The Hermeneutics of Practice in Dōgen and Francis of Assisi

An Exercise in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

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INTRODUCTION

ONE OF THE central questions in the dialogue between Buddhists and Christians concerns the necessity of establishing or following a daily religious practice. There is no lack of suggestions about what that practice might be: prayer, meditation, spiritual reading, almsgiving, and other private and social activities. But there is considerable confusion about what religious practice means. What is its role in one's personal life and in the life of society? What is its intent and its value? What use is it? These questions are intensified in the case of contemplative, seemingly private religious practice. Practitioners of meditation, for example, are often asked what meditation does for them, and what good it does for others. This kind of question arises from the notion that practice is an activity directed towards some end or objective outside that activity, a notion which derives from the ancient distinction between theory and praxis. Often this type of question will dissolve of itself when one actually engages in religious practice. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to examine the presuppositions of such questions, for hidden assumptions condition the way we actually experience as well as the way we express what we are doing.

Relevance to the Christian-Buddhist dialogue

How is this examination relevant to the dialogue between Christians and Buddhists? Let us reflect for a moment on three predominant patterns of the Zen-Christian dialogue. One pattern, the first to occur historically,

has been an attempt to confront sophisticated metaphysical views articulated or presupposed in traditional scriptures. At its extreme, this approach comes to an impasse when a dogmatic Christian monotheism confronts a Buddhist "monism," "pantheism" or "atheism." A second pattern discovers comparative structures, symbols, and stories in the history of the two traditions. Yet many a metaphysical question still haunts academic comparisons and the approach of a history or phenomenology of religions. What, after all, is to be made of the insistence on the "truth" of the respective teachings?[1]

A third approach has been to eschew metaphysical questions and locate truth in religious *experience*. If the first two approaches can be said to be biased toward Christian or Western methods, the third appears to lean toward the Zen insistence on experiential truth. Much good work in this approach has gone into comparing the rapture of the medieval Christian mystics with the enlightenment experience of Zen adepts.[2] Yet even if this approach is metaphysically neutral (e.g., with regard to such issues as identity with the Absolute or God), I believe it to be hermeneutically naive in two respects. First, for purposes of dialogue, which occurs via language, it too often assumes that expressions common to the two sides are already shared meanings, and that differences in expression result from adventitious interpretations attached, post factum, to a core experience. It underestimates the degree to which tradition shapes (and sometimes beguiles) communication. Secondly, it tends to forget that our tradition and society see mystical experience as the inner sanctum and enjoyment of the rare adept (or perhaps as the psychological "peak experience"), remote from the usual exigencies of life in a secularized age. Hence it may be said to be naive about the ways in which traditional meanings have already limited the scope and wider relevance of the dialogue.

Perhaps by discovering what is actually done in exemplary instances of religious life, and how that doing is understood, we may find an approach which is metaphysically neutral but not hermeneutically naive.

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[1] For a review of the difficulties of these approaches and a development of their positive aspects, see Heinrich Dumoulin, *Christianity Meets Buddhism* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1974).

[2] One of the most thorough examinations via this approach is that of Hugo M. Enomiya, *Zen Buddhismus* (Kōln: J. P. Bachem, 1966). See also H. M. Enomiya Lassalle, *Zen Meditation for Christians* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1974).

What I offer in the following is a brief examination of some texts of two (among many possible other) practitioners in the Zen and Christian traditions. These texts of Dōgen Kigen Zenji (1200–1253) and St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) are exemplary in the sense that they suggest precisely how religious practice shapes the meaning of a textual tradition and the intersection of tradition and concrete life. The point of my view may be somewhat overstated as a form of the hermeneutical circle: to understand a text (and tradition), one must practice what it enjoins upon one; and to know how to practice one must be informed by the tradition (and text).

The Sense of Practice

When we hear the word "practice" we are likely to be influenced by the meaning that is predominant in the Western world and wherever Marxism has made inroads. This meaning opposes practice to theory: theory and theoretical knowledge is an end in itself; practice is a means to an end outside itself.[3] It is clear that if we were to apply this notion of practice to the endeavors of Zen and Christian religious life, then practice would appear simply as the means to the goal of enlightenment or salvation. That this is a misleading notion of religious practice, at least in Dōgen and Francis, I shall document later. But there is another consideration which precludes the oversimplified view of religious practice as a means to an end. And this is the fact that theory, by way of its Latin translation, has been associated with contemplation and the purely contemplative, i.e., apolitical life—the life later associated with religious meditation. Thus we are confronted with a view which would take the theoretical life paradoxically as the life of religious practice.

If an instrumental notion of practice as a means to an end outside itself is inadequate to grasp the sense of contemplative religious life, then what approach to understanding is open to us in a secularized world?

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[3] There is not space here even to sketch the broad outlines of the theory-praxis distinction from Aristotle on. For detailed explorations of this distinction in the history of Western philosophy, see Nicholas Lobkowicz, *Theory and Practice* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967); and Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), esp. pp. ix–xii. For a sample of the way this distinction has found its way into the East, see the pamphlet Mao Tse-tung, *On Practice* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1968).

The experiential sense of practice as performance

In order to anticipate the proper sense of practice in religious life, let us consider the notion of practice as disciplined performance. This notion is akin to the notion of *askēsis*, whence our word "asceticism." The original meaning of *askēsis* did not connote self-mortification or subjugation of our corporeal nature. Rather it indicated the practice which most fully expressed that nature for the Greeks, namely, athletic training. It was an affirmation and positive evaluation of bodily existence and the repeated exertion required for athletic prowess. But one need not take activities specifically identified with athletics to see the point I would like to make about "ascetic" practice. Any activity that "takes practice" to be performed proficiently will do. Let us recall such activities as practicing piano or dance, learning a language, doing floral arrangement or tea ceremony. To say that any of these takes practice means that it requires repeated effort and concentrated performance. Such activities are daily disciplines exercised for no other goal than their performance. When we give a piano recital or communicate in a new language we are performing the same kind of activity in the end as we did during our "practice" sessions. And when the activity becomes a "practiced," i.e., proficiently performed activity, then there is no gap between what we will and what we do. It may even be said that during any practice there is no room for desires or intentions which separate our present performance from an imagined ideal, *what* we are doing from *how* we wish we were doing it.

