

**September 11th Memorial Service,
New York City Shambhala Center
October 30, 2001
Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche**

On a sunny Tuesday afternoon in late October, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche walked with friends to the southern tip of Manhattan. Beside him was Nancy Murphy, a sangha member whose brother died in the attack on the World Trade Center. Their small group walked down Broadway towards Ground Zero and soon began glimpsing the devastated site from the side streets they passed.

Inside the inner area the breeze was calm, softening the typically acrid air. A wooden platform was offered to family members and firemen that provided a view encompassing twenty acres of wreckage. The charred remains of several buildings still stood and there were several distinct plumes of light gray smoke. Several stories of the second tower leaned against another building, exposing snapped beams and grillwork. Other areas had collapsed below street-level. Orange cranes, firemen, and workers with hard hats sifted through cement and steel, demolishing and recovering the debris.

Rinpoche and Nancy stood alone towards the front of the platform and talked for a while. Holding his beads, Rinpoche put his hands in angali and became absorbed in practice. Everyone in the group was aware that, despite a tight schedule of teachings and an impending departure for India, Rinpoche's visit to Ground Zero occurred exactly forty-nine days after September 11: the day Buddhists traditionally commemorate the deceased's passage into their next life.

When Rinpoche finished his practice, the group walked north along the waterfront observing boarded-up stores and apartment buildings and talking in the changes in the once bustling promenade. The empty spaces where people had lived, worked and played was ghostlike and overwhelming.

After a brief lunch, they drive to the Chelsea district where one-hundred Shambhala practitioners gathered for a Tuesday afternoon nyinthun. Rinpoche joined them and the sangha meditated together for over an hour. During a break, more people entered the shrine room, which filled and overflowed into the adjoining community room. The attendees represented all levels of practice and various traditions. Many people walked through the Shambhala center doors for the first time.

After almost three-hundred people had settled into their seats, Rinpoche took his place on a throne beneath the Shambhala banner. Acharya Judy Lief stood, took the microphone and introduced the Sakyong.

Judy Lief: Thank you for coming on this special occasion. Every Tuesday, for the past two years, we have had a weekly dharma gathering. Some of you have been coming for a long time, and some people may be here for the first time: we welcome you especially. For those of you who are new to this place, this is the New York Shambhala Center. It isn't often that we have the opportunity to gather old students together with very new students and people who came just to see what this place is about. I apologize for the crowded space, but please do join us on this auspicious occasion. Today, we are honored to have Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche here. Mipham Rinpoche is the leader of our entire Shambhala community worldwide. He is the son of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, founder of the New York Shambhala Center, Naropa University, and Shambhala International. Rinpoche will make some remarks and lead us in a traditional Buddhist memorial service. After the

service, there will be a reception where you will have a chance to meet Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche. Thank you for joining us for the ceremony, and the general gathering of community energy.

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche: Thank you. I'm very happy that I can be here with all of you on the forty-ninth day after such tragedy. In the Buddhist tradition, we perform this ceremony forty-nine days after a person has passed away. We do meditation and practice for both ourselves and the person, or in this case, the many people who have passed away. It is a way for us to understand the process of death, and also to understand the process of living altogether. I am extremely happy that people have shown care and concern and have allowed the process to become a way of coming together for solace and comfort.

On one hand, the situation is very fresh, and on the other, it happened a while ago. We have all gone through a lot in the past few weeks. I last visited New York City a few days before the actual event. A lot of friends and people I know here were very concerned; this is a way for me to check in with them, to perform this ceremony and be in New York before I travel to India for a three-month retreat.

During this process, we're learning and trying to understand. The situation reaches the heart of the Buddhist, Shambhala, and warriorship teachings. We are learning how to be in a situation where life and death are two sides of the same sword, where every situation we encounter reminds us of the painful things that happened to other people, things that have happened to us. None of us are immune to it. The Buddhist teachings emphasize that we must experience life and death as a part of our meditation practice; nothing is excluded.

Frequently, people get involved in Buddhism as a way of helping their personal lives. They think, "Buddhism is good for my life: it supports what I'm doing right now." But one of the basic tenets of Buddhadharma is that we are in a constant cycle of birth and death. The teachings and the experiences in our lives remind us of this situation, and help us examine why this happens and how it occurs. According to Buddhist principles, this is the result of an inability to recognize our basic Buddha nature. If we want to acknowledge our basic nature, we must look at our own mind, our own heart and the minds and hearts of others. We must ask, "What is the essence of our experience?"

In the Shambhala tradition, this essence is basic goodness. Fundamentally the basis of everything is completely pure and good. It is pristine from the beginning. Our basic wisdom has never been tainted, has never wavered. It is not particularly good as opposed to bad; instead it is a quality of complete wholesomeness and totality.

