and of earning an income for their families.

So a deep bow and a big thank you to you all.

The One Mystery Bede Griffiths

This article by Father Bede was written in 1974 and first published in The Tablet. His insights, prescient then, have an urgency today in our world of global conflict which often has religion at its core.

Dialogue with Hindus is something which has grown up only very recently in India. It began, apart from pioneer efforts by some individuals, scarcely ten years ago with some meetings of a group of Christians—Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant—under the direction of the then Swiss ambassador to India Dr Cuttat. This group met in a spirit of prayer to prepare themselves for dialogue by meditating together on passages of the Bible and the Upanishads, which for many are a revelation of the depths of wisdom and experience of God. The aim of this group was always to seek to meet the Hindu in the depth of his mystical experience and to see how a Christian can come to share in this experience. The result of these meetings was a conviction that in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita there is an experience of God of a depth and significance that can only be compared with that of the contemporary Hebrew prophets.

Perhaps the two greatest pioneers in dialogue with Hindus were Fr Monchanin and Fr le Saux, two French priests who founded the ashram of Shantivanam in 1950 in South India on the banks of the Cavery River. Fr Monchanin, who took the name of Swami Paramarubi Anandam, the Bliss of the Supreme Spirit, was both a scholar and a very holy man, who conceived his vision of a meeting with Hindus on the level of contemplative experience in the 1930's, when even the ecumenical movement among Christians was only just beginning. Unhappily he died in 1957, yet he left behind a legacy, not only in the ashram which he founded, but also in the principles which guided him in the dialogue with Hindus, which are of permanent value. Fr. le Saux, who took the name Swami Abhishiktananda, the

Bliss of Christ, continued his work at Shantivanam but finally retired to a hermitage in the Himalayas, where he wrote several books of extraordinary insight and, through his own experience of God, he gave an inspiration to the whole Church in India.

Fr le Saux himself died only two months ago, but his work is being continued at Shantivanam, and last month a Hindu Christian dialogue meeting was held there, which may be considered as the fulfilment of much which both he and Fr Monchanin had sought. The meeting was organised by the Commission for Dialogue in India, and was attended not only by two bishops on the Dialogue Commission, but also by Mgr Rossano from the Secretariat for non-Christians in Rome, who gave a key-note address of outstanding importance, setting out the principles of dialogue which are now accepted officially by the Church. There were over 50 people, Catholic and Protestant, Christian and Hindu, present each day for three days. There was throughout an atmosphere of extreme openness and friendliness, which, when one considers the atmosphere of fear and suspicion which prevailed until recently on both sides, and which still prevails in many, was itself an achievement.

But the discussions themselves were of great interest. The tone of the meeting was deliberately made personal and existential. Each one was asked to answer the question, 'what does my religion mean to me and how do I relate to the partner in the dialogue?' This meant that it was not an academic discussion of religious differences which leads nowhere, but a sharing of religious experience, which leads to a real communion in the experience of God. This became very clear in the prayer services that were held in common in the chapel, which is built in the style of a Hindu temple. The Hindus felt perfectly at home and the service was composed of readings, prayers and chants from both Hindu and Christian sources. It is a deeply moving experience to listen to Hindu prayers and songs expressing sorrow for sin and longing for grace, the call for self-surrender and the bliss of union with God. At this level Hindu and Christian meet in a shared experience of communion with one another and with God.

The basic principle of this meeting, said Mgr Rossano,

was one of mutual enrichment by sharing experience. In every religious tradition not only Hindu and Christian, but Buddhist and Muslim, African and American Indian, there is an immeasurable depth of religious experience, each people experiencing the divine mystery through its own language and symbols and patterns of thoughts. In the dialogue it is understood that each one remains true to his own tradition of life and thought, but seeks to open himself to the experience of the reality of God in a different mode of thought and expression. The comparison was made of the white light which is broken up into different colours—red, blue green, yellow, all of which appear different and even opposed, but which when traced back to their source are found to be one.

