

Four Days in Saccidananda

The Christian Ashram of Fr. Bede Griffiths (1906-1993)



by Br. Harold Thibodeau, the Abbey of Gethsemani

This account of a visit to the ashram of Fr. Bede Griffiths was written by Br. Harold, one of our MID advisors, some months after his return from a trip to India about nine years ago. In light of Fr. Bede's continuing influence, we present it here in slightly revised form.

In Tamil Nadu, on the banks of the River Kaveri, in the "Forest of Peace" (Shantivanam) near the Hindu village of Kulittalai, lived a wise old Sannyasi in the District of Tannirappali—Fr. Bede Griffiths. For twenty-four years his abode was a hut under the palm trees in the ashram called Saccidananda, where he was teacher (guru). He arrived in India in 1955 and by 1958 had decided to become a Christian *sannyasi* in Kurisumala, Kerala, to help found a contemplative community with Fr. Francis Mahieu (Acharya). Together they sought for ways to incorporate the values of Indian *sannyasa* into Christian monasticism.

After ten years of formation at Kurisumala Ashram, in 1968 Bede moved to Saccidananda Ashram in Tamil Nadu, where he became in effect its third founder. The ashram was sponsored by the Kurisumala community. Under Bede's direction it began to flourish and soon became a place of pilgrimage for men and women from all parts of the world. Bede's main ambition was to "inculturate" the Church, so that it would fit into the Indian scene and not appear as a purely Western, that is, foreign religion. He was able to make a start in overcoming the impression that Christianity had no place in India, in spite of the fact that it had been there since the earliest times. In 1992 Bede wrote in a letter to Beatrice Bruteau that "It is only the contemplative life which can give the world the new direction which it needs." He warned also that our very survival depends on our ability to recover spiritual visions (from *The Roll*, September 1993).

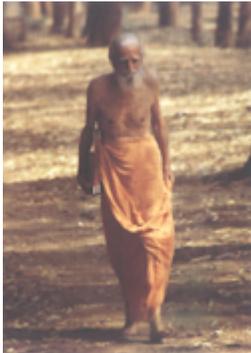
The life of the Spirit was an insatiable hunger for Bede and it pervaded his "life-long quest, life-long yearning, and life-long slogan: Monk, Priest, Sage, Prophet, all was in one and one was in all." When asked what influence shaped Fr. Bede, the monks of Shantivanam always gave the same response: "He was molded by the Spirit; he believed and lived up to the end of the precious struggle" (official letter from Saccidananda Ashram, June 1993).

Sr. Pascaline Coff recalls some memorable comments of Fr. Bede that show his positive trust and hope for a better future for the world. The last book that Bede wrote was published under the title *Universal Wisdom*, a selection of texts from the world's religions. In this book Bede asserts that one of the urgent needs of human life today is "to transcend the cultural limitations of the great religions and find wisdom, a philosophy which can reconcile their differences and reveal the unity which underlies their diversity." Then, in London, on January 14, 1992, Cardinal Basil Hume presented Fr. Bede, in absentia, an award from the British journal *The Tablet*.

Having suffered a second stroke, Fr. Bede had to dictate his acceptance speech, which both began and ended with the words: "We are entering a new age.... In a very wonderful way we are at the birth of a new age and a new consciousness" (*The Roll*, September 1993).

Known also as Swami Dayananda ("Joy of Compassion"), Fr. Bede acknowledged that the last third of his life was the best. They were the years of maturation, integration, and transcendence. Like the 14th-century mystic Jan van Ruysbroeck, he extended his compassion to all "without distinction" (*Spiritual Espousals*). The gift of wholeness and holiness in a man like Fr. Bede imbues the whole world with the fragrance of gentleness. His petals of wisdom enlightened the seekers who sought inspiration from him. He led them to discover the beauty of truth and the radiance of reality, not without but with-in.

In late October of 1992 I made a friendly visit and pilgrimage to see Fr. Bede and the famous ashram in South India. Previously, I had visited some other ashrams, including Kurisumala in Kerala. Also in that area is the Ananda Matha Ashram, which was in the process of becoming the first Cistercian foundation in India. Two Belgian nuns from Soleimont Abbey were directing the new building's construction. My main purpose in India, however, was to be a participant in the work of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, a group from North America. From early September to mid-October, 1992, we visited some twenty-four Tibetan monasteries. Their warm hospitality and dialogue will long be remembered as a joyous and successful event.



It is quite possible that I may have been the last Cistercian to see Fr. Bede before his death and "journey to the Farther Shore" in May of 1993. In any case, I now wish to share with you how I experienced the four wonderful days lived in Shantivanam, as this ashram is popularly called. From Tiruchi airport I arrived by taxi at Shantivanam on the morning of October 20<but not without paying the taxi driver a rather exorbitant sum of rupees for such a short distance!