The sense of practice which follows from the original Greek *askēsis*, as opposed to the sense of practice derived from the *theōria-praxis* distinction, cannot be adequately understood in terms of a means-end relationship. It takes as its model athletic training, but can also be seen to include any activity which requires training, repeated exertion, and concentration of body and mind. Hence, it covers our most ordinary and even routine daily activities.

Might not one object, however, that this notion of practice undermines the specifically religious quality of acts traditionally identified with asceticism? Isn't there something special about the practices of the religious ascetics that transcends such mundane pastimes? Does not an implied comparison of playing the piano for amusement with fasting for purgation smack of sacrilege? It will be the burden of our interpretation of texts by Dōgen and Francis of Assisi to show that this is a misguided way of thinking.

The Sense of a Comparison of Dōgen and Francis

The texts which I propose to examine derive from historically separate traditions. Therefore it is necessary to say a few words about the sense of reading them together here. A "comparison" of texts or their authors would seem somehow to put them on a par with one another, seek out their similarities and differences and perhaps a way to reconcile those differences. With regard to the lives and writings of Dōgen Kigen and Francis of Assisi, we might discover a series of similarities ranging from the superficial to the profound. Both were early thirteenth-century founders of religious "orders" which were novel and yet conservative of long existing traditions; both had experiences which converted them to a life of austere practices, apolitical and perhaps even non-worldly in their nature; both devoted their lives to teaching others and exemplifiying their teachings, and thus were able to transform religious history. Their way of life continues to be practiced today, over eight hundred years later. Differences are no less striking. When we read them translated into English, it is still as if we were reading two different languages. Writings of and about Francis abound with piety and praises directed to a transcendent God; severe mortifications of the flesh, states of ecstasy and miracles are described; moreover, if we read Bonaventure on Francis, we must read through an epistemology ascending from the sensible to the intelligible and a metaphysics where the creaturely is a sign of the divine. Dōgen, on the other hand, plunges us into a world of Buddhist terms and Zen sayings where words often clash with sense, at least common sense; where a non-dualistic metaphysics, denying any ultimate difference between Self and Absolute, is suggested. Furthermore, differences in the types of the texts to be compared seem overwhelming. On the one hand, we have eulogistic biographies and *legendae* of the life of Francis, and poems of praise and versions of fraternity rules by his own hand. In the case of Dōgen we have expositions of Zen kōan from Dōgen's own unique point of view and language, and exhortations to follow the example of the Buddhas and patriarchs, i.e., the enlightened teachers of old.

However, what I propose here is not a comparison of personalities, historical circumstances, enlightenment experiences, nor even of types of texts. Rather I want to offer an experiential probe into texts of two traditions which emphasize the significance of practice, in order to discover what notion of practice is presented therein, and to anticipate how living

out that sense of practice may revolutionize the reading of texts. If we need to turn to the texts for support, inspiration, or corroboration, we also need to return the texts to the world we live in.

The Practice of Dōgen Zenji

An introduction to a hermeneutic of practice in Dōgen can be found in a comment by a contemporary American Sōtō monk.

> The word *practice* has many rich implications in Zen. In a narrow sense it refers to the activity of sitting meditation we call *zazen*. To practice means to sit in meditation, concentrating with all our effort until the gap between ourselves and others is eliminated.
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> In a broader sense, practice refers to the activity of completely involving ourselves in whatever we are doing or experiencing so that there is no gap or separation between ourselves and that activity or experience. It is the extension of zazen into our lives from moment to moment.[4]

The English word "practice" renders several terms in Dōgen, each of them having historical connotations and capable of varying translations.[5] But rather than explore the notion of practice via a philological account,

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[4] From the Introduction, by Stephen Ikko Bodian, to *The Way of Everyday Life*, Zen Master Dōgen's *Genjōkōan* with Commentary by Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi (Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1978).

[5] Some frequently used terms and suggested connotations are: 修行 (*shugyō*: religious practice; discipline); 行 (*gyō*: Buddhist practice); 行持 (*gyōji*: continuous practice; activity unremitting); 辦道 (*bendō*: negotiating or enacting the Way); 參學 (*sangaku*: going and studying; penetrating study); and 參究 (*sankyū*: going and scrutinizing; penetrating investigation). All of these occur in the essay *Gyōji* and are translated by Francis Cook as "practice." See his *How to Raise an Ox*, Zen Practice As Taught in Zen Master Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* (Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1978). For alternate translations see Hee-Jin Kim, "Existence/Time as the Way of Ascesis: An Analysis of the Basic Structure of Dōgen's Thought," *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. XI, no. 2 (October 1978), pp. 43–73. The Japanese texts I have consulted are in *Shōbōgenzō/Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*, annotated by Nishio Minoru, Kagamishima Genryū, Sakai Tokugen and Mizunoya Oko (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1975).

All of the above terms contrast with 実践 (*jissen*), the word for praxis as opposed to theory. However, the term 練習 (*renshū*) covers some of the basic connotations I sought in the experiential notion of practice as performance.

I believe we can go to the heart of the matter by referring to the two first works Dōgen composed: the *Fukanzazengi* ("Universal Promotion of Zazen," 1227; revised circa 1243) and the *Bendōwa* ("Discourse on Negotiating the Way," 1231). There Dōgen both specifies the concrete form and locus of practice and indicates its universal application. The *Fukanzazengi* begins by proclaiming that the "Way," i.e., enlightenment or ultimate reality, is manifested unconditionally. But since man's discriminating mind separates him from the Way, no one can dispense with efforts to "negotiate the Way." Dōgen writes, "If you want to attain suchness, you should practice suchness without delay."[6] Immediately following this injunction are instructions telling one how to practice zazen, giving details regarding the mental attitude, physical posture, and preferred environment.