The origin and goal of all religion is the same, the one inexpressible Mystery, in which the ultimate meaning of human existence is to be found. This was expressed in the declaration of a group of theologians from east and west at a seminar on evangelisation, which was recently held at Nagpur in north India. ‘An ineffable mystery’, they declared, ‘the centre and ground of reality and human life, is in different forms and manners active among all peoples of the world and gives ultimate meaning to human existence and aspirations. This mystery which is called by different names but which no name can adequately represent is definitively disclosed and communicated in Jesus of Nazareth.’

This, of course, expresses the Christian point of view. For a Christian the disclosure of the mystery is to be found in Christ, for a Buddhist in the Buddha, for a Hindu in the Vedas, for a Muslim in the Koran. Each has his own unique insight into the mystery, and we have to learn to share these insights with one another. To relate these insights to one another, to see the relationship of each to the whole, is the function of theology today. In this task the Christian theologian cannot work apart from the Hindu, the Buddhist and the Muslim, who are all engaged in the same work, just as the Catholic theologian cannot work apart from the Protestant. In this process we have to make sure that nothing of the essential truth of each religious tradition is lost. We are not seeking a syncretism in which each religion will lose its own individuality, but an

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Love has no Boundaries

Win Browne

Win Browne is a Sangha member who lives in Surrey.

‘Love has no boundaries’, this is what filled my mind when I was wondering what to write. This is how I perceive Fr Bede, who reflected through his life and work, the life and work of Jesus, which for me is about going beyond all boundaries.

I am new to the Sangha, only meeting others for the first time at the Sangha Retreat in May 2002 and again at the Shalford retreat day in July.

There are two parts, I think, to this whole experience. The first was Brother Martin. In his talks I felt I was being invited to think in ways that gently stretched my mind. Indeed, the boundaries, such as they were, of my thinking, were being pushed. For me it was like being offered fresh water or a good nimbu-pani, sharp and refreshing. The other part of the experience was meeting other Sangha members – men and women who, like me, were ‘unfolding’ out of their usual tightness and connecting to each other. The feeling of being included was a very special and unique one. It felt genuine and unforced. I only had to be me.

For me, my Sangha experience this year, continues to be about being invited to go beyond the comforts and confines of myself – to reach out, to risk, to expand and grow. It is also about finding friends in faith and I say this carefully, a faith of love.

Fr Bede’s love of Christ, Brother Martin’s teachings about love and my experience of the Sangha, lead me on. I leap forward and thank everyone on the way. Shanti Shanti.

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Letters to a Friend Winifred Dearden

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

I had written to Father Bede telling him of my difficulties in trying to practice detachment and at the same time loving my neighbour. Below is his reply dated 2nd January 1990, and as always it is wise, explicit and full of loving understanding: I would like to share it with my friends of the Sangha.

“...as regards detachment from oneself and going out to one’s neighbour, they go together. In order to love others one must learn to be detached from oneself, from one’s ego, and that means freeing oneself from all bonds of attachment to people and things, then only is one free to love. The Bhagavad Gita centres around this theme: do your work but do it with complete detachment, surrendering all to God. Kabir also speaks constantly of ‘love and detachment’.

This also is the way to love God. As detachment to oneself, to people and things decreases, love for the Infinite, the Eternal grows. This love is rooted in our nature: when we let go of everything else, it rises spontaneously in us. It is there all the time but gets diverted into egotistical desire. St Augustine put it well: ‘Thou had made us for Thyself and our heart is restless until it rests in Thee’.

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organic growth in which each religion has to purify itself and discover its own inmost depth and significance and then relate itself to the inner depth of the other traditions. Perhaps it will never be finally achieved in this world, but it is the one way in which we can advance today towards that unity in truth, which is the ultimate goal of mankind.

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Truth is Two Eyed—A Study Tour of South India Kevin Tingay

A party of eleven people spent the Easter season in South India. The inside of the first week was spent in the city of Madurai, where we visited the magnificent Sri Meenakshi temple and other sites of interest. We also heard of the work among the Dalit communities by the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary.

