

The Ecstasies of St. Francis: The Way of Lady Poverty

by John Ryan Haule

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Rearranging Our Sensibilities

The impetus for this book was a powerful piece of music, Olivier Messiaen's opera, *Saint François d'Assise*. Before Messiaen rearranged my sensibilities, I had paid scant attention to the little man in the robe and tonsure who is remembered primarily for preaching to the birds. He seemed too much a child, too simple-minded, too pious, out of touch with the harsher realities of life. In fact, when I told my brother I had been reading thirteenth and fourteenth century biographies of the saint, he remembered one of the nuns who taught in our grade school nearly a half century ago saying that St. Francis was a "sissy." Perhaps his memory is faulty. Perhaps the nun was commenting on the pronunciation of *Assisi*. However flawed the story, though, it is memorable for expressing a common opinion in a shocking manner. Possibly we think it was permissible for Francis to have been a sissy, for he loved God enough to become a "saint." Or perhaps all saints are sissies to some extent. Such notions lodge in our minds unexamined and reinforce the distance we habitually maintain between "the real world" and religious aspiration.

The Francis of Messiaen's opera is a bird of a different feather. First performed in Paris in 1983, it employs all the idiosyncratic forces of Messiaen's craft, especially the extraordinary "colors" of his unusual chord structures ("modes") and melodies derived from his life-long study of bird song. Messiaen (1908-1992) was a conservative Roman Catholic who considered himself a mystic and composed "liturgies" for organ as well as the better-known *Quartet for the End of Time*, which was written during World War II while he was a captive of the Nazis. He set out to give us the inner life of St. Francis by selecting a few well-known scenes from the earliest biographies and investing them with an emotional reality that only music can convey. There is nothing sentimental, effeminate, childish, or superficial about this Francis. Indeed, the music is almost disturbing. Comprised of melody fragments drawn from the songs of specific birds from Europe and the tropics, it creates a sensibility that transcends the merely human, giving us something larger, impersonal, almost cosmic. Dark conflict and discord struggle with sweetness and light in the soul of a hero neither naïve nor jaded, one who has surpassed us not so much by his goodness as by the depth of his struggle. Here for the first time was an interesting Francis, one who might have something to say to us today.

To find the evidence for this other Francis, I acquired a copy of the nearly 2000-page *Omnibus of Sources* concerning his life story (Habig, 1983). There, despite differences between the biographies, I found an original and uncompromising character who seemed to

belong in the pages of my earlier, still unpublished study of Tantra. Not that Francis is a "sexual mystic" -- though his relationship with Lady Poverty has distinct erotic overtones. Rather Francis resembles the *tantrikas*, the practitioners of Tantra, in that he has taken up the shadow side of his existence, the most disturbing experiences in life, and pursued them relentlessly as the means to achieve higher states of consciousness -- "ecstasies," in which one "stands outside" (*ek-stasis*) one's ordinary self and outside the everyday world in order to contemplate and to live a larger reality. Like the more disreputable saints of Tantra, Francis sought out experiences that scared, disgusted, aroused, and humiliated while cultivating equanimity in the face of them. He found social conformity to be a distraction that would dull his sensitivity to the other-worldly dimensions of life and so deliberately courted public scorn and rejection. In contrast to the world of public consensus, he discovered an alternate cosmos, a sacred world, which he recognized as the "kingdom of God" that Jesus had come to preach -- not a life after death but an alternate and supremely meaningful way to live right here in one's temporal body-and-mind. The kingdom of God was a way of *seeing* the world, a state of consciousness that might fade in and out but that Francis hoped to learn how to stabilize.

Francis, therefore, set out to change his consciousness, and he began precisely where the *tantrikas* began, with his own body-and-mind. By monitoring his mental and physiological states, he paid attention to what happened to his awareness when life presented him with a challenge or an opportunity. The action he took in response to such events brought about another change in consciousness, and he noted that as well. He did not need to flee the world like a hermit in order to stay in a cosmos of bliss. He threw himself into the world of poverty and sorrow, caring for lepers, rebuilding churches, preaching sermons, begging for his bread. But he did these things *mindfully*, and did not lose sight of the fact that the real field of his labors lay within.

Paradoxically, Francis did change the world, began a reform within the church, revealed a new emotional sort of spirituality, and inspired thousands to follow his lead. But that is not the Francis who gripped me. I am drawn to the one who learned to experiment with his own awareness. If we can figure out how an innovator like this operates, perhaps we can learn to re-enchant the world for ourselves. Francis' predilection was for the practice of poverty, a carefully observed set of spiritual exercises that only apparently makes pennilessness and ragged clothes the center of his life. As we will see, his attention to what these practices do to his awareness is the chief thing, the essence of his spiritual practice. To emphasize the *disciplined spiritual practice* that poverty became for Francis, I shall refer to it with the Sanskrit term, *sadhana* ("spiritual practice"). The *sadhana* of poverty, therefore, is not simply a matter of giving up luxuries but rather the *mindfulness* with which poverty is practiced.