Zazen as the locus of practice

In the *Bendōwa*, Dōgen defends his teaching that zazen is *the* normative practice for attaining the Way, calling it alone the right path (まさしきみち), the right entrance (正門) and the "Dharma gate of repose and joy" (安樂の法門).[7] Zazen assumes a particular form which we associate with sitting in the cross-legged position and letting go of thoughts. But Dōgen insists that zazen cannot be reduced to a mere technique, exercise, or even portion of practice when he refuses to count it among the four attitudes, the six paramitas, and the three learnings.[8] "The zazen I speak of is not learning meditation. It is . . . the practice-realization (修證) of totally culminated enlightenment. It is the manifestation of ultimate reality (公案現成)."[9]

Zazen then is the embodiment of the Buddha Way as well as the specific form of man's efforts to "negotiate the Way." Realization and practice cannot be separated:

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[6] *Fukanzazengi*, translated by Norman Waddell and Abe Masao, *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. VI, no. 2 (October 1973), pp. 121f.

[7] *Bendōwa*, translated by Norman Waddell and Abe Masao, *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. IV, no. 1 (May 1971), pp. 133, 137, 143.

[8] *Fukanzazengi*, p. 122; *Bendōwa*, p. 143. The "four attitudes" are walking, standing, sitting and lying; the six paramitas or "perfections" are: charity, morality, patience, vigor, meditation and wisdom; the "three learnings" are *śila* (morality), *samādhi* (meditation), and *prajñā* (wisdom).

[9] *Fukanzazengi*, p. 123.

> This Dharma is amply present in every person, but unless one practices, it is not manifested, unless there is realization, it is not attained. . . .
>
> As it is already realization in practice, realization is endless; as it is practice in realization, practice is beginningless.[10]

Dōgen's own realization came in a moment of zazen practice under Ju-ching in China, when the master reputedly shouted, "Cast off body and mind!" (身心脱落) to a drowsy monk.[11] Dōgen frequently uses this phrase to express the essence of zazen practice. Perhaps we may say that to drop body and mind is to put one's whole body and mind into zazen, and further to drop "zazen" as a separate activity, so that the field of practice is all existence.[12] Zazen may be seen as the specific locus of practice, where one learns *how* to practice living (and dying). But to restrict "practice" to the times when meditation is performed would be in effect to maintain the very kind of separation that zazen is meant to overcome. For Dōgen, when one totally practices zazen, dropping body, mind and separation, there is nothing that is not practicing.

> Then the land, the trees and grasses, fences and walls, tiles and pebbles, all the various things in the ten directions, perform the work of buddhas. . . the trees, grasses, and land involved in this all emit a bright and shining light, and preach the profound and incomprehensible Dharma, and it is endless.[13]

Practice as universal manifestation

Practice thus comes to mean the spontaneous manifestation of all reality. There are numerous allusions to this meaning throughout Dōgen. Water practices and realizes itself as water;[14] ". . . the sounds and forms of the valley streams and the forms and sounds of the mountains all become

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[10] *Bendōwa*, pp. 129 and 144. See also the opening of *Gyōji*: "Arousing the thought of enlightenment, practice, bodhi, and nirvana have not the slightest break, but are continuous practice (行持) which goes on forever." Translation by Francis Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

[11] Cf. *Bendōwa*, p. 130, note 21.

[12] For a development of this idea, see Nishitani Keiji, "Emptiness and History," *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. XII, no. 1 (May 1979), p. 67.

[13] *Bendōwa*, p. 136.

[14] *Sansuikyō*, in Nishio Minoru et al., *op. cit.*, p. 306.

the myriad verses of the sutras"; "it is nothing more than the green of pines in the spring and the glory of chrysanthemums in the autumn."[15] A passage in the *Gyōji* ("Continuous Practice") formulates it thus:

> By virtue of this continuous practice (行持) there are sun, moon, and stars. By virtue of this continuous practice, there are earth, sky, and heat within and body without, the four elements and the five skandhas.[16]

The view that all phenomena are manifestations of practice-realization implies a notion of practice which is *not instrumental and not representational.* Practice is not conceived as a means to an end, and it is not objectified as something separate from the activity of the world or of oneself. Hence, in examples Dōgen cites in various writings, Huang-po sweeps out all the rooms in the monastery, not "for the sake of sweeping out the mind, nor . . . performed in order to cleanse the light of the Buddha [but as] continuous practice for the sake of continuous practice."[17] And master Pao-ch'e continues to fan himself when asked why fanning (practice) is necessary since the wind (Buddha nature) reaches everywhere.[18] Abe Masao and Norman Waddell, translators of the *Fukanzazengi*, note that Dōgen may have felt compelled to write yet another manual of Zen practice (*Zazengi*) to counteract other teachers' emphasis on zazen as a "*means* for strengthening mental concentration."[19] Hence Dōgen instructs the practitioners to "have no designs on becoming a buddha. Zazen has nothing whatever to do with sitting or lying down."[20]

This latter statement is expressive of the non-representational thinking which, we may say, sees practice from the standpoint of practice. The

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[15] *Keisei Sanshoku* ("The Sounds of Valley Steams, The Forms of the Mountains"), in Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

[16] *Gyōji*, p. 175 (translation slightly modified). Kim (*op. cit.*, pp. 59ff) explores the relationship between *gyōji* ("activity unremitting") and *engi* (縁起 "dependent origination").

[17] *Gyōji*, p. 198.

[18] *Genjōkōan*; *op. cit.*, no page.