On Easter Day we worshipped in St. Stephen's Church, Ootacamund, a Raj hill station in the Nilgiri Hills. I conveyed the news of the death of the Queen Mother, and condolences were offered to us most movingly by many Indian people. The second week was spent at St. Joseph's Benedictine Monastery, Makkiyad, in the Wayanad District of northern Kerala. The monks have an active pastoral and educational ministry and are committed to inter-faith understanding. They are a more traditional Benedictine community in comparison with Shantivanam and are part of the Sylvestrine Congregation of the Order. They have recently completed a large guest house and welcome pilgrims and visitors of all faiths. They arranged a programme of talks and visits for us. I can send further details of the guesthouse, called Shanthi Nikethan - Abode of Peace, to anyone who is interested, or you can e-mail them direct on snmakkiyad@yahoo.com

All the participants felt that the tour not only deepened their knowledge of society and religion in India, but also was significant for their own spiritual journeys.



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

The Eucharist and the purpose of life

John Martin Sahajananda

All spiritual teachers, scriptures and rituals reveal just two things, who God is and who human beings are; and what God does and what human beings have to do.

The Biblical tradition presents God as the creator, His or her nature is creative. In the Vedic tradition the name for the ultimate reality is *Brahman*. The word *Brahman* comes from the root *br* which means 'to swell', 'to grow' or 'to bubble'. The image is that of a spring which is bubbling with life. Brahman is life, and creativity and God is Creator and creativity. But what does it mean when we say that God creates? Why does he/she create? It is difficult to answer this question as giving a purpose or motive to God limits the fullness of God. One can only say just that it is the nature of Truth or God to create and we cannot impose any motive onto the creative activity of God.

Out of what does God create? Generally the prophetic traditions believe that God created this universe out of nothing, which is to say that God is the creator and we are the creatures of God and there is a gulf between God and creatures. To say that God creates out of nothing is of course a projection of the human mind and so should not be taken as an absolute explanation of God's creative action. We do not know how God creates, and to say that God 'creates out of nothing' is only to say that God's action is not like human actions. Human actions need an object as a potter needs clay to make a pot. To say that God 'creates out of nothing' reveals the limitation of the human mind in understanding the creative action of God, which clearly does not fit into our system of cause and effect. All we can say is that creating is the first miracle that God performed.

The Vedic tradition understands the creation as the sacrifice of God. *Brahman* becomes this universe. It is spirit becoming matter. God, the Spirit or Consciousness and creation, is energy and matter. But how

Spirit becomes matter is a mystery, a secret hidden in the heart of God. Perhaps we will be never able to understand this mystery even if God were to reveal it to us, for our minds are limited. The creative action of God is that in which Spirit becomes matter, the infinite becomes the finite, the unlimited becomes the limited, the One becomes many without losing its oneness.

How does the One become many without losing its Oneness? How does the spirit become matter and still remain spirit? It is a mystery that the Vedic tradition calls *yagna* or sacrifice. It is an act of love. When God performed this *yagna* creation came into being. This creation is not separate from God but can be described as the body of God, the finite expression of the infinite just as ice is the solid expression of the water. In this way the creative action of God can be described as the Eucharistic celebration of God in which the spirit becomes various manifestations including the material universe. This sacrifice is not a painful process. It does not involve suffering. It is a joyful manifestation of the fullness of Being. Creation does not add to the fullness of God nor does it take away from the fullness of God.

The Biblical tradition states that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. We can extend this to say that the whole of creation is the image and likeness of God but it is human beings that have the gift of becoming conscious of this image and likeness of God. Human beings are not masters of creation but only part of creation just as the head is not the master of the body but part of the body, albeit an important part for it has the capacity for self-conscious reflection. Thus creation can be described as the 'body and blood' of God, which is to say that it is the manifestation of God, the finite as an expression of the infinite.

Creating is an act of sacrifice. By creating, God, who is 'I am who (or what) I am' becomes less than himself or herself. God, who is the fullness of Being, becomes creator, sustainer and the culminator of creation. He/she

becomes a father and mother to creation; he/she becomes the saviour, the giver of grace and the protector of creatures. He/she establishes a relationship with creation as if he/she and creatures were two independent realities. This is the sacrifice and reveals the love and the humility of God.

