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A BUDDHIST REFLECTION

ON THE TRAGEDY OF

SEPTEMBER 11

Ajahn Jayasaro

Foreword

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in New York City, a ceremony was organised at Benjamabopitr Temple, Bangkok, Thailand in remembrance of those who passed away in that tragic event. Ajahn Jayasaro gave a Dhamma talk on September 17, 2001 to an audience including members of the diplomatic corps giving a Buddhist perspective on the tragedy .

Ajahn Jayasaro's main point was that the root cause for such an inhuman act was a fundamental lack of wisdom and understanding of the human condition. In this connection, he reiterated that one of the Buddha's teachings is that all human beings are companions in birth, in old age, in sickness and in death. Buddhists may train themselves to cope with that type of situation through stillness, wisdom and reflection. Through forgiveness, more lives may not have been lost and peace may have been better maintained.

We are profoundly grateful to Ajahn Jayasaro for his kind permission to publish this Dhamma talk. We sincerely hope that this book will provide a different but useful perspective to those who are determined to maintain global peace and security.

May all beings live in peace, respecting and understanding one another.

Na hi verena verani
sammantidha kudacanam
averena ca sammanti
esa dhammo sanantano.

At anytime in this world,
Hatred never ceases by hatred,
But through non-hatred it ceases.
This is an eternal law.

Dhammapada Verse 5

9/11

A Buddhist Reflection

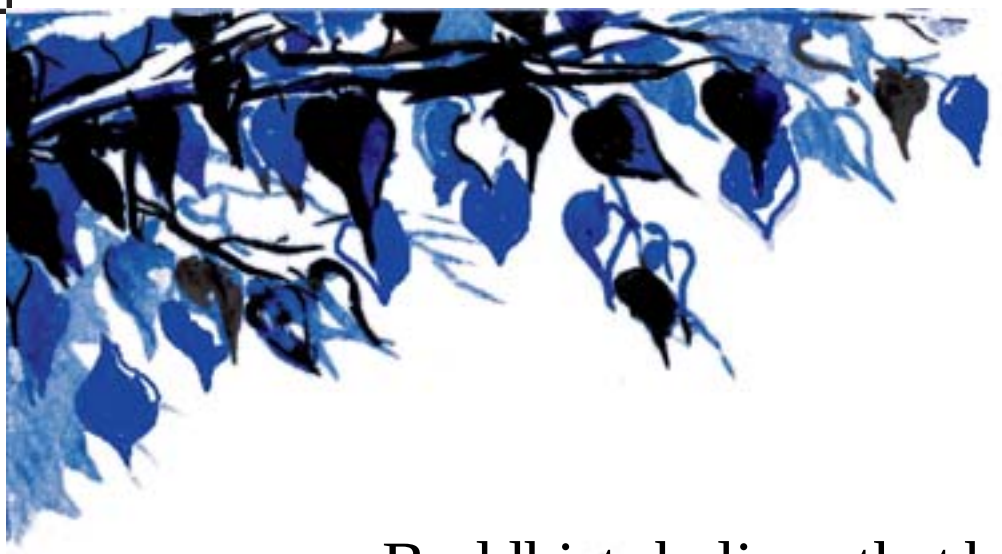
Buddhists believe that good actions create what is called *puṇya*, a positive karmic force, the benefits of which may be shared with those who have departed from the human realm. Consequently, ceremonies

involving dedication of *pu a* lie at the heart of Buddhist funeral rites. We have gathered here today in order to take part in just such a ceremony. Although such an event is very common in Buddhist temples throughout Thailand, today's proceedings are unusual for a number of reasons. To begin with, those with whom we are sharing *pu a*, lost their lives not here in Bangkok but many thousands of miles away in New York. Secondly,

most of them, and indeed many of the people here today are not Buddhist. And thirdly, I myself, although ordained in the Thai monastic order for over twenty years, am not Thai by birth, but English. It is an unusual event then, but one that I think bears testament to a reassuring fact: that globalization of sympathy and concern can be every bit as real as the globalization of hatred and aggression. We meet in response to the wish of the Buddhists

of Thailand to share *puja* with those who died on September 11, and also to formally offer condolences to all who have lost loved ones.