[19] *Fukanzazengi*, Introduction, p. 117. Waddell and Abe also note that Dōgen apparently shifted his own emphasis in his revision of the text (circa 1243): ". . . in the later version the idea of *dhyāna* or *samādhi* as a means to enlightenment has totally disappeared, and in its place there is a corresponding accentuation of the oneness of practice and realization" (pp. 118f).

[20] *Fukanzazengi*, p. 122.

entire work called "The King of Samādhis Samādhi" (*Sammai Ō Zammai*) is, I believe, composed from this point of view. There again Dōgen identifies practice as zazen, sitting cross-legged, and again he states that this practice is beyond any formalization:

> Rare are those who have understood that sitting is the Buddha Dharma and the Buddha Dharma is sitting. Even though some may have known experientially that sitting is the Buddha Dharma, no one has known sitting as sitting. . . .
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> Therefore, there is a mind sitting and it is not the same as a body sitting. There is a body sitting and it is not the same as a mind sitting. There is sitting with body and mind cast off, and it is not the same as sitting with body and mind cast off.[21]

In his book, *What is Religion?*, Nishitani Keiji aptly characterizes the standpoint which does not objectify practice:

> The moment you see "practice" (行) in a representational fashion, you have already attached to the form. On the field where practice is truly practice, phenomena such as man moving his limbs, clouds moving across the sky, water flowing, leaves falling, and blossoms scattering, are formless. Their form is a formless one. And to adopt this "formless form" as one's own form—is none other than the standpoint of "practice."[22]

Because this notion of practice is non-instrumental and non-objectifying, it signifies not the self-serving activity of the individual but a practice of self-enlightenment *qua* enlightening others. Dōgen can therefore unite his exclusive insistence on zazen with the general Mahayana philosophy of compassion for all.

The every-day character of practice

Likewise, because this practice is not conceived as a means to an end nor discriminated as a separate, solely individual activity, it can manifest

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[21] "The King of Samādhis Samādhi: Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō Sammai Ō Zammai*," translated by Norman Waddell and Abe Masao, *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. VII, no. 1 (May 1974), pp. 119f.

[22] "Emptiness and Time," translated by Jan van Bragt, *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. X, no. 2 (October 1977), p. 9 (translation slightly modified: cf. the original version, Nishitani Keiji, *Shūkyō to wa nanika* [Tokyo, 1961], p. 220).

itself continuously in everyday life. Practice-realization is to be found in such everyday, "ordinary" activities as eating rice, drinking tea, fanning oneself, or sweeping the hallway. At the same time, emphasis must be put on the efforts of every day as well as the "ordinariness" of the activity. To say that continuous practice means the realization of one's own true nature and the manifestation of the universe is to say that it demands the totality of one's efforts. To hold that "even avoiding continuous practice is itself continuous practice . . . is a halfhearted continuous practice, and it cannot be considered seeking continuous practice."[23] This statement, from the *Gyōji*, is followed by some twenty-three stories recounting the everyday efforts of practitioners of the Way. Beginning with Sakyamuni, Dōgen writes: "The teaching and conversion activities of his whole lifetime were nothing but continuous practice, keeping his robes clean and begging for his food were nothing but continuous practice." This is also the point of Pai-chang's saying, "A day without work is a day without eating." There was not a day Pai-chang did not exert himself on behalf of those studying under him, Dōgen writes. Everyday should be valued and respected; everyday is a priceless jewel which we should value highly.[24] Dōgen can thus integrate the Zen predilection for the ordinary with the rigorous demands of his own discipline.

Practice as a hermeneutical principle

The practice of everyday activities, i.e., "routine" things performed in a concentrated spirit, is itself seen as the content of the Buddha's teaching and the instruction of the patriarchs. In the *Kajō* ("Everyday Life"), Dōgen recounts the story of Tao-k'ai, who asks his teacher, Master T'ou-tzu, "Are the words which the patriarchs use the same as their daily life of drinking tea and eating rice? Are there any other words different from these which are used to teach people?"[25] Of course, the means or "words" the patriarchs use for transmitting the teaching are inseparable from their everyday actions. But is there not another, strictly verbal message transmitted from teacher to disciple? This is the question not only of priority of action over speech (or good works over scripture), but of everyday practice as the source of the meaning of scriptures. When Tao-k'ai asked

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[23] *Gyōji*, p. 177.

[24] *Gyōji*, pp. 177f, 183, 194.

[25] *Kajō*, in Cook, *op. cit.*, pp. 205ff.

his question, he used words; when Dōgen recounts the story, he passes on a verbal tradition, and when we repeat it here we remain within the realm of language. However parsimonious Zen masters may be with words, it is not the case that language is always rejected in favor of non-linguistic action. The point is that, if practice supplies the foundation of the meaning of the linguistic expression, then the linguistic expression must be carried out to be "understood." Hence Dōgen exhorts the reader to penetrate the inner meaning of Tao-k'ai's question and then to transcend this inner meaning. That is, Dōgen transmits the story properly as a kōan, to be accomplished by the reader.

Perhaps many of Dōgen's own statements, as well as the numerous stories he recounts from the Chinese Buddhist tradition, are intended to be taken in this sense. They are not historical accounts, enigmatic decriptions, or dogmatic formulas, but enjoinders to clarify and enact their meaning. The hermeneutic of practice in Dōgen challenges us to see practice as the principle through which the text is to be understood. If the text can give one spiritual inspiration and concrete instruction for daily practice, then how much more can actual practice open up the meaning of the text.