The Biblical tradition says that God created human beings to be 'fruitful and multiply'. We can extend this to every creature and say that the nature of every creature is 'to be fruitful and multiply', that is, to be creative. But this creativity in human beings is not limited to physical multiplication through children, but includes creativity in the mental and spiritual levels.

All created beings, apart from human beings, live this creativity naturally and spontaneously, but human beings have the potential to forget their true nature and fall into barrenness and stagnation, just as the fig tree in the gospel that did not yield any fruit. But human beings also have the potential to remember their natural state, and the whole drama of the human spiritual journey is played between these two possibilities of forgetting and remembering. This fruitfulness and multiplication is also for sharing with others, for giving and receiving. In this sense it is also *yagna*, a sacrifice, and just as the nature of God is creative so also he/she created creatures, including human beings to be creative. To create is to sacrifice, to become less than oneself, to become 'food' for others.

The Vedic tradition goes further and says that human beings can enter into the heart of God and say, 'I and God are one'. This entry is not an individual entry but the entry of the whole of creation. When the consciousness of human beings enters into the divine consciousness the whole of creation enters into the heart of God. When a human being says, 'I and God are one', it is to say that the whole of creation is one with God and is the 'body and blood of God'. Just as from the scientific point of view matter is energy and energy is matter so also in the spiritual point of view consciousness is matter and matter is consciousness. To enter into this level of experience one has to do the *yagna* or sacrifice of the ego, which in its ignorance thinks that it is independent of God and so creates a wall of duality between God and

itself. By sacrificing this ignorance the wall is broken down and one's consciousness or awareness enters into the heart of God and realizes that 'I and Brahman are one' and sees the creation as the body and blood of God.

Jesus did not limit his experience of God to the possibilities presented in his spiritual tradition but he went beyond and realized that he and the Father (God) were one. To enter into this experience he had to sacrifice his ego, he had to do the *yagna*, which happened at the moment of his Baptism at the river Jordan. The heavens were opened, as the wall between him and God was broken down, and he entered into the realm of silence, originality and creativity and realized that he was the Son of God (universal consciousness united with the whole of humanity and of creation) and ultimately that he and God were one.

This experience can be illustrated with the image of a tree. A tree has leaves, small branches, big branches, the trunk and the roots. The leaves are our physical bodies, which come into being and fall away. The big branches are the great religions and the small branches are the differences within a big branch. The trunk is human nature in which the branches have their support. The roots are the divine, which is hidden, but which is the source and the life giving force of the tree. The Son of God or the Daughter of God is one whose consciousness has gone beyond identification with the leaves, with the small branches and even with the big branches and who identifies herself or himself with the stem. He or she is the whole of humanity and the whole of creation. In this sense God has only one son or one daughter. Finally the consciousness grows beyond the trunk and says, 'I and the roots are one or I and God are one'. So it is not the limited 'I' of a leaf, a small branch or a big branch and trunk that says 'I and God' are one but it is the divine 'I' which transcends all these identifications. Jesus realized that God was his roots, his father or mother.

God is life or creativity and he gives life or creativity to everyone. Jesus said, 'Just as the Father has life (creativity) in himself he has granted the Son to have life (creativity) in himself'. I have come to give life and

give it abundantly'. He entered into the roots, the source of life and creativity and invited everyone to grow or to enter into this source of life and creativity. The way he proposed was one way albeit described in different ways. He described the way as '*repentance*', '*rebirth*', '*becoming like a child*' and as '*interior death*'. These expressions are different ways of saying 'the way to enter the kingdom of God is the sacrifice, the *yagna*, of one's ignorant self, the ego, and the finding of one's true self. The Vedic tradition calls it a transition 'from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light and from death to eternal life'.

There is only one way to God, and that is to renounce or sacrifice one's ego, the ignorant self, and to find one's true self. Identifying oneself with the leaves, with the small branches and the big branches is to create the ego and to separate oneself from the trunk and the roots. The purpose of all spiritual teachers, all religions, all scriptures, all rituals, all spiritual techniques, all practices and all ways is to help human beings to renounce or sacrifice their ego, their ignorant self, and discover their true self. It is to help their awareness grow into the roots. To find one's own true self or God is the greatest *yagna* one can do, and one has to do it to open the door to the other *yagna* in which one becomes less than oneself and becomes a sacrifice for others. In this other *yagna* each person becomes food for others.

