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Ekoji Buddhist Sangha

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Student perspectives on worship services from Instructor Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez's Religious Studies 108 Human Spirituality undergraduate course at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Ekoji Buddhist Sangha

by Jack Burrell

For my third and final field trip paper for this course I elected to attend a Buddhist service at the Ekoji Buddhist Sangha located at 3411 Grove Avenue Richmond, VA. The service that I attended was a Ligmincha Group on Monday Evening from seven to nine PM led by Greg Kelley, November the 23rd.

The outside of the temple looked like any other row house in the Fan District of Richmond, a normal town home with some pillars on the front porch and some cement steps. I actually wasn't sure if I was at the correct place until I was at the front door and noticed a small sign on the exterior of the structure. Upon entering the building it was again not quite what I expected, of course there was Buddhist religious artwork hanging on the walls and some cushions to sit on, but other than that I pretty much looked like a better taken care of and cleaner version of the house I'm leasing in the Fan. It was an open room that looked like it probably once functioned as the home's living room; this is where we'd be taking part in the ceremonies.

The way I was greeted was very warmly, not only by the leader but the others there to partake in the service. The demographic was not very diverse, of the five of us there including the leader only one of us was a female, we were all white, and we all seemed to be doing pretty well financially. Everyone besides the leader of the service was between the ages of 20 and 26 and the leader didn't seem older

than about 40 or so.

I felt very welcomed by the congregants and the leader of the service, they were patient with me learning the different positions and chants, and they offered stories of their first times coming to services like this one. The leader acted as a sort of instructor throughout the entirety of the service, this was extremely helpful in my case since this was my first time to ever go to a Buddhist temple. They made me feel comfortable and wanted at this service, and were more than willing to offer help and support throughout the service.

To give a more specific account of the service I'll go back to the beginning, to the point I walked in the door. Me along with the other attendees all arrived relatively around the same time and all took off our shoes at the front and grabbed some cushions to sit on. We started by performing a ritual where we imagined the cleansing powers of the Buddha going through us in the form of light and air. We did several arm movements and kneeling exercises, and followed those with some breathing techniques. Following the breathing exercises we sang some prayers in Tibetan and recited them in English, the leader would explain briefly what they meant in leman terms for me so I wasn't completely lost. Next we did some chanting repeating five different sounds 21 times a piece in long drawn out voices with our eyes closed not focusing on any one thought. After that we sat criss cross on our

cushions and meditated again not focusing on any one thought for about 40 minutes. While we were sitting and meditation a thought that kept coming into my head was how amazed I was that I was so uncomfortable physically just from sitting for an hour and a half. After the meditations were over the rest of the congregation and my self spoke to the leader about these thing and he said it would take a lot of time to get used to meditation. We analyzed the fact that when your going about your everyday life you don't notice things like swallowing or sitting but when you clear your mind of all thoughts your body speaks to you almost. Upon my exit I said my goodbyes and my thanks to all in attendance and put my boots and coat on, I walked across the street to get in my car and turned my cell phone back on and was amazed that it was nine o'clock. Two hours had seemingly flown by during the service, this blew me away. I truly enjoyed this experience, this religion and its rituals seemed more about self enlightenment, and not so much just saying prayers and doing rituals just for the sake of going through the motions. I'm not saying I'm a Buddhist after attending one service, but to be honest the service was relaxing and enjoyable. The way the people acted towards others at this congregation was by far the most friendly I have witnessed this semester through exploring different denominations of our world's religions. I would be sincerely be interested in attending another mediation group whether it is this one again or with another one of the groups offered at the Ekoji Buddhist Sangha. •

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