

A visit

to the world trade center

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Among its many gifts, Zen practice can help us to look directly at life's hardest truths with tenderness, grace, and wisdom. And, when confronted with the horror of September 11 attacks, this ancient tradition can provide a way to help.

So, with the aspiration of offering whatever help my years of practice might allow, on Friday, September 28, I took the # 6 subway from New York's Upper East Side to lower Manhattan and the World Trade Center. This is what I experienced.

Walking up the steps from the last stop on the # 6 line, I emerged into clear air at City Hall and immediately smelled the sharp, lingering odor of destruction. The streets were blocked with barricades and chain link while police and soldiers stopped cars and pedestrians. All but those who lived in the neighborhood north of the World Trade Center were funneled up or down Broadway, the main thoroughfare that runs to the bottom of the island.

Going south along Broadway, and just to the east perimeter of the World Trade Center complex, I came upon two churches, St. Paul's Chapel and, a short distance further down, Trinity Church. St. Paul's is the oldest extant building in New York City while the current Trinity Church is the third church building to stand on its site since the original was built in the mid-1600s. George Washington and the new congress worshipped together in St. Paul's immediately after his inauguration as our country's first president so this area occupies a special place in our country's history.

Both churches were constructed of a rose sandstone so dark that the buildings seem to absorb their own shadows, creating an inward feeling that contrasts strongly with the more assertive man-made materials of the modern structures along this stretch of Broadway. Each church has a spire that towers upward for one hundred feet or more and

traditional churchyards surround the buildings, shaded by tall arching trees. Under the trees stand headstones marking the remains of parishioners from earlier times, perhaps two or three hundred graves at each church.

Green grass covers the churchyards and provides the serenity one expects of a cemetery. But on closer approach (not too close because of the barricades), I noticed how the grass had been recently and vigorously raked right down to the ground. Looking even more carefully, I saw that the ground beneath the grass showed gray, the color of blown-in ceiling insulation—a faint layer of disaster resting on the island's brown earth.

St. Paul's Chapel now houses a relief center for the thousands of police, National Guard, construction workers, federal agents, and others who labor at the site. A row of 20 or so portable toilets screens the front of the church. Trinity Church, further down Broadway, sits quietly by itself.

The eastern side of Broadway, opposite the churches and adjacent to the Wall Street financial district, is open to foot traffic and it brought me parallel to the site of the attacks—16 acres of shattered life. As I looked west down the narrow streets, the full extent of the devastation couldn't be grasped. And yet, even these limited views revealed vast piles of crushed concrete and bent steel mounded several stories high and spilling into the cordoned-off streets. Cranes circled overhead while smoke drifted up 15 stories or more. Occasionally, an invisible particle of grit, carried by the breeze, would catch in my eye.

From this section of Broadway, World Trade Center Building 5 obscured much of the area where the two towers collapsed, but WTC 5 presented a spectacle terrifying enough: a shell of a building, the exterior and interior walls and windows blown out to reveal a five-story blackened steel skeleton.

On this six or seven block stretch of Broadway, the crowds at the barricades resembled the throngs one might see at a parade, eight or ten people deep, with each person seeking a bit of destruction, some rubble, a view of the emergency vehicles, earthmovers or cranes. New York police officers insisted, gently, that everyone move along but many resisted, needing to pause and look, remember, photograph, cry, talk, laugh, eat, think, and sift through their feelings. Some would sit on the shoulders of their friends or stand on cars for a better view or to take a photograph. Some quickly posed in a momentary opening so that someone could photograph them with the wreckage as a backdrop. A few sobbed quietly, slumped against the side of a building or car. Most had the somber and hunched stature of those attending the funeral of a beloved friend.

At one point, where Wall Street meets Broadway, incense filled a small plaza, cutting through the odor of decay, and I saw four Japanese Buddhist monks who had set up a small altar. They wore deeply colored, dark robes in rich silken brocade and were chanting slowly and carefully. I didn't recognize the chant but their presence seemed to still the crowd. Above the monks, on a tall flagpole, an American flag waved in the breeze, its fabric torn with small holes. Later I saw three Catholic nuns praying alongside a chain link fence. Prayer was needed and prayer was why I went to this site.

From the corner where Trinity Church sits on Broadway, I began working my way west down Rector Street. As I did, the crowds diminished almost completely. Finally, I came to the intersection of Rector and Washington, 4 short blocks directly south of the remains of World Trade Center Building 2. There were a few cars on the street, their windows blown out and the insides filled with ash, paper, and unidentifiable objects. An inch or more of ash remained on the car bodies, even after several rains. Unexpectedly, just inside the perimeter fence set up by the police, I saw a Tibetan Buddhist temple with golden deer, Dharma wheels, flags, and other symbols on the front and top of the five-story brick building. Now the temple appeared as deserted as the rest of the buildings on the street, the monks or nuns evacuated, its façade and ornamentation covered in ash. The only civilians in the area were residents under police escort who were retrieving personal belongings.

From this intersection, the collapsed 110 story south tower appeared as a compressed and rounded hill of debris backed by the blasted and broken framework of the building's outer shell reaching 4 or 5 stories into the smoke. As I stood there, one of only five or six people, the sun broke through the clouds and illuminated the façade's great crenellated shard as it loomed over the darkened ruins. This twisted gothic shell spoke of its dead as eloquently and sadly as the pale headstones in the yards of St. Paul's Chapel and Trinity Church speak of their deceased.

Looking across the expanse of broken concrete and steel, my imagination failed and my heart filled with nearly unbearable pain. I simply couldn't grasp how thousands of bodies could be lost within the mounded rubble. Although enormous, these piles seemed far too small to contain the remains of so many lives. As we live day to day, our human life can seem so large and spacious. And yet at death it becomes so small. It hurt deeply to stand next to this yard with its eerie, skeletal marker.

Nevertheless, I stayed at this quiet intersection for two hours, quietly and quickly repeating the name of the bodhisattva that aids travelers and the deceased, Jijang Bosal. Buddhist art depicts this bodhisattva in human form but as with all bodhisattvas, the name actually signifies a powerful energy that resides within each of us and throughout the universe. By chanting Jijang Bosal with an aspiration to help all suffering beings, we can harness and direct this energy. And there are few places on the planet where help could be needed more than at the World Trade Center. Jijang Bosal Jijang Bosal Jijang Bosal Jijang Bosal.

My fingers worked quickly through the mala beads. As the chanting became stronger my focus at last softened and I became steadier. Occasionally one of the police standing at the gate leading to the remains of the south tower would ask people to move along but nothing was ever said to me. I just did my practice and the police seemed to understand and support it. I've never seen policemen with sweeter faces.

Many New Yorkers refer to this location as "Ground Zero," but I don't understand this phrase. 'Zero' signifies nothingness, emptiness, a vacuum, and this site is anything but zero. This ground in lower Manhattan contains inconceivable hurt and love and suffering and fear and need...and, of course, the countless remains of ordinary human beings. So, not zero. For me, 'World Trade Center' stills seems the right name, a place where change and exchange can occur, a center for the exchange of grief and sorrow and anger and a place to begin a profound change for the whole world.

In the days since the attacks, I've experienced a tremendous opening in my heart and other people have spoken to me of similar experiences. It's commonplace to say that after these events, nothing will be the same. But it's true. The power of this destruction has given us a way to look deeply into our hearts, to see both the love and the anger that we carry within us. I hope that each of us can practice hard and nurture this opening so that, after the shattered sides of the south tower come down, we can erect a lasting monument to kindness and wisdom and love. A monument that will deliver true justice to the innocent lost human beings of the World Trade Center.