To live is to relate and it is in relationship we know who we are. It is in relationship that we give and receive. We receive food, not necessarily material food, from others and we give food to others. If we give and receive without the sacrifice of the ego then our giving and receiving becomes profane and others become mere objects of our enjoyment and enrichment. But if we sacrifice our ignorant self then human relationships become sacred and become manifestations of the divine. All human actions become sacred. Sex becomes sacred for sexual relationships are the expressions of this sacrifice. Making love becomes the most intimate way of celebrating the Eucharist.

When Moses asked God his name, first God replied, 'I am who I am', the eternal and the transcendent aspect of God. But Moses could not relate with that eternal aspect of God who then revealed his historical aspect, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob'. To call himself the 'God of Abraham' was a sacrifice on the part of God for in doing this he/she became less than himself/herself.

In the same way there are these two aspects in every human being. In the deepest self we are all 'I am', like God, but to relate to others we take upon ourselves attributes which limit our infinite selves. We take upon ourselves the attributes of a woman or a man, father or mother, husband or wife, brothers or sisters, children and parents, doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers, lawyers, workers, etc. These are all attributes we take upon ourselves so we can serve others. To take these attributes is a sacrifice. They are all the doors through which the ocean of our being unfolds itself. It is a Eucharistic celebration. But if we *identify* with our attributes then we fall into ignorance, as would a house that identifies itself with the door.

We are not called to do extraordinary things. What we need to do is transform our daily work into sacrifice or worship, and to make it into a eucharistic celebration. If the motive of our work is only to earn money then it becomes profane. But if it is an offering or a sacrifice then the remuneration that we receive is also an offering. It is the body and blood that we give and the body and the blood that we receive. In this way our daily work and activities become a continuous eucharistic celebration. So there are two types of sacrifices or *yagnas*: one is sacrificing the lower self to discover the higher self and the second is becoming the lower to relate with others, to become food for others.

The Eucharistic celebration that Jesus performed reveals these two sacrifices. During his public ministry Jesus showed that the purpose of our life is to be fruitful and to multiply, not necessarily physically, but whatever is necessary for human need. He did not multiply in the sense of having children, but he

changed water into wine when there was no more wine, he multiplied fish and bread when people were hungry. So the purpose of our human existence is to be fruitful and multiply what is necessary for human need. To live is to relate, to give and to receive. We share what we have and receive what we need, and in this receiving and giving we celebrate the Eucharist. In fact it is God in us who gives and God in us who receives.

All great spiritual teachers, scriptures and rituals reveal who we are and what we have to do. The first Eucharist celebrated by Jesus reveals this truth. He is the Son of God, which means that he is the universal consciousness united with the whole of humanity and creation. He is the body and blood of God. It means also that every human being is ultimately the body and blood of God. Then we have to live in sharing with one another, becoming food for others. We have to become less than ourselves to become food for others. The bread and the wine become our body and blood which we give to others saying, 'this is my body and this is my blood, take this and eat'.

Loving, praying and living are one and the same; it is an eucharistic celebration. It is a state of our being in which we receive the transcendent spirit of God and transform it into our own flesh and blood by sacrificing the higher to become lower, the love of our neighbour, and give it to our neighbours as a gift of love and grace. It is like a transistor which receives the transcending electro-magnetic waves and transforms them into sound waves. Just as creating is the continuous eucharistic celebration of God in which the spirit becomes the universe, so also human beings, who have been given the gift of consciousness, are called to perform this eucharistic celebration in each moment of their lives. All other creatures do it unconsciously. God is the eternal priest and the creation is his sacrifice. Every human being is a priest in the image and likeness of God and his or her body, and the world, is the altar where he or she offers this sacrifice

or eucharistic celebration. Hence every human being is a priest, and priesthood is the natural state of every human being and all creatures. The official priesthood is meant to remind people continuously of their essential inner priesthood.

