“To meet the bodhisattvas is to embrace more fully our own humanity, and our ultimate capacity for courage, devotion, compassion, and transcendent wisdom. Taigen Dan Leighton has lovingly illumined still another dimension of the human condition. This is a tour de force.”
— John Daishin Buksbazen, author of *Zen Meditation in Plain English*

Archetypes of wisdom and compassion, the bodhisattvas of Buddhism are powerful and compelling images of awakening. Scholar and Zen teacher Taigen Dan Leighton explores the imagery and lore of the seven most important of these archetypal figures, bringing them alive as psychological and spiritual wellsprings. Emphasizing the universality of spiritual ideals, Leighton finds aspects of the bodhisattvas expressed in a variety of familiar modern personages—from Muhammad Ali to Mahatma Gandhi, from Bob Dylan to Henry Thoreau, and from Gertrude Stein to Mother Teresa. This book also functions as a thorough and engaging introduction to the world of Mahayana Buddhism.

“Vigorous and inspiring, *Faces of Compassion* guides the reader into the clear flavors of the awakening life within both Buddhist tradition and our broad contemporary world. This is an informative, useful, and exhilarating work of deeply grounded scholarship and insight.”
— Jane Hirshfield, editor of *Women in Praise of the Sacred*

“A sparkler among contemporary Buddhist writings.”
— Brother David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B., author of *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*

“This book is as useful as a fine axe… the perfect antidote to today’s spiritual materialism.”
— Peter Coyote, actor and author of *Sleeping Where I Fall*

**Taigen Dan Leighton** is a Dharma teacher in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki, leads the Ancient Dragon Zen Gate in Chicago, and teaches online at the Berkeley Graduate Theological Union. He’s also the author of *Zen Questions: Zazen, Dogen, and the Spirit of Creative Inquiry*, as well as the editor and cotranslator of Dogen’s *Extensive Record.*
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Praise for *Faces of Compassion*

“I appreciate Taigen Dan Leighton’s elucidation of the bodhisattvas as archetypes embodying awakened spiritual human qualities and his examples of individuals who personify these aspects. In naming, describing, and illustrating the individual bodhisattvas, his book is an informative and valuable resource.”

—Jean Shinoda Bolen, M.D., author of *Goddesses in Everywoman* and *Gods in Everyman*

“Vigorous and inspiring, *Faces of Compassion* guides the reader into the clear flavors of the awakening life within both Buddhist tradition and our broad contemporary world. This is an informative, useful, and exhilarating work of deeply grounded scholarship and insight.”

—Jane Hirshfield, editor of *Women in Praise of the Sacred*

“Such a useful book. Mr. Leighton clarifies and explains aspects of Buddhism which are often mysterious to the uninformed. The concept of the bodhisattva—one who postpones personal salvation to serve others—is the perfect antidote to today’s spiritual materialism where ‘enlightened selfishness’ has been enshrined as dogma for the greedy. This book is as useful as a fine axe.”

—Peter Coyote, actor and author of *Sleeping Where I Fall*

“In *Faces of Compassion*, Taigen Leighton provides us with a clear-as-a-bell introduction to Buddhist thought, as well as a short course in Far Eastern iconography and lore that I intend to use as a desk reference. What astonishes me, however, is that along the way he also manages, with surprising plausibility, to portray figures as diverse as Gertrude Stein, Bob Dylan, and Albert Einstein, among many likely and unlikely others, as equivalent Western expressions of the bodhisattva archetype. His discussion provides the sort of informed daring we need to make Buddhism our own.”

—Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Senior Dharma Teacher of San Francisco Zen Center and author of *Taking Our Places*
“Like boys flying kites, spiritual writers tend to let their teachings jounce high in the clouds somewhere. Not so Taigen Dan Leighton. He resolutely reels them down. In *Faces of Compassion* he presents Buddhist ideas and ideals embodied in flesh-and-blood people, examples whom we can love, admire, emulate: a stroke of genius. The result: a sparkler among contemporary Buddhist writings.”

—Brother David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B., author of *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*
Faces of Compassion

Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and Their Modern Expression

An Introduction to Mahayana Buddhism

Revised Edition

Formerly published as Bodhisattva Archetypes: Classic Buddhist Guides to Awakening and Their Modern Expression

Taigen Dan Leighton

Foreword by Joan Halifax

Wisdom Publications • Boston
This book is dedicated
to my parents, Joseph and Rosalind,
who were teaching me about bodhisattvas
before they ever heard the word.
Publisher's Acknowledgment

The Publisher gratefully acknowledges the kind generosity of the Hershey Family Foundation in sponsoring the publication of this book.
May all awakening beings extend with true compassion
their luminous mirror wisdom.

May the merit and virtue
of these considerations of the bodhisattvas,
both of the words herein and in the readers’ hearts,
be extended to all beings,
that all may find their unique, sparkling place
in the way of awakening;
and may the practice of awakening go on endlessly.

—Adapted from a traditional Sōtō Zen dedication chant
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Image from Manual of Zen Buddhism, D. T. Suzuki, used by permission of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.
Foreword

*Lotus in a Sea of Fire*

When we consider the history of the bodhisattva archetypes, we touch the whole and long history of Buddhism. We also touch the present moment, and the suffering of all beings in the world today. And we are invited to consider the future and how we must live, with courage and love wrapping around each other that we and all beings may awaken from this rough dream of our present world to a world that is sane and kinder.

The bodhisattvas blossomed like fine and rare flowers in China some two thousand years ago—though their seeds are everywhere in the old Buddhism of India and we feel their presence in the four boundless abodes of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

With the advent of Buddhism to China and the opening of practice and devotion to the world of lay people, active and compassionate archetypes developed in the ground of everyday life and in the popular imagination. These archetypes have a very human feel to them. They are not remote or passive—but rather involved with the world, with you and me, with all beings.

The bodhisattva archetypes all manifest flavors of compassion, and each bodhisattva has delayed her or his departure from the world of saṃsāra until beings everywhere are free of suffering. Their sacrifice touches us and has inspired millions for thousands of years. And their presence is in our very time pointing to guiding principles for a more compassionate and sane world.

Though bodhisattvas are mythic figures, they also are functions within the psyche, archetypes of compassion; and myth and psychology fuse in the presence and activity of these compassionate beings.

Tibetan Buddhists call bodhisattvas “Awakened Warriors,” for they manifest great strength of character and virtue for the sake of others. And as all bodhisattvas forever practice the perfections of generosity, wholesomeness, patience, enthusiasm, mental stability, wisdom, steadfast dedication, skillful
modes, powers, and helpful knowledge, they nourish these qualities in us as we study, practice with, offer devotion to, and emulate them; finally we may discover that we are they.