Buddhism leads us to recognize this in our own being. Through the course of meditation, we look at our own mind and see what is going on in our thoughts. We ask, "Who am I?" We experience many different thoughts and emotions: we're angry, jealous, prideful, or hurt about something. As these experiences come up in meditation, we ask, "Is that who I am? Is that who I really am, that thing, that emotion, just because that's how I feel right now?" As we begin to meditate, we look at that and realize, my goodness, that's not all, there are other things going on. In fact, the sense of uneasiness and emotion begins to dissipate and something more pervasive takes over. Many things come up in our minds: a lot of discursive thought, lots of emotion. But what is their true nature? The process of meditation allows us to dig deeper and ask what, fundamentally, the basis of our true nature is. In the dharma, we look for the truth, and in meditation we discover it.

Truth is not an easy thing to discover because a lot of things come up. Our tendency is to question our goodness and our wisdom. When we question these things, we begin using seemingly more convenient ways to deal with our problems. We are less ready to use compassion, more ready to use aggression. So we have to continuously remind ourselves of basic goodness.

Ultimately, right now, all of us are looking at this situation. Today, when I visited Ground Zero and looked at what has transpired, I realized that in my own mind all this horrible action is taking place, and at some level it is due to a lack of compassion. There was a lack of compassion when we were very young, and while growing up as children. There is an overall lack of compassion. We must ask why people suffer, why they get mad and do things like this. How are we, ourselves, responding? What is

going to solve the situation? If we had a compassionate approach in place, could all these things have taken place? I don't know. But that is one of our challenges. In Buddhism, we propose an overall sense of compassion, without foolhardiness. We meditate to develop our wisdom. By meditating, we can understand what is going on in our minds and in the world. Then, when we rise from practice, our actions are based upon wisdom, and that is compassionate. In the Buddhist tradition, when we meditate, we're understanding and getting familiar with compassion. And when we get up from the meditation seat, we try to act in a compassionate way. A lot of times when we're meditating, we think "I'm meditating, sitting formally on the cushion, and this experience is isolated." When we get up, post meditation starts and many things come into our minds. Really, we should continue contemplating, thinking, absorbing, and deepening. After we rise, we try things out. Within the Buddhist tradition, we say that when we try to have compassion, our mind opens up and strengthens. The Shambhala tradition of warriorship teaches us to be brave, not to narrow our view. I know the affective force of a lot of tragedy. And at the same time, I know the affective force of compassion. A lot of times, we think about ourselves while we are meditating. We meditate and meditate, and most of our discursiveness, most of our thinking is about ourselves: what I want and what I can get. Generally speaking, after we've meditated and contemplated what we want, we go get it (laughter). That's why our meditation is usually very successful (laughter). And it's interesting because that is the power of meditation: sitting in order to contemplate and deepen. We ask why we do things, what needs we're trying to fill. We aren't always able to understand, but we go over it again. Then, when we get up, we can try a different method, a different system. Right now, a kind of openness and raw compassion is taking place in this city. We have woken up to some basic truth of the situation. Not to say that we need these jolting experiences in our life all the time; instead, as we meditate, we can contemplate these truths. But, we could not have a more effective wake-up call. It encourages us to contemplate what is important and how we are going to direct our lives. It lays a foundation for contemplating the purpose of our existence and the way we will act from now on.

Ceremony of Sukhavati

Today we're going to do a ceremony in which we generate compassion and extend it out. This is also a group meditation that harnesses the power of the mind and the power of the heart. Once we pass away, the physical elements of our body dissolve. Buddhist teachings describe the phase we enter after death as very disorienting: the physical body has dissolved and our sense of an existing self has slipped away. We grasp for that self, and it is said that if we're accustomed to getting up in the morning and having breakfast with our family, we still get up and have breakfast with our family, but no one sees us. We attempt to go through the usual routine, like a ghost. The consciousness is still there, but the physical form has dissolved. If we can recognize that this is occurring, we can deepen our understanding of selflessness and emptiness. In the Buddhist tradition, we speak a lot about emptiness because people spend their whole lives trying to create a self. But when they meditate and look at the self, they can't find anything. This is not selflessness. "Selflessness" implies that there is a self and I'm being "self-less." If I said I was "self-less," that would still be an act of self, based upon something real. In fact, there never was a self. Buddhism studies selflessness by asking, "How real is a mirage?" If water was pretending not to be water, that's one thing. But if a mirage of water is pretending to be something else, then the whole thing is a mirage. When we pass away, the experience of missing the sense of self we held on to throughout our lives is disorienting: it is the ultimate rug pulled out from beneath us. The experience of dying is of falling from a high place. There is darkness. It is so disorienting that the consciousness tries to find some kind of ground and, in a sense, is reborn. Every week, for seven weeks we go through several phases of dying. As our