My particular role in the proceedings today is to give a Dhamma discourse. It is the Buddhist custom that at times of bereavement monks are invited to speak about the nature of human existence.



Buddhists believe that being reminded of simple truths about the human condition at such times helps us to come to terms with grief and pain,

and may enable us to respond wisely to the unwelcome changes in our lives that have occurred. Listening to religious teachings that help us to understand things more clearly, is also considered to be one of the best ways of creating the *pu a* that we intend to share with the departed.

I would like to start by making a few remarks about the Buddhist attitude to the fundamental question of life and death. Despite the widespread

dissemination of the Buddhist teachings in the West over the past fifty years or so, a number of misconceptions about them remain. One of the most unfortunate of these is the tendency to perceive in Buddhism a religion of indifference, one which gives scant importance to the sanctity of human life. In this presentation Buddhists are said to think that everything awful that happens to people is just their "karma"; in other words it is fated, it

serves them right, it's their own fault. Buddhists believe, it is said, that the wise person should simply accept the workings of karma and remain calm and indifferent. This may sound somewhat familiar; it is however not at all what the Buddha taught. It is a view that misrepresents the nature of karma, and the wise relationship to it that the Buddha encouraged us to develop. Fatalism and passivity are not Buddhist teachings. How we respond to experiences is also karma.

9 11 A Buddhist Reflection

On many occasions, the Buddha made it very clear that he considered birth in the human realm to be a wonderful thing. He said, “Monks, it is a great gain, it is great good fortune to be born as a human being”. Why? Well, firstly, due to the great difficulty of attaining such a birth and secondly the unique advantages that it provides for the realization of enlightenment. In one of his most graphic similes, the Buddha described a small wooden hoop floating in the middle of a great ocean,

from the surface of which every several hundred years a blind turtle emerges. The Buddha compared the chances of that blind turtle emerging in exactly the spot where that wooden hoop is floating, its head passing through the hoop, as exceeding those of a being wandering through the various realms of existence being born as a human being. Given the rarity of human birth and the advantages it confers for spiritual liberation, the sanctity of human life is stressed in

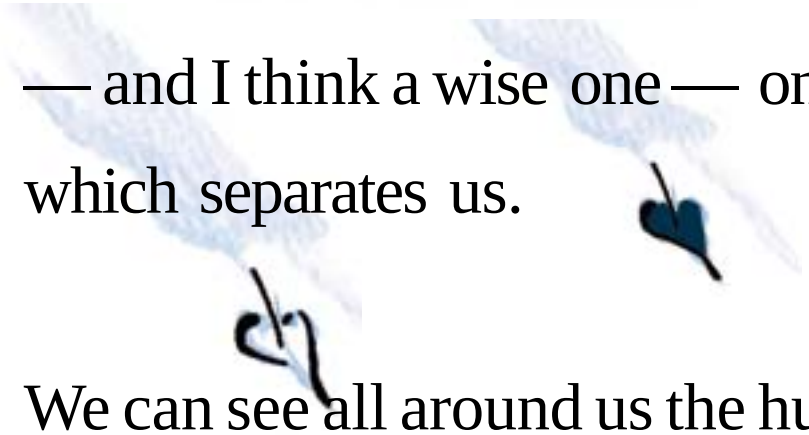
the Buddhist teachings. Every single life, without exception.

In Buddhism we are encouraged to dwell on those truths which ennoble the mind. One of them is our common humanity. We learn to reflect on the things which bring us together rather than those things which separate us. Of course, the differences between each of us — even those born in the same country or in the same city or come from the

same social background — are already considerable. But if we concentrate on those things that set us apart, then they will come to seem more and more real, and we will despair of finding true peace and harmony in our lives together in this world. The Buddha encouraged us to consider that every one of us on this planet are companions: companions in birth, companions in old age, companions in sickness, companions in death. Every single one of

us sitting here today will, without doubt, sooner or later, have to face the reality of death. Everyone of us has already experienced the reality of sickness to some extent or another. And unless any of us is unfortunate enough to meet a premature death we will all have to experience the infirmities of old age. When we give serious consideration to our companionship in birth, old age, sickness, and death with all other beings in the world, it gives us a fresh perspective,

— and I think a wise one — on that which separates us.



