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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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Ekochi Buddhist Sangha

by Oluchi Chigbu

On November 18th at 7:00 pm, I visited Ekokochi Buddhist Sangha, a Temple in 3411 Grove Avenue, Richmond, VA 22039. The Temple practices many forms of Buddhism on different days, and the on the Wednesday I visited, the service was with a Zen group. The presiding officer is Reverend Kennryu Tsuj.

I was raised as a Christian and I have stuck with Christianity over the years, so this was a completely new experience for me. I was excited to see the different practices and how the services differ. The Temple was in a quiet neighborhood with houses packed together. In fact the Temple itself looked like one of the many houses in the neighborhood. It was quite small, but looked welcoming enough for a religious place. I did some research before going for the service and also called before going. They liked the people who had never been to a service before to come about 30 minutes early for a little orientation on Buddhism and what the services are usually like.

As I went through the doors, the smell of incense immediately hit my nose and the first thing I saw was a small sign requesting shoes be removed before entering the Temple. There were two greeters at the door and I explained to them that it was my first time at a Buddhist service. One of the men then led me up a flight of stairs to a small room where he introduced himself and proceeded to tell me about Buddhism and the teachings of Buddha- who was not a god, but a Great Teacher whose

teachings are the basis of Buddhism. He also told me not to worry if I don't get the seated meditation positions right, but I should refrain from letting my feet point towards the Buddha statue and I should not touch the statue. This kind of got me nervous because I got scared that I was going to mess up and do the wrong thing.

After this we went into the main room where the service was supposed to take place. It was plainly designed with what I would assume was Buddhist art on the walls and a statue of the Buddha resting on a table pushed towards the wall. Some people were already seated in meditative positions on cushions placed on the floor. I quickly took a seat at the back making sure to sit as nicely as I could. I felt like I was intruding on people's private moments. This feeling disappeared however when I saw other people start to arrive and take a seat. Everyone who came in gave a little bow in front of the Buddha to show respect and as a symbol of the surrender of oneself and the desire to benefit all beings. There were about 15 people in the service which was expected as services are held throughout the week. There was a pretty even distribution of males and females, but no children were present and it didn't look like any families were in attendance. I was pretty nervous about the kind of dressing allowed in the Temple so I wore jeans and a nice top and it turns out that the dressing was pretty casual so I had nothing to be nervous about.

The leader was dressed in some kind of brown and black tunic or robe and seated in the lotus position in front of the statue of Buddha. He jumped right into the service beginning with a meditation. He led us in some chants before the meditation. These chants were in English but nothing was given out for people to use to follow along. The sound of people chanting around me was quite soothing to say the least. It put me at ease for the meditation that followed. The leader asked us to focus on our breathing and push all thoughts out of our minds. We did this for a good 30 minutes. It was quite frustrating because I never really felt like I had gotten into the meditative state. After this we did the walking meditation where we were told to use the experience of walking around the room as our focus. I became intensely aware of my bodily movements while doing this, which I think was pretty interesting. We did the seated meditation for another 30 minutes and then the walking meditation again. After that there was a short teaching from the leader. He talked about the point of Dharma and the Eightfold Path, which I really didn't understand much of.

The congregation was a little bit reserved as there was hardly any talking, however the service was quite participatory as that is what Zen Buddhism is about. The service was over before I knew it. Announcements were made and we were invited to go downstairs for refreshments. Overall I felt my visit was very interesting and different in a good way. •

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