The Practice of St. Francis of Assisi

When we turn to the life and writings of Francis of Assisi, we find the same insistence on a practice whose universal significance is rooted in, but far outstretches, the particular forms it takes in everyday discipline. The concept of "practice" is itself not an object of Francis' reflection; but it is abundantly evident from the biographies that Francis is above all a practitioner (Latin: *professor*) and an exemplar of what he understands as the Gospel life, and from his own writings it is clear that this is what he expects of his followers. In the prologue of Bonaventure's spiritual biography, the *Legenda Major*, Francis is eulogized as "a practitioner, a leader and a herald of Gospel perfection."[26] In his own *Testament*, composed shortly before his death and intended as "a reminder, admonition, [and] exhortation," he describes how God inspired him "to

[26] "The Life of Saint Francis," *Bonaventure*, translated by Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press), p. 179; see also pp. 203 and 298.

embark upon a life of penance."[27] What does the life of penance concretely entail, and what does it reveal to us?

In forming an answer to this question I shall concentrate on the sparse writings of Francis himself, and draw upon the much more voluminous biographies only to add perspective. If we were to focus on Bonaventure's elaborate *Life of Francis*, for example, our attention could easily shift from the practice Francis recommends for all, to the unique saintliness of his own person; moreover, the tradition has tended to interpret his own writings in the light of later works and not within their own context.[28] Naturally the exposition here will be very brief, but will, I hope, go to the heart of the matter.

Francis' asceticism: obedience, poverty, selflessness

The biographers (Thomas of Celano, Julian of Speyer, Bonaventure, etc.) discuss Francis' asceticism in detail, but it is noteworthy that he himself does not enjoin his own extreme practices of bodily mortification upon his followers.[29] This would lead us to believe that the mortification of the flesh is by itself not to be taken as the normative practice but rather as based upon another sense of asceticism. The asceticism called for is the continual surrender of oneself to others, and thereby to God. Thus, in the *Admonitions* Francis says the truly poor in spirit are not necessarily those who "spend all their time at their prayers and other religious exercises and mortify themselves by long fasts and so on."[30] Rather, they are those prepared to take upon themselves the abuses of the world. The *Rule of 1221* states that

> no matter where they are, the friars must always remember that

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[27] *St. Francis of Assisi Omnibus of Sources*, ed. Marion A. Habig (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), p. 688. The original language versions of the writings are found in *Opuscula Sancti Patris Francisci Assisiensis*, ed. Caientanus Esser, OFM (Rome [Grottaferrata]: Collegii S. Bonaventurae Ad Claras Aquas, 1978).

[28] Cf. Regis Armstrong, "The Spiritual Theology of the *Legenda Major* of Saint Bonaventure" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Fordham University, 1978), p. 10.

[29] The friars are expected to fast and to shun expensive clothing, but not to wear abrasive cord under their tunics, to mix ashes with any cooked food, or to sleep sitting up, as Francis is said to have often done. See, for example, *Bonaventure*, pp. 190, 218f.

[30] *St. Francis of Assisi*, p. 83. Cf. Matt 5: 39–42. The "Admonitions" were compiled after the death of Francis, but are considered authentic.

> they have given themselves up completely and handed over their whole selves to our Lord Jesus Christ, and so they should be prepared to expose themselves to every enemy. . . . [Chapter 16]

and

> Nothing, then, must keep us back, nothing separate us from [God], nothing come between us and him. [Chapter 23][31]

Let us look to the pronouncements on obedience and poverty for a condensation of Francis' sense of practice. Obedience, of course, means following the Rule of the Order and the directives of one's superiors; poverty requires living without property. But the real meaning of obedience is submission to all creation:

> Obedience puts to shame
> all natural and selfish desires.
> . . . it subjects a man
> to everyone on earth,
> And not only to men,
> but to all the beasts as well. . .

and poverty is whatever

> . . . puts to shame
> all greed, avarice,
> and all the anxieties of this life.[32]

True obedience consists not primarily in simply obeying one's superiors, but of making an offering of one's will to God, even willing to suffer persecution for not obeying a command against one's conscience, rather than be separated from one's fellow man. Similarly, true poverty means not simply living without property and money, but freely taking upon oneself the condition of the poor in the world.[33] It means dispossessing oneself of the fear that separates. Francis has these startling words to say of the practice requisite to possessing these and other virtues:

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[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 44 and 52.

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 133f.: "Praises of the Virtues." See also *Bonaventure*, p. 211: "Because [the friars] possessed nothing that belonged to the world, they were attached to nothing and feared to lose nothing."

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 80: "Admonitions" III; p. 61: "Rule of 1223", Chapter 6.

In all the world there is not a man
who can possess any one of you
without first dying to himself.[34]

But before we go into the concrete, everyday dimension of this practice, let us comment briefly on its universal manifestation, as expressed in *The Canticle of Brother Sun* (see pp. 45–46).

A universe which reveals God

The *Canticle* has three sections, composed separately but sequentially during the last year of Francis' life.[35] The major section, which is the first nine of fourteen verses, proclaims the presence of God in his creation. The sun reveals the light of God; and the moon, stars, wind, air, water, fire, and earth all reflect God's light in their own way. God is praised *with*, *through* and *in* each and all of them; the *cun* and *per* of the original Umbrian signify that they themselves are the means by which God is glorified, and not the object of praise nor the cause of our praising God *for* them.[36] Or better, they are the very embodiment of God's glory, just as they are—the weather fair or stormy; the water useful, lowly, precious and pure; the fire full of power and strength; the earth who sustains and governs us. The personifications "brother sun," "sister moon," "brother wind," "sister earth," etc., place all creation on the same level as the human.

The second section of the poem, consisting of verses 10 and 11, specifies how the human manifests God's praise: by granting pardon out of love of God and enduring infirmity and tribulation. Thus man is enjoined to practice forgiveness and to embrace suffering freely, so as to embody what the rest of creation embodies naturally. Such actions of man reveal the glory of God as that glory is also enacted in the natural being of creation. We would not go too far, I believe, to say that the sun, moon, stars, wind, water, fire, and earth manifest the universal practice of being

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[34] *Ibid.*, p. 133: "Praises of the Virtues."

