ForeWord Reviews

Faces of Compassion: Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and their Modern Expression
Taigen Dan Leighton
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"We need more understanding of human nature, because the only real danger that exists is man himself … We know nothing of man, far too little. His psyche should be studied because we are the origin of all coming evil," said Carl Jung, in a 1959 BBC interview. Whatever Jung's "coming evil" has become, clearly the times today call for a deeper understanding of human nature and the causes of evil and its antithesis: compassion and understanding.

This book provides one way to achieve such understanding: an analogical means to consider classic bodhisattva archetypes in relation to contemporary life. According to Buddhism, "Bodhisattvas are beings who are dedicated to the universal awakening, or enlightenment, for everyone." The author elucidates the history of Mahayana Buddhism and explains what the bodhisattva ideals and practice are. His goal is "through the models of these bodhisattvas we may find out our own approach to the spiritual journey that acknowledges and connects with all of creation." Since "everyone has the capacity to act as a bodhisattva," the author proposes that by reflecting upon the seven archetypal bodhisattvas, one can understand one's essential spiritual nature that accords with the archetypes.

Leighton, a Zen Priest at the San Francisco Zen Center, draws deeply from Zen traditions in explaining the various archetypes while he uses famous historical and contemporary personages, such as Francis of Assisi, Mohammed Ali, Mother Teresa, Daniel Elsberg, James Joyce, and Albert Einstein, to exemplify how the bodhisattva ideals translate into Western models. Faces of Compassion, while erudite and encyclopedic, is most accessible to one who has a basic understanding of and interest in Buddhism; the lay reader will take from the book an appreciation for the complexity of Buddhist doctrine as well as a sense that bodhisattvas may well be living amongst us.

In accordance with the Buddhist principle of alleviating suffering and illusion, Faces of Compassion endeavors to awaken in the reader a sense of one's own possibility: "Finally we must go beyond the models and examples that inspire us, beyond all the archetypes, and just fully be ourselves. With so much trouble in the world, it is important that we find ways of working together to sustain our intention. The crucial vow of bodhisattva practice is just to continue to awaken and care for all beings."

Duncan Sprattmoran