The heart of the bodhisattva is always turned toward other beings. Such a one chooses to place herself in the most difficult situations, and has the energy and natural commitment to harrow souls from the hells that they have created. And she does this with no attachment to outcome, with a spirit of radical optimism.

Indeed, the whole life of the bodhisattva is nothing other than helping others. Yet the bodhisattva is like a wooden puppet whose strings are pulled by the suffering of the world. There is a feeling of choicelessness and egolessness when the archetype of the bodhisattva is realized. The right hand takes care of the left without hesitation, not shining from praise or shrinking from blame.

Bodhisattvas also realize the great natural boundlessness of mind and heart, and are the exemplars of mother-wisdom. They cannot be burned by the fire of the world though they stand in the middle of it, a lotus in a sea of fire. They inspire veneration—whether we are Buddhist, Christian, Jew, Muslim, or just plain human—and remind us of what we can be and how we can be in the face of outrage and misery.

*Faces of Compassion* is a wonderful resource and source of guidance and teaching. I am very grateful to Taigen Leighton for his careful research and inimitable spirit. Both make this important work an invaluable companion to our lives.

Each night, the echoes of this chant, the Four Bodhisattva Vows, can be heard in many Buddhist temples around the world:

*Creations are numberless, I vow to free them.*
*Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to transform them.*
*Reality is boundless, I vow to perceive it.*
*The enlightened Way is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it.*

This is we who are making the bodhisattva’s vows—and what are we vowing, other than to be who we really are?

Joan Halifax Roshi
Upaya Insitute, New Mexico
Preface

This book is an introduction to the psychology of bodhisattva practice, imagery, and imagination, directed at the many Westerners now exploring traditional resources for spiritual values and for wholesome, productive lifestyles. This book is also a comprehensive introduction to Mahāyāna, or “Greater Vehicle” Buddhism, the movement that developed in India to promote universal liberation of all beings, with the bodhisattva or enlightening being as its ideal. In many different schools and cultural forms, this became and remains the Buddhism of Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. The varieties of Mahāyāna are now present and growing in Western countries as well.

As Buddhism made the huge cultural leap from India through Central Asia to China, the Chinese, with their own highly developed culture and religious traditions, struggled to make sense of the huge range of Buddhist sutras, or scriptures, and its diverse schools and ritual forms. As genuinely Chinese schools of Buddhism emerged, they each developed systems for classifying the teachings according to the different sutras or styles of teaching. But these Chinese schools, which were also adopted in Korea and Japan, each held their own favorite sutra as supreme, so that most of these systems were hierarchical and included strong sectarian biases. The modern cultural leap from Asia to the Americas and Europe is a much more radical leap even than the shift from India to China. This book offers a means for Westerners to make sense of the various aspects of Mahāyāna teaching through the major iconic bodhisattva figures, each with their own complex approach to awakening awareness and activity. The range of these bodhisattvas, each associated with particular sutras, schools, and awakening practices, helps explicate how the differing approaches in Buddhism interrelate and fit together, but from a non-sectarian, more inclusive and expansive perspective.
We will explore the major East Asian bodhisattva figures, who represent various aspects of enlightened activity and awareness, and are forces for well-being in our lives. These bodhisattvas are Mañjuśrī, expounder of wisdom; Samantabhadra with shining practice; compassionate Avalokiteśvara (perhaps more familiar as Kannon, Guanyin, or Chenrezig); Kṣitigarbha (certainly far more familiar as the Japanese Jizo); Maitreya, the future Buddha (well known in the guise of the Chinese fat, laughing buddha); Vimalakīrti, the enlightened layman; and the historical Buddha Śākyamuni (before becoming the Buddha, himself a bodhisattva known as Siddhārtha Gautama). All of these figures, in their images and even their names, have entered Western culture as Buddhist practice has been transplanted here. But as yet, there has been no comprehensive introduction to the background and significance of these characters and their enlightening realms, a need this volume aims to redress.

This book does not aspire to present a scholarly, exhaustive survey of the full historical development, or every symbolic aspect of the iconography of the major bodhisattva figures. Nor would I presume or desire to present a neat systematic encapsulation of all Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine and potentiality. Rather, this is an overview for a general audience of the bodhisattva figures and their stories as valuable psychological and spiritual resources. This book will provide general surveys of the history and modes of the bodhisattvas as a reference for seasoned Buddhist practitioners and students, while also serving as an introduction to the tradition for spiritually interested newcomers. Although it is clear from the work of modern historians that the realities of Asian history and of social organization in Mahāyāna cultures often have fallen short of actualizing the bodhisattva ideal, in studying that ideal we may reclaim the Mahāyāna rhetoric and worldview and apply it to the urgent issues in our world today. I sincerely hope that this introductory survey will inspire further studies of the bodhisattvas and their history, both scholarly and practical, as well as renewed creative application and integration of these figures into modern Western cultures.

My focus for this study is the bodhisattva imagery and lore from East Asia, although I will make some reference to Indian origins and contemporary Tibetan understandings. My own background as a longtime practitioner and priest in the Japanese Sōtō Zen tradition—mostly in America with a number of Japanese and American teachers, and also for two years in Japan—may inevitably color my approach to a certain degree. Yet, I also have some small practice experience with Tibetan, Vietnamese, and
Burmese Buddhist teachers, and have attempted to incorporate as wide a perspective as possible into this presentation of the bodhisattva figures. I have offered some interpretations and perspectives arising from my own practice and experience, hoping to provoke further interest and contemplation of the bodhisattvas and their work. But certainly this book is not the final word on the bodhisattvas, and significant viewpoints and interpretations of the bodhisattvas may remain unnoted.

The archetypal bodhisattva figures are living and evolving as dynamic embodiments of spiritual life and activity and are not the property of any particular tradition or religious institution. Included here among exemplars of the different archetypal bodhisattva figures are a variety of familiar, modern personages from non-Buddhist spiritual traditions. It is my hope that this will demonstrate that we may readily view the bodhisattvas as spiritual helpers in the world quite apart from any restriction or allegiance to the “Buddhist religion.”

By featuring some of the people in our own world who are spiritual benefactors, I wish to encourage recognition that, indeed, despite all the problems, cruelty, and despair of our world, we need not see the bodhisattva ideal as irrelevant, idealistic, or beyond our reach. I have enjoyed selecting these exemplars, taking the opportunity to celebrate some of the people who have been personally inspiring to me. Although I have attempted to mention people from a range of arenas and contexts, any personal selection will be to some degree idiosyncratic. A great many more bodhisattva guides will come to mind for each reader upon even slight consideration.

The examples herein include persons of our own time, and some still alive. This is not to demean the ageless ancient great cosmic bodhisattvas, but rather to incite deeper consideration of the meaning of awakening activity and awareness in the contemporary world. I hope these sometimes provocative examples will demonstrate that the timeless inclination toward awakening is still active. Spiritual development and awakening still occur in the world, and enlightening beings still walk among us, perhaps helping and inspiring us where we might least expect them.

