

# Yoga or Bhoga:

## Absorption in the Spirit or Absorption in the Senses

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**Abstract:** This continues from the work in progress *Dom Bede Griffiths' Images of God*, from a paper presented at the Association of Practical Theology in Oceania (APTO) conference held in Suva, November, 2009. Griffiths' concern for a solution to present crises, through his dialogue with Hindu spirituality leads to the idea of the relevance for today of integration of the active and contemplative ways of life. It is not a matter of dividing sense and spiritual satisfaction or fulfilment, but of seeking a balance which acknowledges and expresses the centrality of Christ. Meditation brings detachment that frees the soul to celebrate and relish all God's gifts. Bede emphasises the call of all humanity to contemplative experience and that such experience be authentically grounded in the body and in the earth...that according to right order, all may be permeated with the consciousness of the Spirit.

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### Introduction

The Hindu tradition has three rhyming related words. *Yoga* or 'uniting' shares the same root as the English 'yoking' and signifies personal integration within the universe. Conversely *Bhoga* which is centring on material goods does not contribute to spiritual transformation and can lead to *Roga*, physical and mental illness that comes from material over-indulgence.<sup>1</sup>

The four main types of yoga encompass the different ways to God: the classical *raja yoga*, *karma yoga* – action, *bhakti yoga* – devotion, and *jnana yoga* –

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<sup>1</sup> Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 179. Jesu Rajan, *Bede Griffiths and Sannyasa*, 1989. 'Trilogy of Bhoga, Roga and Yoga', *Hindustan Times*, [http://www.adishakti.org/\\_trilogy\\_of\\_bhoga\\_roga\\_and\\_yoga.htm](http://www.adishakti.org/_trilogy_of_bhoga_roga_and_yoga.htm) (accessed, 10th February, 2009).

wisdom. Generally yoga assumes the practice of asceticism as a prerequisite for meditation/contemplation. The Hindu path of holiness, therefore has stages of life that correspond with the various yogic stages. Initiation into the permanent state of *sannyasa*, (a life abandoned to the search for God) classically took place later in life following the earlier stages of celibate youth, and married householder.

Griffiths shows how 'divine Lord' in the Hindu and Christian traditions relates to contemplation in action. In what amounts to a reflection of 'the true sannyasi'<sup>2</sup> people's everyday lives can be transparent witness to the Holy Spirit. The concluding contemporary illustration given from Australia has a parabolic significance in terms of what we have elsewhere named as Griffiths' 'hermeneutic of encounter'.

### **Griffiths' Hermeneutic of Encounter**

We have already found his images of God couched in the overall image of journey. As well the late Judson Trapnell has articulated Griffiths' developing theology of complementarity.<sup>3</sup> We find this whole movement grounded in a hermeneutic of encounter which is discernible in potential in Griffiths' particular intellectual mien even as a youth when his exploration of life is strongly dictated by his literary interests. For example, at this time he is devoted to the novels of Thomas Hardy who finds depth of humanity in exploring people's suffering through poverty and deprivation. Later the Romantics provide the setting for the pure idea which comes through contemplation of beauty and its working on the imagination.

The 'graced moment' of his numinous experience in his final year of high school provides the key to the further step of understanding the sacramental, how the mysterious depths of reality are veiled by everyday life. Through an initial 'nature mysticism' and later an intense crisis of conversion he comes to discern the Word

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<sup>2</sup> Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 272.

<sup>3</sup> Judson Trapnell, "Bede Griffiths' Theory of Religious Symbol and Practice of Dialogue: Towards Interreligious Understanding." The Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The Catholic University of America, 1993.

manifest in a variety of different ways, who is Christ, 'The Golden String'<sup>4</sup> and the way to the Eternal City. This is the basis of humility and his sense of self-transformation (and the transformation of all of creation) as a process in life's journey. Concomitant with this is a particular sensitivity and openness to Christ which, while it finds a home in an institutional Benedictine expression of humility and welcome also points beyond to further forms of expression.