The guestmaster assigned me to cabin number eight, which was not far from Fr. Bede's hut. There was a thatched roof, which was common to all the cabins, and like all of Gaul, the cabin was divided into three parts. The porch had a comfortable wicker chair that faced the Kaveri River, but the stream was not visible from the porch because of the tall trees in between. However, I sensed its presence. Many hours were spent in that wicker chair reading, meditating, listening to the melodious tropical birds and watching the wandering cows and goats grazing nearby. The one door opened onto a second small room, which contained a narrow bed with mosquito netting, a tiny table in one corner and a small cabinet attached to the wall at the foot of the bed. The third area was a large bathroom with a toilet at one end that did not flush. One had to use the well-pump inside to fill a bucket of water and thus flush the toilet. It took only one demonstration for me to master this technology. To shower, another bucket had to be filled with cold water and poured over one's head or shoulders. It was an experience that I never quite got used to, though I admired its simplicity and efficiency. In another corner was a small sink with a cold tap for hand washing and shaving, though there was no mirror to guide the razor's edge.

Having got adjusted to a new situation and schedule, I had time to walk over to Fr. Bede's cabin. He was calmly sitting at his window, reading the day's mail. I explained my presence and extended many greetings from persons who had asked to be remembered to him. Fr. Ignatius Hirudayam in Madras had asked me to deliver two volumes in Tamil for Fr. Bede's library.

At one point in our conversation I mentioned a recent article in *Tricycle: A Buddhist Review*, written by Harold Talbot. It described Thomas Merton's interest in the Tibetan teachings about Dzog Chen. When Merton first met with the Dalai Lama in 1968, this was one of the first things he inquired about. He strongly felt that these teachings would be useful for Christians to know about. Then Fr. Bede told me he had just recently heard about *Dzog Chen* ("The Great Perfection") in Australia, where he had met the Dalai Lama the previous year. Having heard the Dalai Lama's explanation, Fr. Bede was much impressed. He said to me: "You know, to me *Dzog Chen* is nothing but pure contemplation!" He thus confirmed my own intuition, based on what little I had learned at a Bon monastery in North India only a month before. It appears to be the highest Tantric teaching among Tibetan Buddhists. Essentially, it concerns the transcendental state of True Mind, beyond all conceptualizations. This simple explanation summarizes what I read in a book in the library of the Bon Monastery, but it does not exhaust the depths, meaning or practice of this rich and profound teaching.

The ashram had tea-breaks at 10:00 a.m. and again in the afternoon at 3:00 p.m. This communal meeting for conversation took place in a large round concrete building with wide open spaces. Pillars supported the roof, which provided welcome shade. It was here that I met Sister Sarananda, a French Benedictine nun who had lived there for fifteen or more years. Like the other *sannyasis*, she wore the orange *kavi*, made of two lengths of cotton cloth. As we drank the tea, she engaged me in a friendly exchange on various topics. She has great interest in interreligious dialogue and has participated in various dialogues in India and perhaps elsewhere.



One day a young Frenchman arrived at the ashram. He told me some details about his leaving the Catholic Church when he was eighteen to become a Buddhist. Someone had tried to convince him that non-Catholics were pagans who would all certainly end up in hell. His heart was unconvinced. Somehow he was led by the Spirit to come to the "Forest of Peace" and within a few days he seemed to rediscover his Christian roots through participating in the Indian style Eucharist. As he left the ashram, his face and eyes were full of joy and light. Fr. Bede told me that numerous former Christians come here from all over the world only to rediscover their forgotten beliefs anew or for the first time. The

Holy Spirit works marvels at this ashram, through the tongues of many who journey there.

I will now describe a typical day at Saccidananda Ashram. The ashramites rise at 5:00 a.m. as the Angelus prayer announces the call to "wake up," signaled by the bell that also rings for midday and evening prayer. Morning meditation begins at 5:20 at sunrise. The evening meditation is from 6:00 p.m. to 7:00, at sunset.

Morning Prayer and Eucharist:

The early morning prayer begins at 6:30 a.m. As the songs and psalms are prayed, a sandalwood paste is passed around to everyone. Each person dips a finger into the container and places it on the forehead or hands as a sign of purification and consecration of the whole body to God. It is seen as a symbol of divinity or divine grace. The Eucharistic celebration follows directly, in an informal setting with dignity and beauty. The Roman rite is followed with the addition of meaningful elements native to India. At the *Arati* ritual (called the waving of the lights), a flame is lit in a bowl before the dark place where the Blessed Sacrament resides. Then the flame is carried around to everyone present. Those present extend their hands briefly over the flame and then touch their eyes (or forehead). For me this symbolized receiving the Light of Christ who enlightens everyone. The ashram explains it in this manner: "At each of the three communal prayer services, the *arati* is offered at the beginning of the service. It consists in the waving of light or incense, as a sign of honor or worship performed before any sacred thing or person. The root meaning of *arati* before the central shrine of a temple (which is always kept dark) signifies the dwelling of God in the cave of the heart. When lights are waved before it, it reveals, as it were, the hidden God. The waving of lights before the Blessed Sacrament and the whole congregation manifests, as it were, the hidden Christ." Other features of the three communal prayer services are the readings from the Veda, the Upanishads, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. There may also be readings from the Tamil classics and other Scriptures, together with psalms and readings from the Bible.