The three opening chapters provide an overview and introduction to Mahāyāna philosophy, history, and practice as a background to consideration of the seven featured bodhisattva figures. In the interest of making this book more accessible to general readers, I have refrained from using extensive footnotes, but have given citations for sources of quotes in notes at the end.
of the book, divided by chapters. An annotated bibliography also appears at the end to reference the sources used for each chapter. A chart with aspects of the seven major bodhisattvas is given as an appendix, including their names, main sutras and schools, primary iconographic features, associated figures and sacred sites, and principal modes of practice. This chart may serve readers as a helpful reference tool while navigating the strange Asian names in the text.

The names of the bodhisattvas are given first in the text in Sanskrit, with Chinese and Japanese versions provided, as well as in Tibetan and Korean as relevant. In most cases I have primarily used the Sanskrit names, even when referring to their East Asian manifestations. An exception is made for Kṣitigarbha, who because he is so much better known by his Japanese name Jizō, is referred to by that one instead. Avalokiteśvara is also well known by her Chinese name Guanyin and her Japanese names Kannon and Kanzeon, and I use all of these names for Avalokiteśvara as appropriate to context—but in terms of the overall Avalokiteśvara archetype these names can be seen as generally interchangeable.

The contemporary pinyin transliteration system has been employed for Chinese words and names. The greatest difficulties of pronunciation with this system are syllables beginning ɭ, pronounced like ɭh; x, which is pronounced like ɭs; and ɭ, pronounced like ɭts. An exception to the use of pinyin in this book is made for references to the Chinese religion Taoism, which has entered English usage with that spelling, rather than the pinyin Daoism.
Acknowledgments

Over a period of years a number of people have contributed to my thinking about bodhisattvas as archetypes, either in informal discussion or in classes. Others have suggested exemplars I cite herein, or shared with me their personal experiences of some of these exemplars. I would like to thank the following people for their helpful input: Stephen Colgan, Sonja Gardenswartz, Djann Hoffman, Lisa Faithorn, Joanna Macy, Reb Anderson, Alan Senauke, Diane Martin, Tom Skomski, Jack Earley, Patricia Gleeson, A. J. Dickinson, Rick Sowash, Michael Monteko, John Heinz, Mark Tatz, Shari Young, Gary Snyder, Linda Grotelueschen, Wendy Lewis, Linda Kotcher, Ann Overton, Mayumi Oda, Mel Weitsman, Fran Macy, Norman Waddell, Preston Houser, Jack Van Allen, Richard Payne, Melvin McLeod, Peter Rutter, Elaine Parlman, Charles Page, Martha Wax, Marge Franz, Ruth Poritz, and David Chadwick. Of course, any misstatements, errors, confusion, or distortions in what follows are solely my responsibility.

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Along with sources cited in the bibliography, I am especially grateful to Daniel Ellsberg for kindly providing me with excerpts from his forthcoming memoirs containing material referred to in chapter 4.

I would like to thank all of my teachers for their guidance. But it would be impossible to name them all since teachers are everywhere, in all our life experiences. Of the exemplars of the bodhisattva archetypes to be cited in the text, about a dozen of them have been, mostly from afar, important examples and mentors in my own life. Many other particularly helpful guides have appeared in various circumstances. Although too numerous to name, without many of them this book would not have happened.

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Finally, I am deeply grateful to Ellen Randall, whose support, patience, and loving-kindness during the process of writing this book was a great encouragement.
The Bodhisattva Ideal
Benefiting Beings

The Heroic Benefactors

Bodhisattvas are beings who are dedicated to the universal awakening, or enlightenment, of everyone. They exist as guides and providers of succor to suffering beings, and offer everyone an approach to meaningful spiritual life. This book is a practical, contemporary guide to the major traditional bodhisattva figures. Through the models of these bodhisattvas we may find our own approach to the spiritual journey that acknowledges and connects with all of creation.

A buddha, or “awakened one,” has fully realized liberation from the suffering of afflictive delusions and conditioning. This liberating awakening of a buddha is realized through deep experiential awareness of the inalienable undefiled nature of all beings and phenomena, all appreciated as essentially pristine and imbued with clarity. There is a way in which everything is all right, just as it is. Such insight in turn can be said in some ultimate sense to actualize this liberation for all beings, who may, however, not yet realize this truth of openness and freedom themselves due to obstructions from their own individual, deluded consciousness.

A bodhisattva, carrying out the work of buddhas, vows not to personally settle into the salvation of final buddhahood until she or he can assist all beings throughout the vast reaches of time and space to fully realize this liberated experience.

The bodhisattva path is not restrictive or exclusive, but offers a wide array of psychological tools for finding our personal path toward a meaningful, constructive lifestyle. By following teachings about generosity, patience, ethical conduct, meditative balance, and insight into what is essential, we can
come to live so as to benefit others. Thereby we also learn compassion for ourselves and see that we are not separate from the persons we have imagined as estranged from us and as opposing our hopes and desires. Self and other heal together.

The bodhisattva is the heroic ideal of Mahāyāna “Great Vehicle” Buddhism, the dominant branch of Buddhism in North Asia: Tibet, China, Mongolia, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan, as well as Vietnam in Southeast Asia. This tradition is now spreading and being adapted to Western cultures. The word bodhisattva comes from the Sanskrit roots bodhi, meaning “awakening” or “enlightenment,” and sattva, meaning “sentient being.” Sattva also has etymological roots that include “intention,” meaning the intention to awaken, and “courage” or “heroism,” referring to the resolution and strength involved in this path. Bodhisattvas are enlightening, radiant beings who exist in innumerable forms, valiantly functioning in helpful ways right in the middle of the busy-ness of the world. As soon as we are struck with our own urge or intention to take on such a bodhisattva practice, we also are included in the ranks of the bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas can be awesome in their power, radiance, and wisdom; or they can be as ordinary as your next-door neighbor.

Bodhisattvas are not restricted to the Buddhist religious institution. A bodhisattva appears in whatever milieu is most helpful according to this way of seeing spiritual practice, which has been preserved not only in Buddhism but in many of humanity’s cultures through aesthetic, socially progressive, philosophical, technological, or charitable forms. We may acknowledge as bodhisattvas persons from all spiritual and cultural traditions, not only Buddhism. In the opening chapters we will discuss some of the principles of bodhisattva activity common to all of them, before exploring the stories of each of the major archetypal bodhisattva figures.