It grasps Rahner's insistence on the openness towards and of an absolute future as that which is quintessentially Christian<sup>5</sup> and Panikkar's theology where a Trinitarian faith can be expressed in the formula, 'openness in both directions'.<sup>6</sup>

In what we have elsewhere named as Griffiths 'hermeneutic of encounter' meaning is found in – being found, in the primordial personal encounter instigated by the wholly transcendent Other; One who is yet discovered to be profoundly present within and without, such that pursuit of greater openness to life in all its forms is a sacred discipline and continuing exercise in humility.

Griffiths admits that although in the beginning of his journey he was rightly oriented, nonetheless he was selective, screening out what did not appeal to him. This changed in India. Here, in his search for personal integration and the experience of *advaita*, (non-dualism) he encountered dark symbols, such as *kali*, and sexual images which did not, however, disgust him. Rather, they pointed to the heart of Mystery. He was even more convinced of the need to accept the full panoply of stages in human development and personal integration such as he found best explicated in the work of Ken Wilber.

On the other hand, a hermeneutic of encounter does not dispense with spiritual discernment. It owns a radical acknowledgement of God's outpouring love in and for all of God's creation. Necessarily, however, the divine freedom which is imaged also

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<sup>4</sup> This is Griffiths' own emblematic symbol, taken from William Blake's poem, *Jerusalem* (Plate 77).

<sup>5</sup> Karl Rahner, *Investigations*, 190.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Panikkar, *The Trinity and World Religions*, 42.

in creation recognises the possibility of the demonic. Griffiths does not condone sin. In the case of interreligious dialogue which he insists is a vital duty, he advises patience and perseverance; we note in a particular difficult situations he withdraws when it becomes apparent to him that the motives of the other parties do not serve the search for truth.

For Griffiths, at the heart of divine Mystery we encounter Love for which Christ is the supreme symbol, the Divine Lord whom he encountered in his own life as ‘the Golden String’.

### **Divine Lord and Right Order**

In Hindu and Christian traditions, the image of ‘divine Lord’ is the basis for right order in life. Christians may recognise in the *Beatitudes* a profound holism centred in divine order. In both traditions, ‘Divine Lord’ links up with concern for and solutions to present crises in global society. Further, the image has profound cosmic significance whereby the principle of relationship is central. In this we find that for Griffiths the fine edge is openness to encounter.

Griffiths describes how the Son of Man, Jesus not only ‘reunites humanity as one body in himself’<sup>7</sup> but also the whole of creation as ‘a new creation’. He believes, with others, that we are entering a new stage in evolution which involves a process of ‘personalisation.’ In accordance with the inner essence of the Trinity, this is a new step for humanity, the *imago dei*, towards becoming a ‘communion of persons in love’.<sup>8</sup>

‘Christ himself goes beyond space and time, is totally one with the Father, the creator-God,<sup>9</sup> and so is also present in all creation’<sup>10</sup>... as the Cosmic Christ, in the

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<sup>7</sup> ‘The whole of humanity is growing to the full stature of the man, Jesus Christ, who is none other than the primordial Man who was there in the beginning and who has now been revealed as the Lord, uniting all humanity with God.’ *A New Vision*, 112.

<sup>8</sup> Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision*, 94.

<sup>9</sup> We would have to understand ‘creator-God’ here in terms of ‘source of being’ or ‘the void’ which empties into the act of creating being itself.

<sup>10</sup> Bede Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 97.

One God who is Mother and Father ‘...beyond all distinctions and yet embracing all distinctions’.<sup>11</sup>

Bede describes the Hindu religion, as ‘the supreme example of a cosmic religion’ and Brahman, ‘the One Supreme Being...the Cosmic Lord’.<sup>12</sup> In the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Brahman*, as one with the *atman*, dwells as divine Lord in the human heart.