karmic propensity enters the process, we begin to take on the mindset of the next birth. This process is called bardo in Tibetan, meaning "intermediate period." The beings who have passed away are going through this bardo. During this process they can understand the nature of their own minds. Just as in life, we can recognize this nature through meditation, by contemplating emptiness and practicing compassion, so in death, we are also supported if we have a powerful teacher or a powerful sangha able to do compassionate practice for us.

During the bardo period, as a community, we open our minds to those who have passed away. Their experience is more refined than it is within a physical body, more available, and more receptive to expressions of prayer and aspiration. The meditation we do for people who have passed away is potent. We can actually reach them. The most compassionate thing we can do is let them know they have passed away. So often, we get stuck and don't know it. As a community, we can tell them they have died and are having various experiences. We tell them that there is a clear light, which is their own mind. We warn them not to be fooled by the appearances that have come up.

During the bardo state, all of us have the potential to practice meditation and achieve enlightenment: the same potential we have in life. If the deceased person is not able to do that, the community prays that they have a free, well-favored birth and are reborn into a situation where they are able to practice compassion and wisdom. Please use this ceremony to practice and develop your own compassion. We don't want these beings to suffer. We want them to achieve happiness and peace, and we express these desires. We offer them the truth of the situation, telling them to let go and move onto the next situation, the next life. In that way, we help them. We'll chant the Heart Sutra to purify obstacles, and then continue with Tonglen practice and the Sukhavati.

Together, all in attendance chanted the heart sutra: "Thus have I heard, once the Blessed one ..." Then Rinpoche offered instruction for tonglen practice. As everyone present extended compassion, loving kindness, and strength to the victims and their families, and took in their pain and confusion, Rinpoche offered guidance for deepening the practice. He unified the group and emphasized the power of a compassionate mind. In a moment of profound sharpness, Rinpoche reminded the sangha that they could relate with the victims' experience: the deceased were close and accessible.

When the practice ended, papers shuffled as everyone took out the Sukhavati chant. Rinpoche was handed a bowl containing a card labeled "Victims of the September 11 Attack." Rinpoche lit the card on fire, symbolizing the aspiration that the souls be liberated from this life. Over 250 voices chanted the liturgy and as the card burned to embers, they repeated, "NAMO AMITABHAYA HRIH, NAMO AMITABHAYA HRIH..." until the flame went out.

A sharp silence followed. Rinpoche requested the assembled to dedicate the merit to the liberation of all sentient beings. Then he made his concluding remarks.

Thank you everybody. Please take care of yourselves: continue practicing and take care to strengthen so you can bring these profound issues and topics into your heart. It is very important. I am also going into retreat to understand and strengthen. There is only so much we can perceive at one time, in fact, the process of our whole life is to understand, mature and develop a bigger mind.

When painful situations occur that affect us personally, our instinct is to clamp down. And at the same time, while we're trying to open our minds and hearts, we shouldn't stretch ourselves too much, become ragged and run-down. Please do formal meditation practice, follow your breath, say a mantra, do a visualization, practice compassion. But please, take the time to be by yourself. Settle down. See how you feel. Recognize how you are feeling. Get a sense of where you are, and then move forward a little bit. Any formal meditation that we do is based on our ability to do it. That ability comes from strength, our windhorse, our own life-force. It is an essential element for living a fruitful and wholesome life. If we have the energy, we're able to

do very powerful practices, where we think and contemplate others like we just did. It's not easy. We must have the courage to recognize the importance of these practices and to do them.

Take the time at work, or wherever you may be, to have a moment of reflection. From there, other practices can transpire. We realize other things that we can do. But first find a balance and take care of yourself. Then you will be able to help others.

For everyone involved at the Shambhala Center, or various other places: please decide what is worthwhile. We each have our own life, our own path, and we must look for ourselves to see if this is good, if it is real, and how we can utilize it. Please take advantage of the freedom and open-mindedness that we have. It's very important to make use of this time because, as you know, death comes without warning. Tibetan poets say that our life fades before us like the movement of a lama dancer's robe. His robe flickers and life is gone.

Right now, we're trying to look at the situation and it seems really big. So we find balance in appreciating the situation, but not getting consumed by it. That's the challenge I will leave you with, because we tend to vacillate between extremes. Thank you, good luck, my thoughts, prayers, and wishes are with you.

Take care.