Breakfast:

About 7:30 a.m. breakfast is ready. Everyone meets outside the hall where Fr. Bede greets us with clasped hands and a bow. We respond in the same manner and proceed to enter, having first removed our shoes or sandals. At all meals, we sit on floor mats and eat our portions of food without the use of utensils. This is in keeping with the poor families of the area. When finished each one takes the metal plate and cup outside and around the back to wash, rinse, and place them on a wooden rack to dry. As you pass the cow barn on the way to the dish washing, anything uneaten on one's plate is put in the manger for the cows to eat. They even eat banana peels!



Midday Prayer:

During midday prayer, purple (or red) powder (kumkumum) is used. A tiny brass chalice-like container with the powder is passed around to the gathered community. Each one dips the index finger in it and places the powder on the forehead or hands. This symbolizes the "third eye," the eye of wisdom. The two eyes with which we see physical objects are the eyes of duality. They see the outer world and the outer self. The "third eye is the inner eye which sees the inner light." As the Gospel urges us, "If thine eye be single, the whole body shall be full of light." This third eye was often marked on Greek icons of Christ and thus seems to be a universal symbol. Wisdom becomes a theme that permeates the midday prayer. The ashram considers the red color of the "third eye" to be a symbol of feminine wisdom. The readings are from Psalm 118, the Wisdom Psalm, and from one of the books of Wisdom in the Bible.

Fr. Bede's Four-o'clock Talks:

Not long after the afternoon tea-break, Fr. Bede gives scheduled talks at four o'clock.

However, in October of 1992 he was able to give only one or two talks a week. The one I heard on that warm autumn day was about "the need to recognize the importance of interreligious dialogue in order to understand better the beliefs of other traditions without pre-judging them as invalid or useless, as we've done in the past." He further explained, "The Spirit of God was with everyone from the beginning and was never separated from God. God reveals himself to man through man's psyche or soul, in a way he is able to receive it. This is not therefore a direct revelation of God himself, who is without form and beyond all concepts. From the beginnings of civilization to the present time God has been communicating his presence in many ways according to the various cultures. Each culture has its own way of expressing its worship of the Great Spirit who pervades the entire Universe. Similarly, each culture gives different names to this Spirit, but the Great Spirit, the Absolute, is beyond names and concepts."

The whole talk lasted an hour or more as Fr. Bede, with his soft voice and fantastic memory, went on to summarize the history of the earliest civilizations to the present ones, with their various traditions and beliefs—"and the Great Spirit was with them all." At the end of his talk, Fr. Bede recommended Mircea Eliade's book *Patterns of Comparative Religions*, which was later expanded into three volumes, each with a different title. He also highly praised the work of a woman who had, in his opinion, written the best explanation of the Vedic tradition. Her name is Jeannie Miller and her book is entitled *The Vision of the Cosmic Order in the Vedas* (London: Routledge-Kegan Paul, 1985).

Evening Prayer and Supper:

Evening prayer begins at 7:00 p.m. One of the rituals used here involves ashes. This is not merely a carry over of the Ash Wednesday rite. Rather it has a deeper meaning: "Ash is matter from which the impurities have been burnt away. Placing the ashes on the forehead signifies that our sins and impurities have burnt away. The ashes represent the purified self" (from Ashram Booklet). The arati (waving of lights) is also offered here, just as at the Eucharist and the Midday Prayer. The Psalms, readings and songs are likewise part of the evening prayer.

Supper is eaten around 7:30 p.m. Since I had only four days at the ashram, I decided to skip supper in order to have more time for reflection and some reading in a quiet atmosphere. The book I was reading for relaxation could not be called "spiritual reading," but then it was not intended to be. I bought it at the airport to read while waiting to board various flights. It was a thick book by Danielle Steele entitled *No Other Love*—a title worthy of any Cistercian or devotee of St. Bernard, I thought. It brought to mind the very first Cistercian book I had read thirty years earlier, *This Tremendous Lover*, by Fr. Eugene Boylan, OCSO. That book had sweetly seduced and allured me into the desert of the "precious struggle" which is the monastic way of seeking God. It was there in the desert of my heart that I learned, timorously, to surrender all "for the sake of the Kingdom." It is the mystery of Absolute, Unconditional Love. However, in the first few pages of *No Other Love* I discovered that the story was about the sinking of the *Titanic*. The plot was concerned with a certain family and the unexpected relationships that resulted from that tragedy. Now, on my last night at the cabin, this memorable story came to an end.

The next day, when preparing to leave the ashram, I decided not to pack that thick novel in my luggage. I gave it to one of the *sannyasis* who was near the office of the

ashram. Somewhat embarrassed, I explained the book was too bulky to carry and suggested that someone at the ashram might like to read it—who, I wondered. Fr. Bede? Not likely. The *sannyasi* looked at me with a puzzled stare. “You can keep it,” I said, “or just burn it.” My taxi had by then arrived at the ashram, so I bowed with clasped hands in a gesture of farewell, realizing that this little episode was an enigma to him—and even to myself.

<http://www.monasticdialog.com/bulletins/67/saccidananda.htm>