We can see all around us the human desire to escape the pain of insecurity through identification with a group or belief system, to feel right or special or chosen. It is also clear, isn't it?, how that desire encourages the exaggeration of ethnic, religious, political differences, and engenders so much needless conflict in the world. We grasp onto things so tenaciously

even though they constantly let us down. So many people feel safe only by keeping their eyes tightly shut.

And the remedy? Simply to stop and look more closely — more devotedly and yet less dogmatically — at our human nature. Before we are Caucasians, Asians or Africans; before we are Buddhists, Christians or Muslims, we are vulnerable, mortal beings. It's an old truism, isn't it?, that we're all just one big human family, but

the familiar saying contains within it an invitation to transformation of the way we lead our lives. What I'm advocating here is not so much a superficial acceptance of a clich but for us to work hard for a more profound insight into the simple truth that lies behind the words. It would surely be impossible to get everyone in the world to see things in the same way. Fortunately it is neither necessary nor indeed desirable. What is needed, I would like to suggest, is

for us all to try to make the difficult journey of human life with a humble integrity and empathy based on wisdom.

Self knowledge is praised by all religions. The problem is, of course, how to develop it. The Buddhist path is one of wisdom and reflection, and it is distinguished by its emphasis on the necessity for a comprehensive education of the way we live our lives. Unlike most animals, which after a few

hours or a few days can fend for themselves, human beings are dependent for many years on their parents and teachers for survival and socialization. This long-term dependency is a defining characteristic of human beings; we become fully human through education rather than instinct. Seen in a positive light, this truth demonstrates our basic *educatableness*. That is an ungainly word that probably doesn't exist but never mind. What I'm trying to point

to here is the wonderful innate capacity we have to learn and change in beneficial ways. Buddhism teaches us to exercise this capacity to the full. It extends the concept of education to cover every aspect of our lives — the way we relate to the material world, the way we relate to the people around us and the society in which we live, the way we conduct our inner life; it encompasses the education of our moral, intellectual, emotional and spiritual life.

9 11
A Buddhist Reflection

When we try to look at the causes and conditions contributing to the terrible events that occurred at the World Trade Center some few days ago (and indeed, the terrible events that occur all over the world every month of the year) I think we can discern a pattern. I would propose that the root cause for “man’s inhumanity to man” lies in a basic failure of education, a fundamental lack of wisdom and understanding of the human condition. Immorality is a

function, in other words, of immaturity.

Buddhism considers the quest for a direct experiential understanding of the human condition as the heart of spiritual life. It employs a vast array of skillful means and ways of reflecting on life, which people of other religious traditions or indeed people of no religious tradition, might benefit. The more profound our understanding of our existence as human beings is, the more we are protected from blind

identification with narrow categories, whether they be social, ethnic or religious. We all as human beings have the capacity to reflect on experience, to learn from it. Whatever religion we profess we can, for instance, look at the effect on our mind of the strong attachment to ideas of *us* and *them*. Theists, atheists, polytheists are equally capable of observing how the idea of *us* and *them* affects how and what information we absorb from our surroundings, how we interpret that

information, and how we express ourselves in our actions and words. We can begin to notice our tendency to believe in the labels we attach to things, and what strong negative emotions are conditioned by those beliefs.

As Buddhists, we devote ourselves to learning how to maintain clarity of mind, fundamental compassion and intelligence, as a constant inner refuge.

It is not so difficult to be clear about issues which don't personally affect us, or those which provoke no strong feelings. The real challenge is to be awake even in the midst of a hurricane of emotions — when we are hurt and betrayed, angry and afraid. Clarity of mind means that when things get rough we can still receive the blessings of the principles we uphold. Inner clarity is thus the ground in which the dignity and meaning of life can grow.

An inner refuge does not come easily. It can only be brought about by a thoroughgoing commitment to this life-education, a training of the way we live internally and externally. Buddhist teachings are seen then, in summary, not as dogmas to be believed in (or rejected), but tools to be made use of. We use the teachings to understand ourselves and our experiences in life, to understand other people and the world we live in. Then basing ourselves

on that understanding, we seek to create as much authentic happiness and benefit for ourselves and others as we can.