**BODHISATTVAS AS ARCHETYPES**

We can gain insight and guidance into how to engage in spiritual practice and live wholeheartedly, in accord with the light of the bodhisattva tradition, by studying seven bodhisattva figures as psychological and spiritual models. Some of these bodhisattvas are mythical figures; others are based on actual persons in human history. Most appear in a variety of forms. Many specific historical personages traditionally have been designated as incarnations or representatives of these primary bodhisattva figures.
The bodhisattvas presented in this book are considered as archetypes, fundamental models of dominant psychic aspects of the enlightening being. They certainly overlap in their qualities as bodhisattvas, sometimes considerably, but each emphasizes particular aspects or modes of awakening, and each reveals an overall character and style that practitioners may identify or align with at different times or phases in their practice. As they work together for universal liberation, as archetypes all of these bodhisattvas have their own psychological approach and strategy toward practice and their own function as spiritual resources. They exist as external forces to provide encouragement and support, as internal energies to be fostered, and, above all, as examples of modes of awakened practice to emulate and incorporate.

Archetypes are crystallizations of components of the psyche, and catalysts to self-understanding. In Western psychology Carl Jung and his followers have studied the way in which humans externalize and project certain unconscious, instinctual patterns of their own character onto others. Many of the world’s mythologies reflect these psychological patterns and potentialities. By examining such common patterns we can recognize and understand aspects of ourselves. If all beings have the capacity for clear, open, awakened awareness posited by the teaching of buddha nature, then by seeing the bodhisattvas as archetypes, patterns, or approaches to awakening activity, we may learn models with which we can each express the elements of our own enlightening and beneficial nature.

Some of the major bodhisattva figures are traditionally androgynous, especially Avalokiteśvara, who is venerated in both male and female forms. In their archetypal expressions among worthy people in our world, all these figures are manifested by both women and men. Unlike the Greek gods and goddesses, the bodhisattvas are not archetypes specifically of men or of women, but of all human beings as positive spiritual agents. Occasions when some of these bodhisattvas have taken on forms or practices that illuminate gender issues will be discussed, but these distinctions are always secondary to the fundamental problem of alleviating suffering and liberating all beings.

The bodhisattvas do not usually have as wide a body of mythic tales as the Greek gods and goddesses; they are not archetypes of aspects of the psyche in the same sense as the fleshed-out characters of Greek myth. Yet, we may view bodhisattvas archetypally because, in the lore that has accumulated around each figure, we may indeed discern emerging patterns and styles of spiritual activity.

The archetypal characters of the bodhisattvas are clarified through the stories about their complex, varying iconography, the different forms in
which they commonly appear, through their evolving role in Mahāyāna cultural traditions, and through their diverse forms in different Buddhist cultures and in the cults that have venerated them. Many of the bodhisattvas have particular mountains or other sacred sites dedicated to their worship, as well as a rich folklore of colorful teaching anecdotes about them. Traditionally the different figures also are considered to embody particular sutras, schools, and philosophical branches of the Mahāyāna teaching. Thus we might make sense of the full range and diversity of the Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrines by seeing how they are represented by the various bodhisattva figures.

SUGGESTING CONTEMPORARY EXEMPLARS

In addition to identifying people who have been designated historically as examples of these bodhisattvas, we may speculate about contemporary and traditional figures of Western culture who might be viewed as representatives of these archetypes. Some of the exemplars mentioned herein will be my own associations, including those who have personally inspired me. Other exemplars come from the suggestions of students in classes that I have led concerning the bodhisattvas. You are invited to identify further examples, in your own life as well as among culture heroes. There is nothing ironclad about the associations presented in this book, and many exemplars might easily fit into more than one category. The process of suggesting exemplars may help us to see the aspects of these spiritual archetypes that are closest to us, and that we can more fully adopt for ourselves. This may also give us a perspective on the relevance to contemporary spiritual needs and concerns of the different bodhisattvas.

I want to make it explicit at this point that by designating known persons as examples of the bodhisattva archetypes, I am certainly not saying that these persons are (or are not) bodhisattvas, or even “saints” for that matter. Nor am I attempting to “claim” them for the Buddhist religion. The point is that everyone has the capacity to act as a bodhisattva. Furthermore, everybody, at some times and in ordinary everyday ways, does act kindly and beneficially as a bodhisattva. All human beings, even great cultural heroes, might also at times act in unfortunate ways, out of small-mindedness and from petty concerns or desires.

The persons to be cited as exemplars, as diverse as Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Muhammad Ali, Rachel Carson, Clint
Eastwood, and Gandhi, are mentioned because whatever worthiness they are known for exemplifies and clarifies aspects of particular bodhisattva archetypes. I have no desire, nor have I the perfect knowledge, to make judgments about the true character of these persons. My accounts of them will of necessity be speculative, cursory—even playful and provocative—intended simply to suggest how they illuminate aspects of the bodhisattvas. Where these persons have shadow sides to their personalities or careers, I hope to mention these flaws only inasmuch as they may illuminate the archetypal qualities of the bodhisattvas being discussed.

I am mentioning some famous people in the context of discussing bodhisattvas only because they may be generally familiar as examples. Bodhisattvas usually are unknown and anonymous rather than celebrities, and function humbly and invisibly all around us, expressing kindness and generosity in simple, quiet gestures. Having opened their hearts beyond delusions of craving and estrangement, bodhisattvas can just be themselves, not seeking out good deeds to perform, but in their very ordinariness presenting inspiring examples that help others. The glamour and worldly fame of celebrity are contrary to the approach of bodhisattvas. Any bodhisattvic qualities of the people to be mentioned might be seen as manifesting in spite of their fame and renown, although some exemplars have skillfully used their reputation as a means to support enlightening work.

As it happens, a number of the noted modern exemplars who will be cited are involved in facing social issues, some of them even opposing governmental or other authorities in activist campaigns. Traditionally recorded bodhisattva lore and Mahāyāna history tend to emphasize the contemplative and devotional aspects of the bodhisattva work, apart from political embroilments. Although bodhisattvas take on innumerable styles and approaches, all bodhisattvas are in some way concerned for their fellow beings, especially for all those suffering in unfortunate conditions. Even the bodhisattva yogi sitting in meditation by himself near a remote mountaintop can never truly sit alone. Myriad beings are mysteriously present, and all society is subtly and intimately affected, whenever one takes on the bodhisattva project. Insight into the wholeness of reality, and acceptance of its dynamic presence just as it exists in our immediate state, are not separate from the responsibility to regard and respond creatively to the suffering of our fellow creatures.
THE PRIMARY BODHISATTVA FIGURES

Many Mahāyāna scriptures, called sutras, include descriptions of numerous assemblies that have gathered to hear the Buddha’s teaching, sometimes including pages full of names of different bodhisattvas. Some of these bodhisattvas exist in our own realm and context, while some come from other “world systems,” which we might describe as other solar systems or galaxies, or even alternate universes. The Mahāyāna vision is vast. It includes many different dimensions of space, time, and mind. Some sutras clarify that there are innumerable bodhisattvas, that in fact there is not a single place or time where there are not bodhisattvas and buddhas. Some of these bodhisattvas may be as immense as solar systems, some as tiny as molecules. Nevertheless, only a handful or so of bodhisattva figures stand out most prominently in the culture of East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The bodhisattva figures featured in this book are cherished mainstays within all branches of the East Asian Buddhism of China, Korea, and Japan, and more recently in the unfolding interest in Buddhism in the West. They are all part of the Tibetan pantheon of bodhisattvas as well, although with varying degrees of importance. A great array of other bodhisattva figures have significant roles in the Vajrayāna “Diamond Vehicle” tradition, a specialized development of the Mahāyāna also known as tantric or esoteric Buddhism, which dominates Tibetan Buddhism and also was foundational in Japanese Buddhism.