[35] Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

[36] Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 130, note 1. Ewert Cousins reads this differently and translates *per* as "for," e.g., "Praised be you, my Lord, for Brother Wind." Cf. *Bonaventure*, pp. 27f. Generally, however, Cousins is more accurate, translating from the Umbrian original, whereas the *Omnibus of Sources* appears to translate a later Latin version. See the *Opuscula Sancti Patris Francisci Assisiensis*, pp. 84–88, for both versions.

selfless ("To you, alone, Most High, do they belong"). They can know no separation from their creator.

The concluding three verses of the poem speak of death as the dividing line of human life. No living man can evade "sister death," but there are two ways to meet her: the death of "mortal sin" or ultimate separation from God, and the "second death," of those who have first died to themselves or overcome their separation from God. Sister death, the death of the body (*morte corporale*), then, is not portrayed as a consequence of sin, but as the point of realization of a first death, either to God or to oneself. Those who repose in God's most holy will need fear nothing from their "second death." As such, death too is, however we accept it, the praise of God. The *Canticle* ends with an exhortation to serve God selflessly.

In this reading of *The Canticle of Brother Sun* it is important to reiterate that the works of God, the sun, moon, wind, water, fire, earth, etc., do not symbolize but actually manifest the light of God. Man is not enjoined to praise God for them, and they are not called upon to praise God;[37] they *are* the praise of God, the Lord is praised with and through (*cun, per*) them. Later stories also indicate that Francis experienced the elements not first of all as things in themselves which could then take on a secondary function of pointing to their creator, but rather directly as embodiments of divine life. The manuscript of 1311 called the *Legend of Perugia* relates incidents of Francis' seemingly bizarre attitude toward fire, water, and stones. They are living, sentient creatures to Francis; he treats them so as not to harm them, but accepts them as they are, irregardless of their potential danger or benefit to him. He deeply respects them, but has no designs on them; as they exist they reveal their creator. They are addressed as brother and sister, but to address them so requires that one first die to the selfishness of seeing them as created for one's own sake or as a threat to one's own possessions. ("I sinned through avarice by not wanting my Brother Fire to consume [my cloak].")[38] Francis also speaks of the "obedience" of the elements and exhorts humankind to

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[37] This reading would also seem to contradict Bonaventure's own reading of the "Canticle": ". . . and like the prophet David, [Francis] sweetly exhorted them [all creatures] to praise the Lord" (*Bonaventure*, p. 263). But perhaps we may say that Francis exhorted them to be no other than what they already are.

[38] See the *Omnibus of Sources*, pp. 1027ff. (Sections 49–51 of the "Legend of Perugia") for such incidents. Again, this reading contrasts with the proclamation

imitate this way of being. To *be* revelatory of God they exist in relationship with God, and not simply of themselves nor for man. And how is man revelatory of God?

Man manifests this mode of being by way of his submission to all creation (obedience) and his dispossession of self (poverty/humility). To show that this universal manifestation is realized through concrete, everyday practice is the next step.

The everyday character of the Rule

The specific form of practice initiated and exemplified by Francis may be said to have four aspects. It is learned by following a normative Rule with specific injunctions; it is actualized in ordinary, everyday actions and situations; it is persistently and consistently applied; and it itself is the proclamation of the Gospel life, and not a means to an end.

All the versions of the Rule Francis wrote[39] have maintained the spirit as expressed in the opening chapter of the version of 1221: ". . . to live in obedience, in chastity and without property, following the teaching and footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . ." "To follow in the footsteps" (*vestigia sequi*) specifies the guiding priority for Francis: to do what one perceives Christ would do. Francis understands that one learns to perceive this by leading a disciplined life.

The particular content and interpretation of regulations may vary through time and place; but the basic Rule for the friars and the Gospel life it enjoins are never without a specified form. The Rule is transmitted through rules, specific forms of practice. Traditionally these have urged such injunctions as obeying the precepts of the guardian or local minister, praying and worshiping together according to the schedule of the local

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in the same source that "every creature says . . . 'God has created me for you, O man' " and that man should therefore praise God for all creatures. Cf. p. 1029 and note 92, p. 1096. I believe this view of man's domination to be inconsistent with Francis' own writings and even with the tenor of the stories related in this source. My interpretation finds support in Éloi Leclerc, *Le cantique des créatures ou les symboles de l'union* (Le Signe/Fayard, 1970).

[39] A short, simple Rule (no longer extant) was composed in 1209 and approved orally by the Papal See; this was gradually expanded over the next decade as the Order grew and a revised version was made in 1221; two years later it was replaced by the papally approved Rule of 1223 (the *Regula Bullata*), which was a briefer and more precise expression. Cf. *Omnibus of Sources*, p. 28–31.

friary, working and sharing prescribed duties, and serving the wider community in specified ways. Francis forbade his own community to accept or deal with money and exhorted his friars to be as strangers and pilgrims in the world, walking to visit various churches, claiming no ownership of a place for themselves, and gathering under the roof of a stranger to be with others.[40] A typical Franciscan house of formation today might regulate the daily practice in a core schedule of praying the psalms together at seven in the morning and again in the evening, celebrating the Eucharist before supper and joining together for meals and other meetings. Preparations for the liturgy, house duties, and service to the community at large would be required as well and determined individually.

It would be wrong to conclude that the literal execution of such rules exhausts the meaning of the Gospel life; but it would be equally mistaken to suppose that this life is learned and led in the absence of concrete regulation. Once again we find a practiced way of life that is normative in the double sense of prescribing norms of conduct and establishing a universal dimension of a human life that reveals God as all creation does.