By love he knows me in truth, who I am and what I am, and when he knows me in truth he enters into my Being.<sup>13</sup>

Crucially, it involves the movement of divine grace, ‘to see the Self, in the Self, by the Self’.<sup>14</sup>

### **God’s Reign as Lord**

The Spirit of love dwelling in each person’s heart, longs for freedom for *all* humanity, upon whom all creation depends for *its* fulfilment. Griffiths says:

Love is terrible in the way it makes us face our own wounds and the sufferings of others. But it breeds compassion...Love brings us into the presence of Christ who bears in himself humanity’s wounds...Our compassion extends to the whole of suffering humanity, which is both revealed and healed by the suffering of Christ on the cross....The cross is healing...(T)he suffering Christ, the glorified Christ and the cosmic Christ are all aspects of the same reality which we have to keep in mind.<sup>15</sup>

Dialogue with other religions recognises, says Griffiths, ‘the truth and holiness in all genuine religion... the way the Church is moving today.’<sup>16</sup> Griffiths sees as the universal sin, humankind’s refusal to live in relationship, rather to centre on the individual ego however this manifests in people’s lives.

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<sup>11</sup> Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 251.

<sup>12</sup> Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation*, 28-35.

<sup>13</sup> *Bhagavad Gita*, ‘The Yoga of Liberation by Renunciation’, V55. In Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 318.

<sup>14</sup> *Bhagavad Gita*, ‘The Yoga of Meditation’ V20. Griffiths calls this verse, ‘the goal of Yoga’, *River*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Bede Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 53.

<sup>16</sup> Bede Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 106.

As well, if practical works do not flow from this deep centre, meditation ‘loses its depth’.<sup>17</sup> Both are vital for ‘the new age’ that is dawning and which is another stage of the Kingdom of God which ‘is always “at hand”’.<sup>18</sup> Griffiths had come to a profound acceptance of a global catastrophe being the precursor of the new age, ‘The disaster is coming, but a new creation is coming out of the disaster....death to resurrection.’<sup>19</sup>

His confidence lies in the cosmic process evident through history of the Spirit at work drawing humanity back to the likeness of Christ the archetypal person, in a participative role that involves the fulfilment of creation.<sup>20</sup>

### **Creation from Chaos**

In science, progress ‘will be found in renewing a view of life antithetical to its modern model and harmonious with traditional wisdom.’<sup>21</sup> One advocate is physicist David Bohm. For Bohm totality of existence is enfolded within each region of space and time, which he terms, ‘the implicate order’. Like the Vedic ‘net of Indra’ or ‘Indra’s pearl necklace’ this admits a profound dynamic interdependency throughout the whole of reality.

Griffiths finds support in others like Teilhard de Chardin who envisions ‘one vast, organic, guided operation, in which each of us has a place’;<sup>22</sup> and Rahner for whom the way forward that best represents the mystery of Christ will be the ‘collective discovery of truth’ centred in human experience. Such renewed focus on

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<sup>17</sup> Bede Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 94.

<sup>18</sup> Bede Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 81.

<sup>19</sup> Bede Griffiths, *The New Creation in Christ*, 82. Griffiths sees the monastic orders as basically prophetic. Ibid, 84.

<sup>20</sup> Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 272.

<sup>21</sup> Judson Trapnell, *Bede Griffiths*, 125.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Man’s Place in Nature* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1966), 15. In Arthur Fabel, ‘Teilhard 2000’, 154.

the full depth of the human society leads to a practical theology centred in mystical experience.

