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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 Rachel Firkins

On Sunday October 25th, I attended a service with the Richmond Zen Group at 9 A.M. The building that holds service for the Zen Group is called Ekoji Buddhist Songha and is located on 3411 Grove Avenue, Richmond, VA. The group leader was kind enough to allow me to sit in and practice meditation and chant along with the normal members.

When arriving at the Ekoji Buddhist Songha, I was unaware I had arrived because the building is a normal house like many of my friends subside in on campus. This house was light blue and looked a little rugged, and also had a sign out front that said the name “Ekoji Buddhist Songha” right above the doorbell. Entering the building, I was immediately greeted by Kevin, the Richmond Zen Group leader, and he asked if I had ever been to a service there before. When I said no, he gladly explained the proper way to meditate so I was prepared for the hour and a half long service.

The people who attend the Richmond Zen Group come in all shapes and sizes. The majority of the group was older adult white males, but there were a few female young and old. Everyone wore what he or she felt comfortable in due to the fact that we were to sit in meditation for an hour. The outfits ranged from sweatpants to long skirts.

Because everyone was so true to themselves in their demeanor and practice of Buddhism, I felt very comfortable throughout the service

because I was able to be my true self and practice in a way that made Buddhism more relatable to my life. Although the only explanation I received was about how to sit in meditation, it was extremely easy to follow the steps of service due to cues, such as bell ringing, and the books available during the chanting session of the service.

Throughout the service, I observed the inside of the old Richmond home and saw multiple pictures of Buddhist Gods framed and hung on the walls. Also, throughout the room where meditation was practiced, blue mats were placed along the walls so people had an immediate place to sit and begin their practice. In the back center of the room was a gold statue of the elephant god Ganesh and this statue was placed highly, on a pedestal where incense were also burnt throughout the service.

My actual experience with the Richmond Zen group goes a little like this. At the very beginning, I was apprehensive because the building is darkly lit and very quiet due to the type of ceremony I was attending. But, as soon as Kevin welcomed me, I began to relax.

The practice begins before you walk to your mat because you bow out of respect before you enter the meditation room, and then you bow once more in front of your mat before you sit down for meditation. For meditation, one sits cross-legged and on the front of the sit bones so the weight stays evenly dispersed

throughout the legs and the feet do not fall asleep. Then, meditation begins and continues for thirty minutes.

After thirty minutes, a bell is rung and everyone stands, gathers into a single filed line framing the room, and holds their hands at their chest as they slowly walk in a circle around the room for a total of ten minutes. I believe this is done to relax your body again after meditation and to refocus on the intention you want for the practice that day.

Then, after ten minutes, a bell rings again and everyone returns to their mat and sits in meditation for another thirty minutes. During meditation, I was told to let my thoughts pass through my mind without acknowledging them. This way, maybe I would eventually be able to get to a place where I could focus on all of the life going on around me in just that single room, rather than my own personal struggles or problems.

After the last round of meditation, another bell was rung and we all stood and placed our mats more centered in the room to start the actual service part of this Sunday morning.

To start the service, three floor baths were done by each person bowing to the front of the room, kneeling to the ground and touching one's forehead to the ground to the cue of a bell being rung. After this was done three times by the group, a comfortable seated position was taken and the chants began. The first chant that was done was called, "Great Wisdom Beyond Wisdom Heart Sutra", which moved to "Sho Sai Myo Kichijyo Dharani" which translated over to the "Dedication of Merit". In the "Dedication of Merit", the entire class thanks all the ancient teachers

of Buddhism, beginning with Buddha himself. After this prayer, the chant "Dai Hi Shin Dharani" is completed and the "Song of Grass Root-Hut" is then said. Then, the "Dedication of Merit" is repeated one last time.

Once the chants/prayers are all completed, the entire group does three more floor baths. After the floor baths, every person bows to the center of the room to thank each other for their practice that morning. Once the last bow to the center of the room occurs, the service comes to an end.

I related to many aspects of the Buddhist ceremony because I do enjoy the practice of meditation due to my practice in yoga. But, the one part of the Buddhist ceremony I did not enjoy was how you had to be detached from your emotions. I know that as part of the religion, they see being detached from events, feelings, and thoughts help to reach a final enlightenment, but I do not see myself wanting to detach completely from what I feel.

Throughout the chanting portion of the service, the monotone voice that everyone chants with shows this detachment of emotion that they use when practicing their religion.

Although this religion is not one that I may choose to affiliate myself with, I did learn tactics on how to reach a sort of peace that is much needed in my life and going to Ekoji Buddhist Songha was an extremely welcoming and peaceful experience. •

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