For Francis this normative practice pervades everyday life and consistently applies to it. Work is one concrete manifestation of this practice, encouraged in the *Rule* and in Francis' *Testament*, and exemplified by him according to every major biography.[41] But whether working, praying, travelling or eating, the practice is to be continuous:

> Nothing must keep us back, nothing separate us from [God], nothing come between us and him. At all times and seasons, in every country and place, every day and all day, we must . . . keep him in our hearts.[42]

In his *Life of St. Francis*, Bonaventure mentions how Francis continuously practiced this non-separation through prayer:

> Francis strove to keep his spirit in the presence of God, by praying without ceasing . . . whether walking or sitting, inside

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[40] Cf. the "Testament," p. 68, and the "Rule of 1223," p. 61 in the *Omnibus of Sources*. I am grateful to Steven McMichael and Wayne Hellmann, OFM, for pointing out to me the pilgrim practice of Francis and for many other insights into Franciscan life.

[41] See, for example, the "Rule of 1221," Chapter 7, in the *Omnibus*, pp. 37f.

[42] "Rule of 1221," Chapter 23, *ibid.*, p. 52.

> or outside, working or resting, he was so intent on prayer that he seemed to have dedicated to it not only his heart and body but also all his effort and time.[43]

Finally, everyday practice is seen as the very proclamation of the Gospel life, not as means to a personal goal of salvation. The friars are to bear witness and give example by their actions, not to work in order to "get something for their efforts."[44] The verse of the *Canticle* which expresses how man reveals the light of God, proclaims, "All praise be yours, my Lord, through those who grant pardon for love of you. . . ," and not for self-serving ends. For Francis the presence of God is to be found everywhere: he sees the Son of God in all (including the corrupt clergy he alludes to in his *Testament*[45]) and thus can declare that to envy one's brother is to envy God, "who is the only source of every good."[46] But it is our practice which makes this presence visible—to ourselves and to others.

The hermeneutic of practice in Francis

To conclude our reading of Francis, a brief comment is in order as to how Francis himself saw practice as the norm for understanding the Word of God, that is, as a hermeneutical principle.

It is said that Francis was first able to hear the Gospel after he had embraced the lepers. Thereupon he left the world (i.e., the *saeculum* or realm of selfish desire) and embarked upon the life of penance.[47] In turn, his life of strict discipline continued to illumine the Word of God for him. Bonaventure writes:

> His unwearied application to prayer
> along with his continual exercise of virtue
> had led the man of God
> to such serenity of mind
> that although he had no skill in Sacred Scripture
> acquired through study,

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[43] *Bonaventure*, pp. 272f; see also p. 303.

[44] Cf. "The Rule of 1221," Chapter 16, p. 43, and the "Testament," p. 68, in the *Omnibus*.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 67.

[46] "Admonitions" VIII, *ibid.*, p. 82.

[47] "Testament," *ibid.*, p. 67.

his intellect,
illumined by the brilliance of eternal light,
probed the depths of Scripture
with remarkable acumen.[48]

According to Bonaventure, practice and scripture study stood in a reciprocal relation for Francis: the scholars should study "in order to practice what they have heard and when they have put it into practice themselves . . . propose it to others." Francis himself "received from God an understanding of the Scriptures, since through his perfect imitation of Christ he carried into practice the truth described in them. . . ."[49]

A pragmatic understanding of the Gospel underlies Francis' frequent use of scriptural quotations, particularly in the *Rule of 1221* and the *Admonitions*. Throughout Francis' writings it is clear that the scriptures are not quoted as embellishments to the text, but as practical injunctions to be lived. The performance of the Gospel first grants it meaning and conveys its truth. Likewise the Rule, which teaches how the friars are to live the Gospel concretely:

> I entreat the friars to grasp the meaning of all that is written in this Rule . . . putting it into practice, as they repeat and perform what is written in it for our salvation.[50]

A Note on the Mystical Experience

In this paper I have focused on everyday practice in its universal dimension and its normative forms. I have deliberately underplayed the specific experiences of Dōgen and Francis which some would call experiences of mystical union. Yet Dōgen undoubtedly had a profound enlightenment experience while practicing under Ju-ching in China. And he continually alludes to that experience in exhorting the practitioner to "drop body and mind." The identity of realization and practice proclaimed in the *Bendōwa* and elsewhere does not necessarily imply that there is no need for actual attainment, for *kenshō* or satori experience.[51] Likewise, it is

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[48] *Bonaventure*, p. 280. See also Armstrong, *op. cit.*, pp. 182f.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 281.

[50] "Rule of 1221," *Omnibus*, pp. 52f.

[51] Cf. Kōun Yamada Rōshi, "Dōgen Zenji and Enlightenment," *On Zen Practice* II (Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1977), pp. 7–12.

obvious from the connotations of the very titles *Bendōwa* ("Discourse on Negotiating the Way" or on "Making Endeavors to Practice the Way") and *Gyōji* (maintaining one's course in "perpetual practice") that Dōgen does not lapse into the view, popular during this time in Japan, that since man is inherently enlightened (本覚 *hongaku*) there is no need for practice.

Similarly, Francis of Assisi had a powerful conversion experience, went into rapture time and again, and is held to have received the stigmata as evidence of his perfect union with Christ, the object of his contemplation. The biographers relate how Francis' process of conversion culminated one day when, praying alone in the church of San Damiano, he heard the voice of the Lord coming from the cross, was awe-stricken and fell into a "state of ecstacy" (*mentis excessus*).[52] Francis' contemplative attainment had a deep impact on Bonaventure, who describes how the saint exemplified the stage of perfective union in the 11th, 12th, and 13th chapters of his *Life of St. Francis.* And Bonaventure sought in Francis' experience the way by which he himself could reach "the state of contemplation"; the miracle of the stigmata was the inspiration for his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum.*[53]

Yet I believe it to be profoundly significant that neither Dōgen nor Francis spend any time describing their experiences to their disciples. What we repeatedly find in their own writings is an insistence on continual practice, and not a psychology of mystical experience. We surely cannot discount the experiential basis of their writings, but we also cannot expect to find in them instructions for repeating their own experiences. Rather, Francis and Dōgen focus their attention on a way to teach others how to find a continuing experience for themselves—and lose themselves in it.

