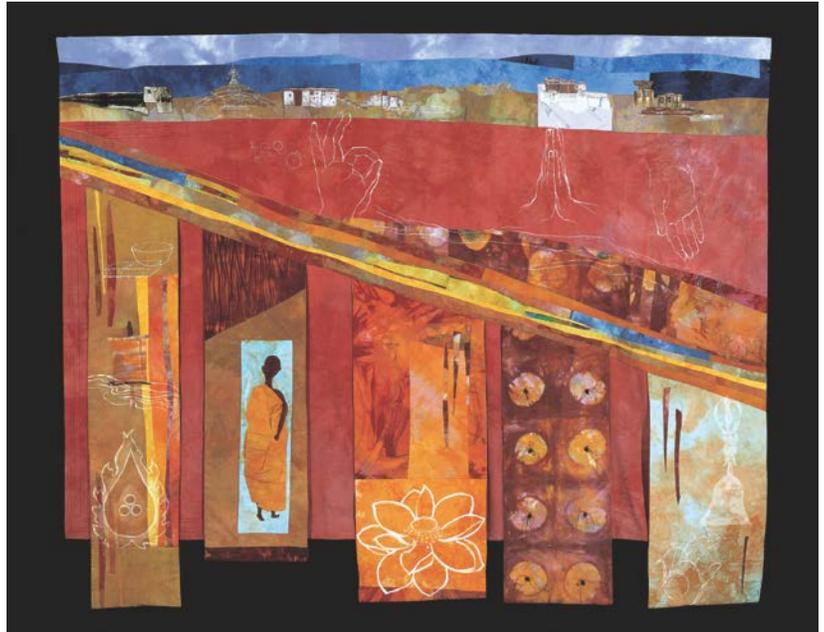


Finding Awakening in All Things

By Thomas Cattoi

While Ignatian spirituality and Tibetan Buddhism are radically distinct traditions, their core teachings reveal a deep spiritual kinship on finding the divine in all things, says scholar Thomas Cattoi.

As Santa Clara prepares to host the Dalai Lama on Monday, Feb. 24, it is worth examining the surprising parallels between the writings of St. Ignatius of Loyola—the founder of the Jesuit order—and a Buddhist text that played an important role in the spiritual formation of the Dalai Lama, *The Way of the Bodhisattva* by the eighth-century monk Śāntideva. While Ignatian spirituality and Tibetan Buddhism are radically distinct traditions, a close look at the core teachings of St. Ignatius and Śāntideva reveals a deep spiritual kinship on the notions of finding the divine in all things, the importance of self-examination, and the way in which sin alienates us from our own potential.



Symbol of Peace by Peig Fairbook and Adele Fox, part of a traveling exhibit called "The Missing Peace: Artists Consider the Dalai Lama." Photo courtesy "The Missing Peace."

THE WAY OF THE BODHISATTVA

While many people in the West are familiar with the Dalai Lama's tireless work in support of the culture and the people of Tibet, relatively few have more than a superficial knowledge of his actual religious beliefs. If one wanted to learn more about the Dalai Lama's spiritual vision, one could very well turn to Śāntideva's *The Way of the Bodhisattva*.

In the eighth century, the Buddhist monk and scholar lived and taught at the University of Nalanda in Northern India. He composed the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, known in English as *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, for the purposes of teaching students how to achieve awakening. It came to be one of the most influential spiritual texts of all times—a text that impacted the lives of millions of practitioners throughout Asia for centuries after its composition.

In recent years, the Dalai Lama has offered public teachings on Śāntideva's vision of the spiritual life in Delhi in 2010 and more recent in Dharamsala in 2013. In 1996, penning the introduction to the latest English rendition of this text, the Dalai Lama noted that during his training as a young monk, he received transmission and explanation of this text from a variety of important lamas. Indeed, he concludes, *The Way of the Bodhisattva* proved to be "very useful and beneficial" to his mind. In Tibet, this text was so highly regarded that even its translation into Tibetan was regarded as inspired, conveying the very essence of the Buddha's teaching.