This he found it in the work of the economist, Erick Schumacher. In *Small is Beautiful* (1974) Schumacher resists the greed and envy of society. He blames the ‘drop-outs’ and the ‘footloose’ on the structureless, frontierless larger patterns arising from centralisation within the expanded nation and the ‘megalopolis’. He replaces the modern model with decentralisation and proper maintenance of rights and responsibilities in the service of justice for every person based on ‘the traditional wisdom of humankind’.<sup>23</sup> Schumacher sums up his system in the phrase, ‘production for the masses, not mass production’.<sup>24</sup>

He points to the Buddhist Ananda Coomaraswamy’s<sup>25</sup> distinction between tool and machine – the one which ‘enhances...skill and power’ and the other that forces a person to serve a ‘mechanical slave’.

He emphasises the importance of daily meditation.

For Griffiths, for East and West to learn from one another, however, means not to demonise science and technology but to recognise their crucial role. He says,

...it still remains possible to conceive of a development of science and technology which would seek not to dominate nature in the style of the West but to work with nature, building up from the basis of the village economy, as Mahatma Gandhi sought to do, and so create a new culture, in which people<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Erick Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (London: ABACUS, 1974), 250.

<sup>24</sup> Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, 60, 61. Schumacher takes this from Ghandi’s expression which he later acknowledges as ‘not mass production but production by the masses’.

<sup>25</sup> 1877-1947, Sri Lankan, educated in England and a scholar of religion, art, law, philosophy and science.

<sup>26</sup> Griffiths has ‘man’ here. We have changed it to ‘people’ to avoid a gender polarisation which he did not really intend and also for the sake of inclusive language in accordance with his later request.

and nature, reason and intuition, the Yang and the Yin in Chinese terms, would be brought into harmony.<sup>27</sup>

### **A Hindu Saint: Mahatma Gandhi**

The Mahatma ‘a unique mirror of the absolute’ reflects the divine Lord and represents the East West integration.

Gandhi’s authority and initiative is suspicious of powerful systems of control, and concerned for the poor and powerless. It is linked with his lasting high regard for Jesus, especially as exemplified by the *Sermon on the Mount*. It is through *karuna* – God’s compassionate love, that Gandhi interprets both the Christian Gospel and the Hindu *Gita*. Rather than in domination, Gandhi found resistance through suffering in the ‘suffering servant’ figure of Isaiah.<sup>28</sup> Particularly in the *Bhagavadgita*, he found the universal message and source of transcendence through its teaching of *karma yoga*; the way to God through serving one’s neighbour as a vehicle for transcendence of the ego.<sup>29</sup> Ramakrishna’s disciple, Vivekananda, expressed it as, ‘My God, the poor; my God, the suffering; my God, the oppressed.’<sup>30</sup> Gandhi’s life exemplifies a certain resolution of the tension between prayer and action.

### **Divine Lord and the Call to Contemplation in Action**

In the Yoga of Renunciation in the *Bhagavad Gita* (300BC) contemplation in action is proclaimed as a better way than giving up work to find God - the classical way of the *sannyasi*. Instead the *Gita* proclaims doing work without attachment, or the yoga of ‘holy work’.

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<sup>27</sup> Bede Griffiths, *Marriage*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Bede Griffiths, *Marriage*, 139.

<sup>29</sup> Bede Griffiths, *Cosmic Revelation*, 84, 85, 91. The way of transcendence of the ego, Griffiths points out is represented by the Hindu ritual in the temple courtyard where a coconut is cracked open before the image of Ganesha, the god who dispels obstacles, releasing the sweet, nutritious, milky fluid in the centre which represents the divine life. In *Cosmic Revelation*, 36.

<sup>30</sup> Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 5.