The following brief introduction to our major bodhisattva archetypal figures will allow the reader to begin to envision how the bodhisattva teachings are embodied during the rest of the introductory material, before the chapters focusing on each bodhisattva.

The first bodhisattva we will examine is Siddhārtha Gautama, who became the historical Buddha Śākyamuni in sixth-century B.C.E. India. His life story and path to awakening constitute an important model for all Buddhist practitioners. His home-leaving is an especially significant part of the tradition that has become controversial in the contemporary context of feminism and family values, requiring our renewed attention to its inner levels of meaning.

Mañjuśrī is the bodhisattva of wisdom and insight, who penetrates and expounds the fundamental emptiness or true nature of all things. He often rides a lion and wields a sword, which he uses to cut through delusion. He sits at the center of Zen meditation halls, encouraging deep introspection.
and the awakening of insight. Often depicted as a young prince, he also may manifest as a beggar.

Samantabhadra is the bodhisattva of enlightening activity in the world, representing the shining function and application of wisdom. His name means “Universal Virtue.” He rides on a six-tusked white elephant, but he is hard to encounter, often performing his beneficial purpose while hidden in worldly roles. Samantabhadra especially represents luminous vision of the interconnectedness of all beings.

Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, is probably the most popular bodhisattva and appears in more different forms than any other bodhisattva. He is called Chenrezig in Tibet, the “Goddess of Mercy” Guanyin in China, and Kannon, Kanzeon, or Kanjizai in Japan. Sometimes he has a thousand hands and eyes, sometimes he has a wrathful mien and horse’s head. One meaning of his name is “Regarder of the World’s Cries,” implying empathy and active listening as primary practices of compassion. An emanation himself of the popular cosmic Buddha Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara’s own female complement, Tarā, is also very popular. Both Bodhidharma, founder of Zen in China, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader, are considered incarnations of Avalokiteśvara.

Kṣitigarbha is of lesser importance than the other bodhisattva archetypes in terms of philosophical doctrine, but is perhaps equal to Avalokiteśvara in popularity in Japan, where he is called Jizō. His name means “Earth Storehouse” or “Earth Womb.” Popularly considered a guardian of travelers and children, in Japan he is associated with ceremonies for deceased children. Traditionally he is guardian in the intermediate states between births, and especially practices to benefit those in the hell realms. Jizō usually appears as a shaved-head monk, carrying a wish-fulfilling gem.

Maitreya is the disciple of Śākyamuni Buddha who the Buddha predicted would become the next incarnate buddha in the distant future. Awaiting his destiny as the future Buddha, the Bodhisattva Maitreya now sits in the meditation heavens of our human realm of desire, contemplating how to save all suffering beings. Many of his messianic followers believe it is our job to prepare the world for him. But he also has incarnated in the world as a bodhisattva. In China, Maitreya is nearly synonymous with his incarnation as the historical Chinese Zen monk Hotei, familiar as the fat, jolly buddha of Chinese restaurants.

Vimalakīrti, the hero of a popular sutra, was a lay disciple of Śākyamuni whose wisdom and enlightenment surpassed those of all the other disciples
and bodhisattvas. As a layman he practiced in the midst of the delusions of the world without being caught by them, all the while benefiting beings and outshining even Mañjuśrī in eloquence and understanding. Famous for his thunderous silence, Vimalakīrti fully expressed the inconceivable quality of the bodhisattvas.

As inspirations, models, and spiritual resources, all these bodhisattva characters are alive and dynamic. The descriptions of them in this book are introductions, not the final word by any means. As the bodhisattvas enter our culture, they will find new guises and evolving qualities. Each of us may bring them to life in our own way. Before we proceed with more detailed discussion of the minds and activities of each bodhisattva figure, some more background into the world of the bodhisattvas will be helpful.

THE INCONCEIVABLE VOW

A key aspect of bodhisattva practice is the commitment or dedication to the way of awakening, and to carrying out this commitment and practice for the benefit of all. The aspiration to care for and to awaken all beings (in Sanskrit bodhicitta, literally “enlightening mind”) is considered mysterious and auspicious. This heartfelt care for suffering beings and fundamental questioning into the meaning of our lives arises unaccountably amid the multitude of psychological conditionings in our experience, known and unknown. The Buddhist scriptures give various detailed descriptions of the course of the bodhisattvas’ personal development of character and deepening of capacity, from this first impulse until the fulfillment of buddhahood. But although bodhisattva qualities may unfold over great stretches of time, the initial aspiration of beginners seeking the Way is said to be identical in nature and value to that of an advanced bodhisattva.

The commitment to awakening developed from such original intention is expressed in terms of numerous different bodhisattva vows. Sometimes these are limited and specific, as in the vow to alleviate some particular social problem, or to help a situation of personal suffering in one’s purview. But the bodhisattva vow is also vast and all-inclusive. Many of the different bodhisattva figures we will discuss have their own particular set of vows. But there are also general bodhisattva vows common to all Mahāyāna practitioners. The best known are the four inconceivable vows. They are:
Living beings are infinite, I vow to free them.
Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to cut through them.
Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them.
The Buddha Way is unsurpassable, I vow to realize it.

These vows seem impossible in terms of the conventional human perspective on the world. But the bodhisattva viewpoint demands and is activated by this thorough, universal level of commitment, while simultaneously encompassing the ordinary kindness and helpfulness that we all may perform in our everyday lives.

The salvation implied in the first vow of liberating all beings is expressed in the teaching that all creation is endowed with buddha nature. The awakening experienced by a buddha is this realization that all beings are fundamentally open, clear, and totally integrated with the whole of existence. This experience, tasted by many yogis or spiritual practitioners throughout the ages, is not about becoming a different person than who we already are. It is not a matter of achieving some new state of being or of mind in some other, “higher” place or time. Rather, it is the nature of reality already present and always available to everyone. The problem is that we are obstructed from realizing and enjoying this reality, and then creatively embodying it. This obstruction comes from our confusion, our grasping, and our aversion, which are produced through the complex web of psychological and cultural conditioning affecting us throughout our whole lives. Our work, individually and collectively, is to break through or let go of the attachments that block our inherent freedom and radiance.