We can learn from Francis even if our own predilection is not the pursuit of poverty. Any field of activity conscientiously engaged in with the sort of mindfulness that highlights the changes in our consciousness may become a *sadhana* whereby the world is transformed for us, and ourselves along with it. Possibly we will not want to call this alternate universe the "kingdom of God." We may leave such determinations to each individual's own "theological" -- or "cosmic" or "psychological" -- proclivities. The point is that in working with his body-and-mind Francis employs his own "human nature" to accomplish the spiritual transformation that has made him the saint we have remembered these past eight centuries.

We, too, have a human nature. Our body-and-mind goes wherever we go. Francis has exemplified how we may use our standard-issue humanity to make life transcendently meaningful.

In the chapters that follow, we shall examine the life of Francis as told by his earliest biographers, for it was their intention to convey the spiritual attitude Francis passed on to his followers. A glance at "A Note on the Early Biographies" (on the page following the Table of Contents) shows that there are three sorts of these documents. Some appear to be personal testimonies written by Francis' closest followers. Others were commissioned by the church or the Franciscan Order to support the official view of Francis. The third group was composed by Franciscan enthusiasts who lived too long after the events they describe to have been witnesses to anything but the popular memory of Francis. There is no "objective," historically accurate picture of the saint, but there is a great deal of agreement among the several portraits that remain.

In Chapter Two, we shall consider in general terms the difference between Franciscan and Catholic propaganda and the unexpunged evidence that Francis saw himself differently from the way he is officially portrayed. Our job will be to pay less attention to reports of the miraculous than to notice what Francis was doing with his consciousness. In Chapter Three, we shall investigate the *sadhana* of poverty, and see how he strove for "perfect joy," the emotion that ratified the appearance of the sacred cosmos, and distinguished it from lesser enjoyments. He attended as well to feelings of shame and evaluated the message they were giving him about the purity or impurity of his intentions. Then, in Chapter Four, we shall take up his love affair with Lady Poverty and its parallels in his relationships with Clare, the founder of the Franciscan sisterhood, and Jacoba, his friend and benefactress, to see that the *sadhana* of poverty is an erotic undertaking. Eros describes the emotion and physiology of arousal and its transformation of the conscious field. The fact that it was central to Francis' practice implies no compromise with his celibacy. It describes, rather, his longing, the fact that divine union and the final and complete establishment of the sacred cosmos were always goals to be eagerly approached, like union with the beloved.

Having thereby described the foundation of his daily practice, we shall look in Chapter Five at his growth in prayer or meditation and the ecstatic states he achieved. His was a cosmic mysticism, not merely a vision to be glimpsed but a cosmos in which to participate actively, knowingly, and with joy. The remarkable events that occurred when he was joyfully participating in the sacred cosmos have been presented as miracles by the medieval biographers, but many of them belong to the category of phenomenon that the Hindus call *siddhis*, the "special powers" that come naturally when one is in high-level ecstatic states of consciousness (Chapter Six).

Although we have no texts of his sermons, we have many accounts of his style of preaching. Often it involved gestures and dramatic gambits even more than words. His preaching exemplifies perhaps better than any other activity his experimental, ecstatic style. He employed a kind of spontaneous improvisation to get across his vision and change the consciousness of his listeners (Chapter Seven). Then we shall examine how he brought everything he had learned from his *sadhana* and his ecstasies to everyday life with his brother friars. The best examples of this come from memories of his closest companions, written down after Francis' death -- how they lived together in paradisaical joy and love in

those early days when they inhabited an abandoned building on the bank of the Rivo Torto (Tortuous River). They followed as serpentine a path as that river, winding from epiphany to epiphany, as the entire world glowed with sacred, inner light (Chapter Eight).

In the Chapter Nine, we shall examine the last crisis of Francis' life: as he saw it, the final demand that God made on him, to accept the ecclesiastical veil that was being thrown over his religious order. The *sadhana* of religious poverty was no longer to be followed; the paradisaical life they had lived by the Rivo Torto was forever a thing of the past. In challenging everything he had stood for, it made possible the final apotheosis, the ultimate ecstasy, and a new manifestation of the sacred cosmos. The hagiographers allude to this transformation when they describe his vision of the crucified Seraph, and the appearance of his stigmata. In the final chapter, we shall look back over Francis' achievements and propose a variant program to the *sadhana* of poverty that a modern individual might follow.