The Hindu *karmani akarma* 'worklessness in work' parallels the Chinese *wu wei*<sup>31</sup>

Who in all his work sees God, he in truth goes unto God: God is his worship, God is his offering, offered by God in the fire of God. (*BG: The Yoga of Partial Knowledge: V24*)<sup>32</sup>

Here, a person's life is a participation in the primordial sacrifice of the *Purusha* who, in Krishna, manifests God. Such a person is *ekagraha*, or 'one-pointed', not divided. Arjuna teaches Krishna:

Kill therefore with the sword of wisdom the doubt born of ignorance that lies in thy heart. Be one in self-harmony, in Yoga, and arise, great warrior, arise. (*BG: The Yoga of Partial Knowledge: V42*)<sup>33</sup>

Anyone who, like Arjuna, can 'fight the battle of life' with detachment can say, 'I am not the doer God is working in me'. There is no desire for reward, 'no binding force at all', no egoism involved. The action flows from the Spirit within. The person can act creatively and fearlessly.<sup>34</sup> Work becomes 'contemplation in the true sense...an activity of God within.' This, says Griffiths, is 'the real goal'.<sup>35</sup> The *Gita* promises purity and freedom to the one who 'ascribes his works to Brahman'. 'No sin can stain thee, even as waters do not stain the leaf of the lotus'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> In the *Tao Te Ching*, the paradoxical saying describes all activity as proceeding from the concentration and stillness at the centre whereby the eternally inactive first principle of creation yet leaves nothing undone. In Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 74.

<sup>32</sup> Griffiths attributes 'vast implications' to this verse, *Brabm'arpanam, brahmahabvir brahm'agnau brahmanahutam; Brahm'aiva tena gantavyam brahma karma samadhina*, which was often sung at Shantivanam as a grace before meals. In Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 76.

<sup>33</sup> Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 81.

<sup>34</sup> Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 81.

<sup>35</sup> Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 81-85.

<sup>36</sup> The Buddhist scriptures read, 'Just as a lotus born of water, grown up in water, passing up above the water, is not stained by the water, so is the Buddha: though he as grown up in the world and conquered it, yet he is not stained by the world'. The *Chandogya Upanishad* has it, 'As water does not stick to a lotus leaf, so do not evil deeds cleave to the man who knows this'. Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 88,89.

Gandhi himself went beyond *swadharma*, or doing his own duty for the sake of inner purity alone. ‘For Gandhi’, says Bede, ‘it was ...crucial .... to change the world’ because:

This world has a force in it now which is directing it towards a final fulfilment ... we are working for the Kingdom of God. That is a vision common to many modern Hindus and many modern Christians.<sup>37</sup>

Following Gandhi, Bede recommended an organic style education system as promoted by Rudolf Steiner: the first seven years devoted to emotional growth, the next seven to the imagination and from 14 years only - serious training applied to the rational mind.<sup>38</sup>

### **God Realisation**

Liberation of the poor says Griffiths, can only come after ‘a profound conversion in which Christianity encounters the depth of Hinduism and Buddhism.’ Conversely he is opposed to ‘the utter brutality of Marxism... one of the greatest scourges which has ever inflicted humankind ...and which has crushed the soul of Asia’.<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, ‘God-realisation’ through contemplation means an awareness of incorporation into the Cosmic Christ<sup>40</sup> such that each will exercise their own gifts differently because, ‘we surrender ourselves to a love which then compels us and may drive us in any direction to whatever work we have to do’.<sup>41</sup> Here ‘divine Lord’ is synonymous with ‘divine Love’ – Love with the character of a Person.

### **An Illustration – A New Eden?**

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<sup>37</sup> Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 89, 90.

<sup>38</sup> Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, 285.

<sup>39</sup> Bede Griffiths, in a letter to Sr Pascaline Coff, June 14<sup>th</sup> 1989. From the Griffiths’ archives, Osage Monastic Ashram, Sand Springs, OK, USA.

<sup>40</sup> Griffiths emphasises that the realisation of *sadhana*, or detachment, is a necessary ideal, but not the ultimate state because the journey takes the soul further into a God of love. *River of Compassion*, 102.

<sup>41</sup> Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 102.