The vow to free beings is enacted by helping others when possible to find ways to express their own distinct awakened buddha nature. Such activity is geared to what is truly practical and effective. In addition to this limited assistance, the bodhisattva also leaps into the inconceivable by seeing the need to sustain this vow, extending it beyond all limits. The limited vow, while carried out as a practical expedient, is self-defeating if we are willing to avert our gaze from those beyond the boundaries we have constructed. The commitment of the bodhisattva is to join the fellowship that will eventually carry this clear, serene, and dynamic awareness to all dissatisfied beings. The job of the community of bodhisattvas is to nurture and finally bring out the kindness and clarity of all humanity (not excluding concern and connection with all the other creatures in our greater environment).

The universal inclusivity of freeing every single being in space and time
may make this vow seem impossible, inconceivable, or simply irrelevant to our own lives. But if we contemplate truly saving only a smaller sampling, say all of those who live in the same neighborhood as us, or all the people with whom we work, or perhaps just those in our immediate family, we may realize that this task is also far from simple, perhaps equally inconceivable. Opening up to the infinite scope of all beings allows us to relate cooperatively with particular, familiar beings, but also to see our vital intention as directed to the wider unlimited context. This spaciousness helps us to interact more clearly in our ordinary realm.

The second of the four vows is the work of cutting through our inexhaustible delusions about self and others. The word “delusions” in this vow is sometimes translated as “desires.” But desires in themselves are not the problem as much as our attachments and graspings activated by desires. Certainly it is very helpful to find satisfaction in the wonder of our life just as it is, without seeking to acquire more and more, of both material and spiritual goodies. Living simply, needing less, increases the richness of our lives as surely as, if not more than, accumulating wealth. But we must also realize that seeking to rid ourselves of all desires is just another desire.

Attractions and aversions that may form desires are wired into our being as fundamentally as the positive and negative charges of protons and electrons in the atoms of our bodies. As the great Japanese Zen master Dōgen says, “In our attachment blossoms fall, and in aversion weeds spread.”\(^1\) This is how the world works; we cannot avoid its changing. But we are caught by delusion when we become attached to objects of attraction or aversion, when we seek to hold in our grasp the things we have imagined will guarantee our happiness, or to repel what we fear will harm or displease us. The bodhisattva way offers practices to help us face our passions and let go of our obsessiveness about them. We can acknowledge our feelings of likes and dislikes without trying to escape from ourselves, yet without having to reflexively act them out in the world. We can also experience that these objects of desire and aversion are not ultimately separate from ourselves and do not have independent reality or power over us.

The third vow, to enter the boundless dharma gates, refers to the richness of the teachings that are available about how to live most fully. The bodhisattva vows to follow through and take on all beneficial practices and teachings. The Sanskrit word dharma has a complex web of meanings, which include, firstly, “truth,” or “reality” itself. Dharma also indicates the teachings
about that truth, often referring specifically to the Buddhist teachings, or Dharma, so “dharma gates” refers primarily to teachings or entryways into reality. The word dharma is also used for the manner, method, or path of following the teaching so as to come into accord with the truth of reality. Finally, as a technical term in early Buddhist psychology, dharmas are the specific elements of mind and matter that make up this reality and that are delineated in a complex analytic system about the component realities in our experience, useful as a guide for understanding the world. In this book, the word Dharma will be capitalized when it refers primarily to the Buddhist Dharma, that is Buddhism, and will be lower-cased when it refers more generally to reality, teachings, or the other meanings, although the word often implies more than one meaning.

The bodhisattva studies all of the gateways to reality, using whatever teaching systems or approaches may be helpful, slowly and steadily developing the tools to act effectively. These gateways to reality are boundless because the opportunities for finding teaching are as numerous as the people or events we encounter. Each person and every situation we face has something to teach about how to be more fully ourselves. When we see every encounter as a potential teaching and source of awakening, regardless of the apparent status or position of those encountered, we are fulfilling this vow.

The fourth vow, to accomplish the unsurpassable Way of awakening, emphasizes the practical, experiential side of the bodhisattva ideal. The bodhisattva teachings are not an intellectual doctrine or system to be debated or taken as an object of belief. The point is to embody and personally fulfill concrete expressions of bodhisattva intention and attitude in the context of our own situation. We may humbly recognize our present shortcomings and lack of awareness, but we can also forgive ourselves and dedicate ourselves to actualizing universal awakening.

This fourth vow of enactment of Buddha’s Way refers to the fundamental practice of taking refuge in buddha. We return home to the principle of awakening and trust the enlightening ones of the world to guide us, also radically trusting our own true, awakened self. We return home to our deepest, kindest, most dynamic and open self that is fully interconnected and integrated with all others, beyond our conditioned prejudices about our estrangement. This taking refuge is a psychological orientation and direction, and also the fundamental formal ritual and practice of Buddhism.
In approaching the bodhisattvas as “archetypes,” the question may arise as to whether these figures are external entities to venerate, or simply internal forces to uncover and express. In the understanding of Buddhist nondualism, both of these facets are germane.

Traditionally, Mahāyāna devotees often petition the bodhisattvas to come and render personal aid and support. A prominent sutra (which is itself part of the Lotus Sutra), the Universal Gateway of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, the bodhisattva of compassion, specifically guarantees that endangered believers need only call out her name and this bodhisattva will arrive to rescue the faithful. Along with invoking the bodhisattva figures, Mahāyāna devotees in all Asian cultures similarly call on a variety of nature spirits and deities. While these spirits derive from the indigenous shamanic and animist spirituality native to all Asian countries, they have also been integrated into Buddhism. In Japan, for example, an elaborate system was devised to identify native spirits with respective bodhisattvas. Meditative practices may naturally open awareness to such nonconventional spirit dimensions.

A psychological reductionism that understands the bodhisattvas solely as internal, psychic forces fails to capture the basic spirit and dynamic richness of Mahāyāna Buddhism as a religion that has brought spiritual support to many throughout the ages. We can honor the traditional view of the bodhisattvas as external, cosmic beings while simultaneously seeing them as internal, psychological forces available as potentialities to be realized within us. Zen and tantric teachers have emphasized that we must incorporate the bodhisattva teachings into our own life experience and activity. It is not enough to have some intellectual conceptualization of buddha nature if it is not actualized and manifested in practice in the world.