It is very easy to brand people who do terrible things as being evil, and perhaps almost as easy to assume that because we find evil acts repugnant, that therefore we are good. But when we look more closely, we see that our bogeymen, the so-called "evil people" sometimes

act well and "good people" may, on occasion, act cruelly. There is no fixed entity, "the evil person", who is evil 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year. Similarly, (apart from fully enlightened beings), there is no unchangeably good person. That being the case, the most constructive response to the suffering that human beings inflict on each other is surely to seek to understand and affect the factors conditioning the arising and cessation of good and evil in the human

mind. Armed with this knowledge we may then look at ways of reducing the power of evil wherever it arises, no matter whether it be in the group of people that we consider as *them*, or within the group of people that we consider as *us*. At the same time, we must be constantly looking to develop and support those qualities — both within that group we consider *them* and that group we consider *us* — which are good, wise and compassionate. Our most pressing task

though, because nobody else can do this for us, is to look within our own hearts.

The approach being outlined here may seem idealistic, and certainly it is a long-term strategy. But even in the short-term, in dealing with traumatic events, it is the people who have made the effort to understand those inner qualities that purify the mind and those that sully it, that are most capable of mature, constructive responses. Of

course, when a great wrong has been done on a national level, governments become involved. But in a society where people have been educated to look at the nature of fear, insecurity, rage, the desire for revenge and know them clearly for what they are, rather than believing in them blindly, it may be expected that, on every level, intelligence and compassion will be more likely to prevail.

To a certain degree, Buddhism is

optimistic about humanity. It is an optimism based on a strong belief in the innate human capacity to abandon evil, develop good qualities and purify our hearts. The proof of this capacity may be deduced very simply. I'm sure, every one of us here has had in the past some kind of bad habit, some destructive character trait or whatever, and has subsequently been able to reduce or abandon it. That is a marvelous thing. Similarly, we may look at ourselves these days and see

certain noble qualities in our hearts and minds that weren't there a year ago, five years ago, ten years ago. The abandonment of unwholesome qualities and development of wholesome qualities I'm talking about here do not need to be anything particularly spectacular — it might be merely that we notice ourselves a little bit more forgiving of others these days, or not so easily discouraged when things go wrong for instance — it's the principle which is important, the ability

to change that is revealed by these modest advances.The smallest improvements in our life can reassure us that we *can* do this: we can abandon unwholesome qualities, we can develop wholesome qualities, and we can create a quality of existence within ourselves and promote noble qualities in the community in which we live and the society as a whole.

In the same way, if we look at the failures and small betrayals in our lives

wisely we feel humble rather than guilty or depressed. We see that any advances we make are fragile, must be cared for. Heedlessness can lead at any moment to our position being undermined. We must be patient.

There are always going to be acts of violence and cruelty in human society. What we can do is to seek to minimize the causes and conditions for them to arise, and to maximize the causes and conditions for kind -

ness and empathy to flourish. This is necessary on the individual psychological level, and also on the level of social and economic organization. All things occur as a function of causes and conditions. It is in our ability to investigate and discover the causes and conditions underlying existing phenomena and adapt our behavior wisely. Herein lies our hope for the future.

I would like to say a little more at

this point about the Buddhist vision of wide-ranging education I mentioned earlier. It begins with moral conduct. In Buddhism, the teaching of morality differs somewhat from that of theistic religions. Moral standards are not considered to have been passed down from God through prophets to the human race; they are not to be known through study of a holy scripture. A psychological standard is taken. In Buddhism, we consider the morality or immorality

of an act to depend on the volition of the actor. If the volition behind an act is accompanied by greed, hatred, delusion in any of its many forms, then the act is inevitably immoral. If, on the other hand, the volition is untainted by greed, hatred, delusion (i.e. is unselfish, kind, intelligent), then the act is moral. That being the case, we find here no justification whatsoever for acts of violence against other human beings. Whatever the provocation. Buddhists are

proud of the fact that no war has ever been waged in the name of their religion. Certainly, Buddhists have conducted wars — and harsh ones too — but they have never been able to justify them on religious grounds. There have never been Buddhist jihads or crusades because the deliberate taking of life must, from a Buddhist perspective, always be wrong.The desire for revenge is considered both immoral and immature.