The ritual of the Eucharist that the priest celebrates in the Church is meant to reveal to people who they are and what they have to do. It reminds us of the two sacrifices we have to perform. It reveals that human beings are ultimately one with the divine. They are the body and blood of God and to realize this truth they have to sacrifice their ignorant self, in which the lower becomes the higher.

Symbolically, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ or God. It also reveals that the higher should become the lower. that God or Christ becomes the bread and the wine to become 'food' for others. The above becomes below and the below becomes above. So we are called to experience this inner transformation of discovering that we are ultimately one with the divine and we are called to become body and blood for others in our daily life in loving and sharing with the others.

If the ritual does not help us to have this inner transformation then it becomes a dead symbol without any power of transformation. Just as Jesus and his gospels reveal who God is and who human beings are and what God does and what human beings have to do, so also the ritual of the Eucharist reveals to us the same eternal Truth. God is eternal and creative. He does the great sacrifice of becoming this universe. His/her nature is to be fruitful and to multiply, which is his/her continuous eucharistic celebration. We, being the image and likeness of God, are created to be creative, to be fruitful and multiply, and celebrate continuously this eucharist each moment of our life.

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10 days in Shantivanam

Victoria Glazier

Many Sangha members enquire about the practicalities of travelling to India and visiting Shantivanam. Victoria and Timothy Glazier travelled extensively in India and this account of their visit to Shantivanam may give encouragement to others who would like to make the trip...

Our Indian adventures began in Chennai (Madras) where we stayed at the Madras Gymkhana Club for three days preparing ourselves for the next stage of our trip to Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam. From Madras we journeyed through the night on the Rockfort Express in a non-air conditioned carriage for six people, which proved better than expected, and we both slept well on the bunk beds with just a blanket.

My husband, Timothy and I retired from the rigours of the day job and decided to change our lifestyle by travelling 5,000 miles through India to go to the Maha Kumbha Mela at Allahabad. We both also wanted to visit the Ashram where Bede Griffiths had lived and taught and where he spent the last part of his life, so here we were in Trichy looking for the bus that would take us to Kulithalai at 6.30 one November morning. Some little boys helped us find the right bus, we had already begun to experience the openness, kindness and willingness to help of the Indian people, particularly the Tamils.

When we arrived at the Ashram at 7.00 in the morning, there was not a soul about except the dogs asleep in front of the refectory; the community were all in Church for morning prayers. We waited and just savoured the surroundings until Fr George greeted us warmly and took us to one of the smaller palm thatched huts, really meant for one person, with one concrete bed and an extra wooden bed. The thin mattresses proved quite acceptable, the beds had good mosquito nets, there was a table and a stool, and we began to unpack. We then joined the community for breakfast sitting on the floor and eat-

ing steamed rice cakes either with our fingers or with a spoon in silence. It was all very strangely exciting. Our hut was small but we had all we needed especially the mosquito nets, and we began to explore. At mid-morning 'chai' in the circular communal meeting place we met Brother Martin for the first time There were one or two guests as well as several older brothers and of course Fr Christodus who was eager to show us around. It was all so beautiful under the banana palms, the frangipanni trees and the coconut palms. As the day progressed it got hotter and we were grateful for the shade of the trees. We were surprised to find a good electricity supply, good drinking water and a good shower and toilet block.

The daily routine of meditation, followed by morning prayer, breakfast, chai break, Angelus, mid-day prayer, mid-day meal, rest, afternoon tea, Brother Martin's lecture, meditation, evening prayer and supper, soon became part of our life. We chatted with the other guests, mainly European or American, some who had been staying for a while and through them found that we could have a larger hut with our own toilet and shower. After checking with Fr George we were able to move in, it seemed quite luxurious and we felt very much part of the community.

We were intrigued with the intricately designed mandalas which appeared on the earth outside the church each day which were accepted as just part of the daily routine and part of the path to the church and walked over. Then one day Tim was up early enough to catch a glimpse of the illusive artist at work with her white or coloured powder creating such beauty in her simple dedication. These mandalas were commonplace outside the dwellings of the village people who decorated the path to their doors with these transient elaborate and intricate designs.