However, teachers from the more explicitly devotional Pure Land schools of Buddhism may counter by pointing out the egoism and even arrogance exhibited by Zen people if they think that they can fulfill buddhahood solely by their own talent and effort. Instead, the Pure Land outlook within the Mahāyāna encourages humbly entrusting oneself to the benevolence of the buddhas and bodhisattvas working in the world. This debate has been characterized within some Pure Land schools as between “self-power” versus “other-power.” But we may transcend this conceptual dichotomy by remembering the fundamental Buddhist teaching about the illusory nature of self-other distinctions.
In Mahāyāna understanding, all dualities are seen as provisional, conceptual discriminations that may be functionally practical in specific situations, but are barriers to openness and awakening if conceived of as ultimately real. The sacred is not seen as existing separate from, or outside, the ordinary worldly realm. Nirvāṇa, the serene salvation from all struggle, exists in the midst of samsāra, the endless run-around of cause and effect and grasping for gain, like a lotus blossoming out of muddy water. Practitioners may retreat for some time into meditation hermitages or monastic enclosures, but the point of this training is to better equip them to emerge and work calmly and effectively to benefit all beings in the world.

The teaching of universal buddha nature and interconnectedness describes how we do not exist in isolation. Rather, all beings are intimately interrelated in our effects on each other. We are the product of our genetic and cultural inheritance; of the intricate web of influence of family, friends, and acquaintances; and of innumerable other unknowable conditions that bring us to our present state. One famous Mahāyāna depiction of this reality is the net of Indra, the Indian creator deity. In this metaphor the universe is described as a vast net, and at each junction where the meshes meet sits a jewel. Each jewel reflects the light of all the jewels around it; and all of those jewels reflect others around them. In this way, the whole universe of jewels is ultimately reflected in every single jewel. This holographic image expresses our deep intimacy and interrelatedness with everything in the universe.

Given this truth, the Mahāyāna goal of universal liberation is simply a realistic approach. When we understand our deep connection to each other, the dichotomy between self and other—which is basic to our usual psychological, ego operations—is exposed as a provisional fiction. Ultimately we are each distinct expressions of one whole, not separate competing entities. It is impossible to be truly free and enlightened oneself if others down the street are in misery. To ignore the suffering of others is to ignore some part of oneself. This does not mean that we destroy the ego, or deny the presence of our particular body and mind, our own life situation. Rather, we more fully engage in and care for our own unique personhood by understanding the larger view as well. We begin to live and practice with awareness of the illusory nature of this self-other separation that is continuously produced by our conditioned mentality.

If self and other are not separate, we need not discern whether bodhisattvas are inside or outside. The point is to effectively help beings, either as self or as others. We can see bodhisattvas as external forces when that is
helpful, or we can see bodhisattvas as components of ourselves when that helps us to find spiritual well-being for self or others. The reality of our lives includes both attitudes.

**BODHISATTVA TIME AND THE NATURE OF REBIRTH**

When we look at the world around us, we cannot avoid seeing the cruelty and atrocities, the suffering and misery, both in news headlines and in the lives of people we know personally. The problems sometimes seem so intractable that it may appear ludicrous to hope for even a slightly better world—let alone “freeing” all living beings! While acknowledging these problems, the bodhisattva also sees the situation through other perspectives. Informed by Buddhist awakening, one experiences the fundamental rightness of things just as they are, while not ignoring the awareness of beings enmeshed in suffering and distress. Bodhisattva practice aimed at relieving and ending this suffering is not only a lifelong affair, but is also seen as a commitment to be carried out over many lifetimes. This is manifested historically by magnanimous, enlightening traditions in spiritual and social realms that are carried on by caring individuals over many generations. But commitment over innumerable lifetimes is also understood in terms of bodhisattvas’ rebirth.

The historic reach of the Mahāyāna Buddhist viewpoint includes vast stretches of time. Śākyamuni Buddha is not regarded as having originated a brand-new teaching or practice, but rather, as one who rediscovered something very ancient and fundamental to existence. A series of seven buddhas, culminating in Śākyamuni Buddha, are commonly named in the Mahāyāna liturgy. These seven are the buddhas of our own age, or kalpa, but they represent a great number of other buddhas before them, in previous kalpas.

In modern cosmological terms, we might equate the cycle of one universe from the big bang to its final collapse with one kalpa. Buddhist cosmology sometimes also equates our universe with a progression of four kalpas, the arising, enduring, and fading kalpas of a world system, and then the fourth, vacant or empty kalpa between material universes. A traditional, more poetic expression of the duration of a kalpa is the time it would take for a bird with a piece of silk in its talon, flying once every century over the top of Mount Everest so that the silk brushes the peak, to completely erode the mountain.
Various times are given for the period before Maitreya Bodhisattva will become, as predicted by Śākyamuni, the next incarnate Buddha. One calculation is $7.5 \text{ billion years}$. Over such reaches of time, the Mahāyāna claims, generation after generation of bodhisattvas have experienced this awakening, and transmitted the teachings and practice to keep it alive. Even when the teaching passes away, new buddhas emerge to rediscover it.

Returning to the more familiar reaches of human history (of this kalpa), we can see bodhisattva practice being transmitted over many generations in the activity and inspiration of great individuals, both famous and unknown. Such dedicated people work in diverse ways and through various social movements, both ongoing and newly arising, to better the world and enoble humanity.

In Asian cultures from India through East Asia, the traditional belief, often predating Buddhism, is that all people are reborn over many lifetimes. Tibetans say that we have all lived so many lives that every single person we pass in the street was in some former life either our parent, child, or spouse. The bodhisattva vow is to continue enlightening practice throughout these many rebirths. Great bodhisattvas are said to choose their rebirth so as best to benefit beings, and reappear over the generations doing helpful work.

This idea of rebirth may be familiar in Asia, but it can be quite alien to Western cultures. Despite the recent fashionableness of notions of reincarnation, the strangeness of the teaching of rebirth is a significant obstacle to many Westerners interested in Mahāyāna practice. A noted American scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, Robert Thurman, has proclaimed that bodhisattva practice is meaningless without the belief in rebirth. Another fine Buddhist scholar told me that she cannot herself be a Buddhist because she cannot bring herself truly to believe in rebirth. But bodhisattva practice is still possible if this teaching is understood only metaphorically. We can engage in bodhisattva activity and help maintain the teaching so that other generations can continue this work and be “reborn” into bodhisattva dedication. In history we see many people doing valuable work after being inspired by the examples, either personal or historic, of previous noble individuals. Yet the whole of the teaching of rebirth might also be seen as sensible and coherent.

Buddhist rebirth is not the same as reincarnation. It is axiomatic in Buddhism that there is no separate, eternal, or personal self to be reborn. Rebirth is a matter of cause and effect. The pathways of the intricate web of causation are never clear and apparent, and cannot be untangled in a linear
manner so as to satisfy limited human rational faculties. But all actions do have results, and all these effects in turn have their impact, even if not apparent to us. In this sense rebirth occurs moment after moment. We take on the changing limitations of the life appearing before us as a result of having done so previously. We continue to identify ourselves in accord with the habits of our conditioned awareness and with the continuing production of the illusions of this world that result from the intricate web of phenomenal causation. This happens moment after moment, day after day.