The severity of immoral acts is considered to vary. The extent of bad karma produced by an evil act is dependent primarily on the intensity of the mental defilements in the mind of the actor. Obviously, the karmic result reaped by someone who kills out of self-defence or to save his family from destruction is far milder than that experienced by someone who plans a cold-blooded murder of hundreds or thousands of innocent people. But, nevertheless, whenever the volition

to take life is acted upon, whatever the justification might be, karma is inevitably created.

Linking morality to volition has certain implications. It means that to be consistently moral we need to educate ourselves about volition, not in the abstract as an intellectual exercise, but in the concrete present, as it manifests in our experience. The central role played by volition demands that we develop a power

of introspection, an honesty and willingness, and an ability to look very clearly at our mind. We need to develop this form of education to the extent that we don't rationalize our cravings and fears so automatically, that we are unable to lie to ourself as we used to do. In responding to a painful situation, for instance, we have to observe to what extent we are affected by the desire for justice, and to what extent for revenge. Is anger present, self-righteousness,

fear? Are these wholesome or unwholesome qualities of mind, — to be trusted or not? Morality here then is not a matter of following a number of rules or commandments, but of using precepts as tools in which to be clearly aware of and responsible for the motives behind one's actions.

Although the moral training in Buddhism demands a certain amount of awareness and a capacity for introspection, it is not the whole of

the training. There are also specific practices for educating our emotions and discernment. Thus we refer to a three-fold training, one which provides a framework within which to address the difficulties or dilemmas that we face in our lives. The training in morality is the foundation. It involves firstly the intelligent adoption of standards of conduct towards the external world and particularly other human beings, and then learning how to be mindful of them in daily life and

bring them to bear on our behavior. It is at this level of the training that we see the central role of self-discipline.

But self-discipline is far from being a panacea for all our ills. We can't decide not to get angry as an act of will, we can't decide not to feel vengeful, we can't decide not to have emotions. If we misapply self-discipline then we create the conditions for guilt and repression. Emotions are one natural part of our

life. We have to understand them. Some emotions deserve to be cultivated, others do not. In our gardens we distinguish between weeds and flowers. Although we remove weeds we don't consider our garden evil for having them. So the first principle of training the emotions and mental states is that force doesn't work; intelligence, sincerity and patience do. The second can soon be clearly seen: the ability to abandon the unwholesome qualities

in our minds and encourage the wholesome is conditioned to a great extent by our ability to focus and concentrate our mind. This aspect of mental culture has been neglected in the Western world for many centuries. An educated person, in Buddhist view, is not only someone who can think rationally, analytically, but is also someone who can, on the necessary occasion, stop thinking altogether. This absence of thought is by no means a blank dullness.

9/11
A Buddhist Reflection

There is a state which is neither sleep nor thought — and it is the fount of creativity. It is the state where in place of the usual hackneyed thoughts lurching along the same old beaten track, new insights can arise. If we read the biographies of great scientists or people who've made important breakthroughs in their particular fields, we find quite often that their breakthroughs don't come to them in the lab or in their office. They find their answers in the car

on the way home, eating their dinner or, like Archimedes, in the bath. Why? Because their minds are temporarily at peace. There is an important principle here, one well-worth contemplating. It is that the peaceful mind — the mind which is free of the mad gush of thought — has many choices; but the mind which is bound to a particular emotion, thought, to a particular way of looking at things, has few. The mind, which is bound to mental states, tends to see things as

clear cut, black-and-white, and often over simplifies the complexity of situations; it reacts in habitual ways. The mind which can put down habitual thinking processes, stand back from the rush of thought and emotion, suddenly has access to far more choices and pathways. A Buddhist teacher once said that the traditional western response to problems is “don’t just sit there, do something,” whereas the eastern or the Buddhist way is “don’t just do

something, sit there." Of course this is a generaliza tion, and there is a place for both stillness and motion. But the Buddhist insistence is merely that the most constructive action springs from stillness. The wisest reflection takes into consideration, not only our own immediate interest or the interest of our particular group or nation; it also bears in mind the interests of our children, our children's children and many generations in the future who are yet to be born. And

this kind of thinking demands the ability to step back from one's immediate attachments. It is dependent on mental culture, mental development.