Summary

In summary, I have suggested a way of seeing religious practice as the constant performance of a particular activity which does not aim at, but embodies unconditioned truth. Specified and transmitted forms of practice, however historically or culturally conditioned they may be, are indispensible. The reach of a specific practice may extend far beyond the particular

[52] Cf. *Bonaventure*, p. 191; and Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

[53] *Bonaventure* pp. 19f.; Armstrong, *op. cit.*, pp. 37f.

posture or rule, but the particular form signifies, or better, incorporates the whole.

I have proposed that the notion of practice to be found in the writings of Dōgen Zenji and St. Francis of Assisi (among many possible others) is precisely of this sort: the everyday enactment of something universal. Finally I have suggested that practice in this sense can function to discern the meaning of "religious" pronouncements and to guide the interpretation of texts.

Implications for Interreligious Dialogue

This view of practice as a "hermeneutical principle" naturally raises certain questions and has implications for interreligious dialogue. We might apply our earlier formulation of the hermeneutical circle and ask: Does one need then to practice zazen in order to understand Dōgen? Do I need to take the Franciscan vows in order to appreciate *The Canticle of Brother Sun*? On the other hand, might it not be that one could practice zazen all one's life and still not understand Dōgen? Or, perhaps one could give away all possessions, live a celibate life, obey superiors, and still not be practicing the Franciscan Rule. Our initial question, "Does one need to practice in order to. . ." has too much of an instrumental flavor. Instead, we might inquire into the actual practice of reading certain texts (and not of doing something else first in order to interpret them). This of course is the traditional business of hermeneutics—but with one fundamental difference. In such practice of reading texts we would be challenged continually to "return the text to the world," to incorporate the message as it is continually discovered into one's concrete life. When practice becomes a hermeneutical principle, the "text" to which it is applied becomes the whole world; application is not a separate moment of interpretation; and appropriation does not follow upon but forms truth.

I have not clarified just what sort of texts are amenable to this practice, and under what circumstances. Certainly some texts give explicit indications that, at least in part, they are to be read as directives, and not assertions. Other texts imply that they are not so much describing reality as challenging one to realize their descriptions. Certainly all texts ask to be heard. Obviously these implications need a much more thorough examination than I have offered here. But perhaps I may be permitted to mention one possible application to interreligious dialogue.

Part of the way we transform the chaos of sounds in a foreign language into meaningful utterances is by actually venturing to speak in that language. We learn to hear clearly by practicing speaking. Sometimes a religious tradition appears to speak in a foreign language, and we learn to translate by practicing within that tradition. But the problem of understanding does not obtain only between different religious traditions. Within one's own "language," one often faces the task of hearing what a person or a text has to say. If that task is made easier because we have learned to perform proficiently in our "mother tongue," or to practice a tradition as our own, then perhaps our greatest opportunity in interreligious dialogue is this: to teach others how we have come to understand our own tradition and its texts, and to learn from others how they articulate and live theirs.

The Canticle of Brother Sun

Most high, all-powerful, all good, Lord!
All praise is yours, all glory, all honour
And all blessing.

To you alone, Most High, do they belong.
No mortal lips are worthy
To pronounce your name.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made,
And first my lord Brother Sun,
Who brings the day; and light you give to us through
him.

How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendour!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon and Stars;
In the heavens you have made them, bright
And precious and fair.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
And fair and stormy, all the weather's moods,
By which you cherish all that you have made.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Water,
So useful, lowly, precious and pure.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
Through whom you brighten up the night.
How beautiful he is, how gay! Full of power and strength.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Earth, our mother,
Who feeds us in her sovereignty and produces
Various fruits and colored flowers and herbs.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through those who grant pardon
For love of you; through those who endure
Sickness and trial.

Happy those who endure in peace,
By you, Most High, they will be crowned.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Death,
From whose embrace no mortal can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin!
Happy those She finds doing your will!
The second death can do no harm to them.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks,
And serve him with great humility.

Canticum Solis

Altissimu, omnipotente, bonsignore,
tue sono le laude,
la gloria elhonore
et omne benedictione.

Ad te solo, Altissimo, se Konfano
et nullu homo enne dignu
te mentovare.

Laudato sie, misignore, cum tucte le tue creature,
spetialmente messor lo frate sole,
loquale iorno et allumini noi par loi.

Et ellu ebellu eradiante cum grande splendore:
de te, Altissimo, porta significatione.

Laudato si, misignore, per sora luna ele stelle:
in celu lai formate clarite
et pretiose et belle.

Laudato si, misignore, per frate vento,
et per aere et nubilo
et sereno et omne tempo
per loquale a le tue creature
dai sustentamento.

Laudato si, misignore, per sor aqua,
laquale e multo utile et humile
et pretiosa et casta.

Laudato si, misignore, per frate focu,
per loquale ennalumini la nocte:
edello ebello et iocundo
et robustoso et forte.

Laudato si, misignore, per sora nostra matre terra,
laquale ne sustenta et governa,
et produce diversi fructi
con coloriti flori et herba.

Laudato si, misignore, per quelli ke perdonano
per lo tuo amore
et sostengo infirmitate
et tribulatione.

Beate quelli kel sosterrano in pace,
ka da te, Alissimo,
sirano incoronati.

Laudato si, misignore, per sora nostra
morte corporale,
da laquale nullu homo
vivente poskappare.

Gai acqueli ke morrano
ne le peccata mortali!

Beati quelli ke trovarane
le tue sanctissime voluntati,
ka la morte secunda
nol farra male.

Laudate et benedicite, misignore,
et rengratiate et servaite li
cum grande humilitate.