The services were a particular joy, eventually we were able to join in the chants and hymns. We felt privileged to take communion with the holy sacraments as well as consecrating the body with sandal paste as a symbol of divinity, the kumkum powder placed between the eye-brows as a symbol of the

'third eye' and the ashes known as vibhuti signifying that sins and impurities have been burnt away and the ashes represent the purified self. Arati is offered at each of the prayers before the Blessed Sacrament which consists in the waving of lights as a sign of honour of worship. The lights are waved before the Shrine to reveal the hidden God manifesting the hidden Christ and the light of Christ is then taken to our eyes by placing the hand over the flame which is passed round to all the congregation. At the offertory of the Mass an offering of the four elements, earth, water, fire, and air are made; every Hindu puja consists in the offering of the elements to God as a sign of the offering of the creation.

The daily services regulated the routine of the day. We noticed that some of the villagers joined us on Sundays and Sister Marie Louise usually attended morning services with one or two of her assistants. One special day we were invited to go and meet her in her Ashram across the road known as Ananda Ashram. We were most intrigued with Sister Marie Louise who Tim had spotted in the congregation and wondered just who she was. Her story is lovely; she is such a strong and loving character. Having been nursing in Europe she was introduced to Bede Griffiths through his books by more than one of her patients and she felt she had been drawn to meet him. Sr. Marie Louise came to Shantivanam (she nursed Fr Bede through the last months of his life) and she has created her own Ashram next door to Shantivanam in an almost self sustaining environment where she successfully grows crops such as coconuts and bananas and also fodder for her cows which produce milk and the dung is converted into fuel in a special plant. There was an impressive irrigation system throughout the grounds which was regulated by the power from the dung conversion plant.

Meanwhile back at Shantivanam Fr Christodus showed us Fr Bede's hut and described Fr Bede's last days. Were able to meditate there where it was free of mosquitoes - bliss.

We explored the grounds and found the herd of cows in the cow sheds where our milk came from, there were two or three lean but well fed cats and the two dogs we

had first come across on our very first morning. At one point I was followed by a flock of guinea fowl, which seemed to appear from nowhere. We watched the ladies thatching the palm leaves for the roofs of the huts and the traders who came to collect the coconuts which the men cut down and the women loaded onto the lorries by throwing them up with great strength.

A local travelling tailor came to offer his services and make us ashram suits in the most beautifully soft colourful cottons. Tim had a loose shirt and trousers made in the traditional raw calico and I had a skirt and shawl in emerald green, clothes we wore a lot in India. I felt it so necessary to wear Indian dress, mainly salwar kameez or Punjabi dress. The Western clothes I had with me seemed coarse and angular not elegant and beautiful like the Indian women in their colourful saris. I was greatly impressed by the way the Indian women were able to look well dressed, mainly in saris, of the most vivid and stunning colours and always clean and extremely presentable, even when doing the dirtiest of jobs such as mending the roads. Bede Griffiths describes this so adequately in *The Marriage of East and West*.

We walked by the river Cavery where the village boys were playing cricket, our presence caused a sensation and they all stopped to talk to us. They wanted to know our names and address in England and for us to take their photograph, we gave them pens and managed to get away. We walked on through the plantation of eucalyptus trees and then back down the lane where the goats were being driven towards the river. We began to feel that we were at last unwinding and taking on the relaxed Indian pace.

One day we walked across the road into the village and investigated the dirt roads between the houses and small businesses getting used to seeing the cows just wandering anywhere rummaging for food. We looked for a shop selling fruit. On another occasion we were invited to visit one of the schools run by an Anglican Nun who visited our Church. The children just loved having visitors and sang for us and showed us their work. Our ideas of India were forming daily with new dimensions emerging all the time. We shared a taxi with one of the older Fathers, Fr Augustine, and

(Continued from page 10)

went into Trichy to see some of the temples and to look at the markets and also to book our rail tickets to Bangalore for the following week. We climbed the 437 steps of the Rock Fort temple seeing the caves on the way up and the decorated but dark inner sanctuaries with many other pilgrims.