In June, 2009, the ABC network *Australian Story* presented Maarten Stapper<sup>42</sup> whose story may be seen as parabolic in terms of the movement to the Spirit veiled by the everyday and the journey of the soul which includes the 'dark nights' and the transformative experience of death and resurrection. Stapper was born and educated in the Netherlands; he went to Canada for three months to pick tobacco and there became aware of an 'eerie silence' due to 20 years use of DDT '...no little bugs, or beetles ...or birds.' He says, 'The real key to our life on the planet earth is the soil...the skin of planet earth ...a skin ...which has been decimated over the last decades .' His story has a Buddhist texture.

He was employed in Australia in the late 80's in the CSIRO or Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation. In 1987, a gene introduced to crops to make them resistant to disease was described as 'magic'. In 1992, it was introduced to potatoes. From the start Stapper questioned genetic modification. 'The soils don't benefit from this.' His questions were not welcome at a time when genetically engineered crops had become the strength of the CSIRO. Maarten Stapper's wife was also employed by the CSIRO and the couple had four children. His continuing research was not commercially viable and he expressed frustration that he was denied a voice. Stapper's promotion was blocked which he experienced as a 'stab in the back'. A crop scientist in CSIRO described Stapper's research as 'fringe science...with no supportive evidence in the published literature'. He quit his job and driving back to Canberra caused an almost-fatal collision . He fell into depression and was assisted by his daughter, Marieke, dietician and nutritionist. However his marriage had deteriorated and ended in separation.

At such a dark time in his life, he 'discovered' biological farming 'a way of cutting down the chemicals and replacing this with biological methods....' Stapper insists that 'if we don't do this we can't feed nine billion people on this planet, more soil will blow away, wash away and we lose life on our planet.'

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<sup>42</sup> Back to the Earth – Transcript. Program Transcript: Monday, 1 June, 2009. <http://www.abc.net.au/asutory/specials/stapper/default.htm> Accessed October 28 2009.

Now, after 10 years, he is fully immersed in assisting farmers who are excitedly starting to look ...at the soil. He has introduced into Australian agriculture the technology of microbes (indigenous to the system), humic acids and minerals for healthier plants.

One farmer, Peter Cook describes the change in what was 'drift sand' due to chemicals, which after the biological treatment is now productive. Cook explains that Stapper's method saves up to \$20,000 a year but more importantly, he says, 'we're looking after the property...good plants...people eating good food'.

This reflects the concern for justice for every person as shown in the stories of Schumacher and Gandhi above, the link between ingested carcinogens and soil and plant management and also Griffiths' insistence on the need for sensitivity to the profound interrelatedness of all of creation.

Significantly, Stapper has inspired about six hundred farmers; of these about three hundred have begun biological farming. Peter Cook's words are unmistakably redolent of the kind of investment with 'life' which we identify with the Gospel, 'Before there were no worms in the paddock,' says Cook. 'Now there's ladybirds...everyone's out spraying aphids and our lady-birds are eating the aphids....the kangaroos have returned...the soil is soft...smells good...I'm excited...I'm getting pretty old, but I'm excited.'

It is hoped the outline provided above along with the illustrations from Griffiths' own experience, and our local one clarify his expression of the Christian way of being towards an ontological vision which he declares also similarly represents the most developed wisdom of the Hindu tradition:

Christ is the Lord who assumes human nature and reunites human nature in himself and in reuniting humanity, he reunites the whole cosmic order in himself. He becomes the Lord the centre of the whole. This corresponds very closely with the idea in the Gita. All is one in the Lord.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 203.

Griffiths' concern for the global crises and belief in the Spirit-led movement into a new level of consciousness in our times finds meaning and theological depth in his own openness to encounter and experience of personal transformation. It raises the question of his recommendation for a radical Christian response which demands self-dispossession and confident abandonment to the action of the Holy Spirit in our everyday lives. Is this possible? Bede Griffiths draws tangible support from the ancient Hindu tradition to commend certain satisfaction not through absorption in the spiritual or in the material but a confident, seamless integration of both through abandonment to the divine Lord centred in a daily commitment to meditation and the contemplative community.

It remains to be fully tested.

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