The third aspect of this training is the training of wisdom and understanding, teaching people how to really look at their actions and their consequences, seeking to understand situations more clearly. Initially it means regularly contemplating the

very simple facts of life which we tend to overlook, in particular the nature of change. Changes may be slow methodical, expected, welcome but they may also quite often be sudden, unexpected and unwelcome. It is an inarguable fact that every one of us, sooner or later, will have to be separated from those whom we love. This is something we don't like to think about. But it's true, isn't it?, that sooner or later, we are going to be separated from our

parents, from our loved ones, from our children. If we don't die before they do, they will die before we do. Putting it in these terms may sound blunt and callous but it is the truth. And the more we shy away or try to prevent ourselves from reflecting on such subjects, the weaker we become, and the more devastated we are when change occurs in the unexpected and shocking ways it sometimes does. The Buddha encouraged us to be students

of *change* and to understand its nature. We should be looking at *change*, looking at uncertainty, looking at insecurity face-to-face everyday. Life is insecure. There is no real security in a changing world and the frantic search for an un-realistic security is only going to lead to tension and pain. There has to be a certain point where we create the conditions for security as best we can, but humbly acknowledge the fact that ultimately we have no defence

against uncertainty and change. We have no rights. We can and should create conventions about human rights and it is important that such rights are vigorously upheld in human society. But ultimately, we have rights to nothing except the way things are: we are born, we get old, we get sick, and we die. We must be patient and willing to keep going against the grain of self-indulgence, looking again and again at the way things are; educating ourselves about

those things which brighten and clarify our minds; those attitudes, those thoughts, those emotions which cloud and brutalize our minds. The more we do this work, the more we see that we have a choice which way we want to go, the way of darkness or the way of light.

And so, today we come together in commemoration of the terrible event that occurred in America last week. The resonances of what happened

on September 11 are being felt every where, not least here in Thailand. Many Thais have families and friends living in New York, some of them work in the World Trade Center. Even I as a Buddhist monk who spend most of his life in a forest in the remote part of Northeast Thailand feel connected. I have a number of friends and students in America and like many people have looked out from the top of the Empire State Building over Manhattan towards

the twin towers of the World Trade Center, seeing them as integral parts of a landscape rather than mere fragile constructions. They are gone now. More innocent peoples' lives have been lost. And let's be clear as long as human beings cling so strongly to beliefs, ideas, emotions, and forget their basic humanity we cannot expect an end to such events. What we can

do is make the sincere effort to look at life, to learn and try to understand, and to act from clear seeing rather than prejudice and emotion. It is, I feel, only through the effort to understand, and the wisdom and compassion that comes from understanding, that we can maintain our dignity and our humanity.