Each afternoon we had been attending Br Martin's talks, the highlight of the day, and were privileged to be able to listen to his pearls of wisdom in these memorable surroundings. We had not heard of Br Martin before we arrived at Shantivanam so were very pleasantly surprised to find this depth of teaching, his unquestionable faith and closeness to God. Each afternoon would start with a question - there is no teaching unless there is a question! He spoke to us on 'Evil', on 'Rituals' on 'Techniques'; 'Symbolism', gave us the 'Seven Levels of Consciousness', and of course 'Eternity' - "Peace will only be achieved when religions teach eternity and not continuity". The most profound message we felt was that religion is like a nest, a secure place to learn but as you grow you must move on and leave the nest and embrace all religions joining God at a Universal level. The Mother must release the child'.

Things are not quite so busy at Shantivanam as they were before Father Bede died in 1993; just a few visitors come and the Fathers concentrate more on the community and the teaching of the younger brothers. We heard that a new monastery was being built a few miles away for the young students to study and for the older Fathers to find more peace. We were not sure what would become of the Ashram. We felt fortunate that we had been able to experience the place and join in the same daily routine which Fr Bede had put in place.

This was the start of our spiritual journey through India, with the essence of Father Bede, this wonderful 'Prophet in our time', still remaining here on the banks of the Cavery River.

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Book Review

Daddy, do you believe in God? The story of how we lost our faith, and how we might find it again. John Hunt. (O Books 2001) ISBN 1 903816 07 6. Price £9.99.

This is a courageous book, putting into words what many people who are on the borderlands of belief have been thinking for many years. In a panoramic search for truth John Hunt looks for the defining words for God and finds them in himself and others. Surprised by his findings, he looks for the origins, proofs, comparisons and history of the Christian religion. The innumerable squabbling, massacres, power struggles, book-burnings, councils, reformations and divisions are all faithfully recorded. In a dramatic final section John Hunt looks at the possibilities for a new understanding within Christianity that is inclusive but requires many years of re-education.

Answering the question that is the sub-title of his book he asks: 'so how do I relate to the Church? For me, being a Christian means rejecting the capital "C" Church as it exists now. It means working backwards through the last two millennia, undoing the damage it has caused, the wrong myths it has created. The first hurdle to be jumped is the Reformation: the infallibility of scripture, the doctrine of justification by faith. The second is the "establishment" of the Church by Augustine, the sacraments and priesthood. The third is the cosmic theology of Paul. Along the way go the papacy, Capital Letter Doctrines, original sin, guilt, buildings and wealth. Indeed the whole religious sphere of life goes. In loving our neighbour we love ourselves. In loving the world we love God. The world *is* God. It's that simple.'

Brian Hawker.



Correction

In the last edition we said that Fr George, who is the Superior at Shantivanam, had moved to the new monastery opened as a novitiate near the ashram. In fact he is still at Shantivanam and it is Fr Paul, who many will have met as the guest master, has moved to the new monastery with the younger monks

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

Sangha Events

A big thank you to all who helped make Brother Martin's trip such a success, and a particular thank you to the hosts and hostesses who took their courage in their arms and plunged into arranging seminars and retreats with Martin.

Sangha Advent Retreat, St Peters Grange, Prinknash Abbey November 29th—December 1st 2002. No retreat leader has come forward yet so in the meantime contact Jill and Adrian on 01227 752871. Registration form with the next newsletter.

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

The Rowan Tree Centre at the Skreen, Builth Wells, which has been home to our small retreats since the Sangha started is shortly to close as its founder, Mary Lewis, takes on new opportunities in her life. If anyone knows of a good alternative venue for our 'desert' retreats please let us know.



In the light

We are very sad to hear of the death of Jeanette Seager. Also please put in the light Sangha members Winifred Dearden, Noreen Read, Anne Dew, and Yvonne Dinwiddy, and Wayne Teasdale. We are pleased to let you know of the marriage of Isobel Brunner

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