The particular mind and person we are now will not be reborn in some other body after death. But the sum of our spiritual and psychic energy and intention does have its effect. This spiritual vector, including our conscious and unconscious vows and predispositions, may be taken up and carried on by some other being born into a body in the world. In this way, also, over the course of many lives, the bodhisattva vow is continued in the world. According to this understanding, an incarnate Tibetan lama does not invade and take over a new body after death like some parasitic extraterrestrial alien. Rather, the lama passing away sends out his or her blessing of bodhisattva vows into the world. Then some new being with sufficient openness, clarity, and compassion takes on that intention.

We need not adopt unquestioning belief in such a doctrine of rebirth “on faith.” But attentive and mindful meditative practice may lead us to experience the truth of the interdependent co-arising of all things as it operates in our own life, and to see this individual life emerging out of emptiness right now, moment after moment, due to the tangled web of causes and conditions. When we try to analyze these rebirth teachings from our background of Western rational logic we are likely to be confounded and perplexed. But this teaching can also allow us to see our life and its meaning afresh, from a wider, deeper perspective. An old friend shared with me an illuminating and marvelously nonlinear teaching that our past lives in our “next life” may well be different from our past lives in this current life.

A bodhisattva need not have any certain theoretical understanding of rebirth. In fact, all fixed theoretical understandings are considered serious obstacles to awakening. I know of contemporary Buddhist practitioners who have had visions of persons in specific places and times, which may well be their “past lives.” But these practitioners do not hold to any particular interpretation of what those visions represent and do not care if anybody else perceives the visions according to some defined theory of rebirth.

The point is to take on bodhisattva commitment in our life here today.
How we take care of this present life and the world that meets us does make a difference. Over the range of bodhisattva time our ongoing contribution to awakening conduct and awareness helps to actualize such an outlook for others. The ever-present reality of the radiant beauty of all things may also be universally recognized over time. This is the bodhisattva ideal.

**Ascending and Descending Bodhisattvas**

It may be helpful to consider the relationship of bodhisattvas and buddhas, how they are different and how they work together. One account of the bodhisattva path might be described as ascending to buddhahood. Step by step, over seemingly endless lifetimes, the bodhisattva develops enlightening understanding and practice, and skillfulness in helping beings, until at some time she is finally ready to realize anuttara samyak sambodhi, Sanskrit for the “unsurpassed complete perfect enlightenment” of a buddha. In this practice of cultivation, through strenuous effort and diligent practice—whether by meditation, chanting, or intense faith—the bodhisattva works her way up to the stage of buddha. By stripping away delusions and realizing emptiness, in this practice one aims to achieve enlightenment.

We might also describe the bodhisattva descending from buddhahood. The story goes that it was only at the urging of the Indian deity Brahmā that Śākyamuni Buddha agreed to stay in the world to help teach those beings who were ready how to enter into the way of awakening. Although a buddha teaches and demonstrates this awakening, a buddha is also one who already sees the world as whole and perfected. In this sense, a buddha does not need to do anything and has nothing to accomplish. Bodhisattvas, on the other hand, do the work of the buddhas in the world, acting to relieve suffering and liberate all beings.

All the bodhisattvas that we will discuss as primary archetypes are known as “tenth-stage,” or fully developed, bodhisattvas (although Maitreya is sometimes described as abiding in the eighth stage). Practically speaking, they have the same understanding as a completely awakened buddha, but they take on the job of helping all suffering beings also to actualize, or make real, this awareness. Although they may have realized the equivalent awareness of a buddha, they return to the state of bodhisattva to perform beneficial work for beings. The role of a bodhisattva as a buddha’s assistant is depicted iconographically by bodhisattvas standing as attendants around the image of a buddha. In this way, individual bodhisattvas may be commonly
associated; for example, Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra are attendants on either side of Śākyamuni Buddha, and a retinue of twelve bodhisattvas, including Avalokiteśvara and Jizō, descends to the world along with Amitābha Buddha as he manifests.

The descending bodhisattva practices in order to enact and express enlightenment, not to achieve it. There is nothing to gain; it is only a matter of all beings reintegrating and reconnecting with their own fundamental, inherent buddha nature. But the descending bodhisattva practices no less intensely than the one ascending, demonstrating cultivation for those who will be encouraged by it. The great cosmic bodhisattva figures may sometimes intentionally appear in a limited incarnate human body for some specific temporary purpose. But when bodhisattvas descend and return to delusion for the sake of beings, usually they actually return to delusion. A bodhisattva manifesting in the limitation of a particular body, in a specific time and place, necessarily is fooled by the world of delusion. He does not just pretend to be in that world, but actually takes on and is gripped by delusion for the sake of demonstrating awakening in the midst of it.

The classic illustration of this aspect of the bodhisattva path is the parable of the prodigal son in the *Lotus Sutra*. In this story a son and father have a falling-out. The son leaves home and travels the world, getting involved in various misadventures. Meanwhile the father works and acquires a fortune. One day the son, in his wanderings, arrives at the town where the father is living. The son, reduced to a beggar in rags by the troubles of the world, loiters in front of the gates of a magnificent mansion, which happens to belong to the father. The father instantly recognizes his son and sends his attendants to bring the son to him. But the son, full of self-contempt, is terrified and runs away when he sees people approaching him from the big house. The father understands and has one of his men don rags and befriend the son, then offer him a job shoveling manure in the fields of the father’s estate.

Gradually the son becomes comfortable and skilled in his job as a menial laborer and is given increasing responsibilities in the father’s business. Eventually, after many years, the son is given the job of managing the whole property. On his deathbed the father gives the son ownership of the whole business and finally announces that his new heir is, in fact, his true biological son. In the same way, bodhisattvas return to the world of delusion, forgetting they are children of buddha, and work their way back to realizing their original, inalienable buddha nature.
Bodhisattvas engaged in their beneficial work in the world take on whatever roles may be helpful. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* offers comprehensive and colorful accounts of the different practices of bodhisattvas. These narratives make clear that bodhisattvas may take on many guises aside from that of formal spiritual teacher. Bodhisattvas may be female or male, and may appear as lay person or priest; doctor, scientist, or fortune-teller; king or beggar; engineer, bus driver, architect, or laborer; or a musician, magician, teacher, or writer. A bodhisattva may be a janitor, gardener, farmer, actor, soldier, storyteller, athlete, dancer, housewife, courtesan, child—even a politician or lawyer! Any of these may be great bodhisattvas.