In fact, Śāntideva never visited Tibet; at that time, Buddhism was just starting to enter the country, and it was only in the 11th century that a second missionary wave would bring the Buddha's teachings back to the Land of Snows. Eventually, however, his writings would gain enormous popularity, and they would be memorized and studied by adherents of all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

What is the secret of this text? One will find many themes interwoven in Śāntideva's poetic vision, but one of the most striking notions is the concept of *bodhicitta*. *Citta* means "mind," "thought," whereas *bodhi* means "enlightenment," "awakening"; as a result, *bodhicitta* as a whole means "awakened mind" or "mind of enlightenment." According to some interpreters, this is the attitude of mind that tends toward the Buddha nature—in other words, the fully enlightened state—whereas, according to others, *bodhicitta* is identical to Buddhahood itself, a reality that is already present in us but which is often concealed from our awareness because of our attachment to the material world. *Bodhicitta*, in addition, has two distinct aspects: ultimate and conventional. The former encompasses the whole of reality and is an insight into the emptiness of reality that transcends conceptualization. The latter, for its part, permeates the conventional realm and manifests itself as our will to free all sentient beings—humans, but also animals and plants—from the cycle of suffering and death. *Bodhicitta* is present in all aspects of the reality we inhabit, and it is our task to learn how to discern this reality within ourselves and within every individual we encounter. Śāntideva teaches us to see the first stirrings of *bodhicitta* in us, to dig it out from under the layers of our habits and attachments, and to foster its development by way of the practice of the six *paramitās* (virtues), which constitute the backbone of the spiritual life.

THE WAY OF IGNATIUS

If we turn to the writings of Ignatius, and specifically to his *Spiritual Exercises*, we will find quite a few elements echoing the writings of Śāntideva that were so influential in the formation of the Dalai Lama. A central theme in Śāntideva's vision is the importance of self-examination. In the second chapter of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, readers are invited to reflect on their sinful past:

In this and all my other lives,
While turning in the round without beginning,
Blindly I have brought forth evil,
And incited others to commit the same.
Deceived and overmastered by my ignorance,
I have taken pleasure in such sin,
And seeing now the blame of it,
O great protectors,
I confess it earnestly.

Similarly, in the First Week of the *Exercises*, Ignatius states that to embark on a path of spiritual transformation, the first point "is a review of my sins. I shall recall to mind all the sins of my life, looking at them year by year and period by period." Later I will have to "weigh my sins, considering the loathsomeness and the malice that every mortal sin committed has in itself, even though it were not forbidden." What the two authors are telling us is that in order to grow closer to God—or to cultivate *bodhicitta*—one has to acknowledge the flaws that separate us from the very ground of our being. For Śāntideva, "vigilant introspection" and "meditative concentration" are important stepping stones on the way to awakening; similarly, in the appendices after the Fourth Week, Ignatius emphasizes the crucial role of what he calls "discernment of spirits"—the ability to adjudicate between good thoughts bringing about consolation and evil thoughts bringing about desolation.

What is the goal of this process of discernment? At the outset of the Fourth Week, in his famous contemplation "to attain divine love," we are reminded that "love ought to be manifested in deeds rather in words"; but also that love emerges from "a deep knowledge" of the many blessings that I have received from God. A few paragraphs later, Ignatius tells us that we should consider

...how God dwells in His creatures; in the elements, giving them being; in the plants, giving them life; in the animals, giving them sensation; in men, giving them understanding. So He dwells in me, giving me being, life, sensation and intelligence, and making a temple of me, since He created me to the likeness and image of His Divine Majesty.

While Śāntideva presents *bodhicitta* as an impersonal reality, Ignatius outlines a vision of the personal God who is present in us but also permeates all aspects of creation. Indeed, Ignatius' Buddhist practitioners are called to discern the presence of the Buddha nature in all sentient beings, and work tirelessly for their liberation; our goal as Christians is to discern God's presence in all things, and to respond to this presence with the gift of our lives.

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