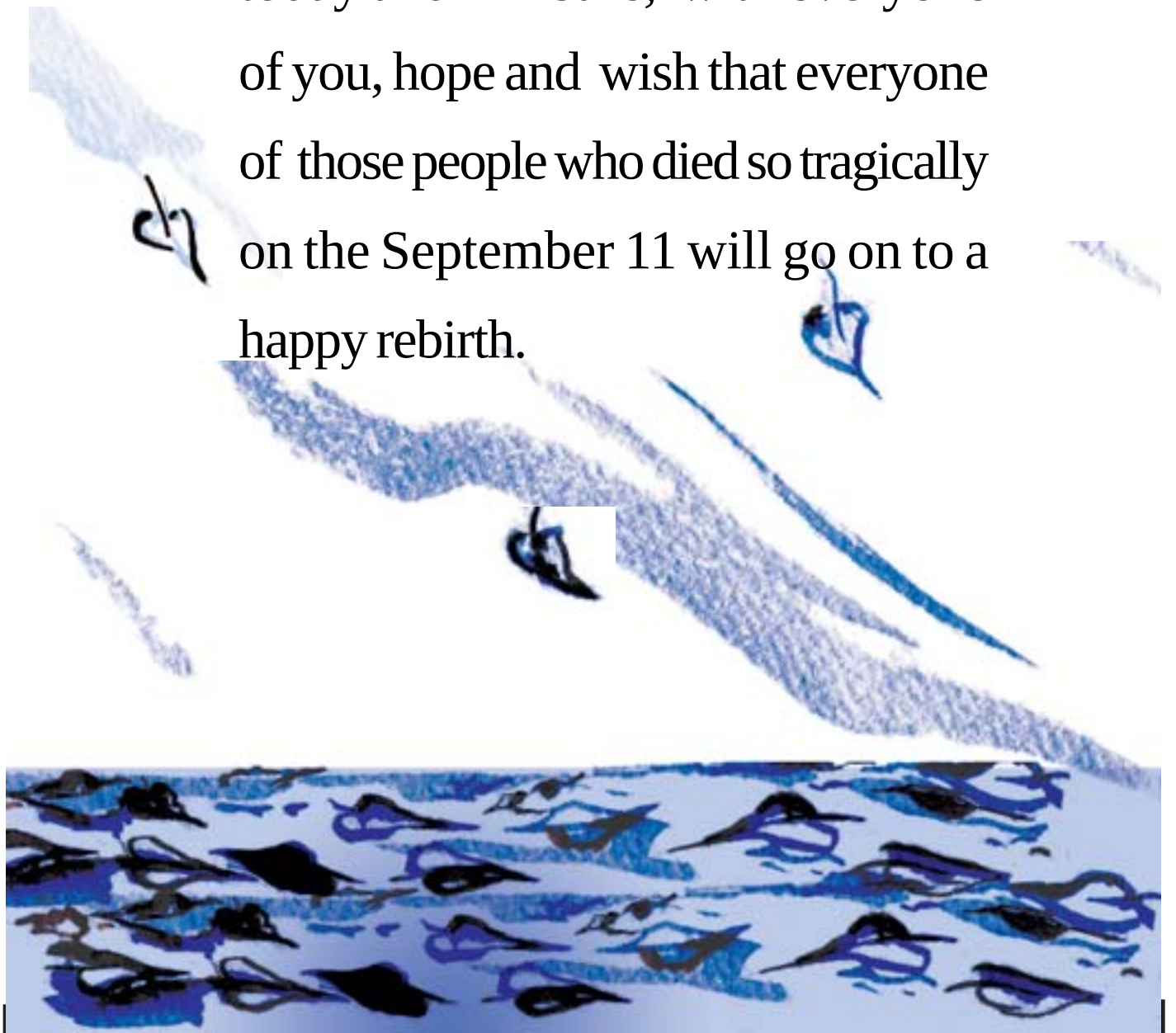
So on behalf of the Sangha here, I would like to express my appreciation of the merit-making that you

have all participated in today. For some of you perhaps it may seem like just another ceremony: exotic perhaps or colorful or even boring. That's all right. But I would suggest that it is more than a mere ritual. On my last visit to America, I was told that a number of institutions in America has been doing research to see whether prayers for the sick can actually affect their recovery rates. In the studies I was told about, one group of patients knew

that they were being prayed for and one group didn't. The researchers found a very clear correlation: people who were prayed for got better more quickly; not only those who knew and were comforted by the fact that somebody cared for them, but also, incredibly, by those patients who had no knowledge at all that the experiment was going on. Of course, different interpretations of what is going on here are possible. As a Buddhist I do not consider it

proof of a divine being answering appeals, but of the power generated by the human mind. It is this same latent power which we invoke by the practices of sending thought of loving-kindness or dedication of merit. It is for this reason that if ceremonies such as this, are carried out with sincerity something very profound takes place. Transference of merit and aid or assistance to those who have passed away can at certain cases certainly take place, especially to

those who have died sudden or violent deaths. So I would like to express my appreciation of this ceremony today and I'm sure, with everyone of you, hope and wish that everyone of those people who died so tragically on the September 11 will go on to a happy rebirth.



Ajahn Jayasaro was born in England in 1958. He began his monastic training in Thailand in 1978 as a student of Venerable Ajahn Chah, one of the seminal figures in contemporary Theravada Buddhism. Ajahn Jayasaro was ordained as a monk in 1980 and has lived in Thailand ever since. In 2002 after a five-year period as abbot of the International Forest Monastery Wat Pah Nanachat, he took up residence in a hermitage in the province of Nakhon Rachasima.