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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 Katherine Gillies

For field trip #3 I attended the Ekoji Buddhist Sangha located at 3411 Grove Ave Richmond, Virginia. The presiding official was Kevin Heffernan. I attended on Sunday November 8, 2015 at 9:00 am.

The Sangha is located in a neighborhood and it is very unassuming. Outside, it looks like a normal townhouse. It has yellow brick exterior with a black roof and a green door. There is a porch with pillars in the front. Other than a small sign next to the door, there is no outward sign that this is a place of worship.

The inside looks like a normal layout of a house. There is a main room like a living room. A door to a basement, a door leading to upstairs, a kitchen and a sitting room in the back. The main room was painted in a neutral color. There are pieces of art depicting monks and Buddhist statues. There is no furniture but rather mats and pillows that lined the floor. Towards the back of the room there is an altar with flowers, incense and candles. On the floor to the left there are two or three bowls used for sound.

I was greeted at the door by Kevin. When we met he bowed. He was very welcoming and gave me a short orientation of how things worked and what I was supposed to do. He then asked me to remove my shoes. There were about 20 other people there. Mostly white men 30-40, seemingly middle class. It was very quiet and there was little to no

interaction between anyone.

There are many different groups that meet at this Buddhist center. The one I attended was the Richmond Zen Group and it is multi denominational. The service consisted of 30 minutes of Zazen meditation, 10 minutes of walking meditation, 30 minutes of Zazen meditation and the a 10 minute service.

We each took a seat on the pillow on the mat with our legs crossed and our hands layed one on the other in our laps. The sounding bells were struck and a low gong resonated.

The first part was 30 minutes of Zazen meditation which is a reenactment of Buddha's awakening. It is supposed to awaken us from our own habits and ways of thinking. It gives us a chance to reset, reboot and power down. It teaches how to sit upright, find balance and alignment both literally and metaphorically. There really wasn't any emphasis on breathing other than just steady and deep. We sat in silence for 30 minutes. The gong resonated again and we rose from our pillows. I found this to be very difficult!

Next, we did the 10 minutes of walking meditation. With the sound of a chime from the sounding bowl, we stood single file in a circle and began walking slowly in a clockwise motion. We were to synchronize our breathing with each step. Our hands were held against our abdomens. The right hand in a closed fist

around the thumb and the left hand laying flat on top. After another low gong, we returned to our mats for another 30 minutes of Zazen meditation. The second time around seemed to me to be a bit easier and I actually felt quite calm and comfortable. I tried to clear my thoughts as much as I could. I think this is something that takes a lot of practice for most people.

The last part of the service was actually referred to as the Service. It consisted mostly of chanting. The readings came from a chanting book. We began in a standing position. A gentleman started playing a small drum and the sounding bowls were used. The first chant was called Great wisdom Beyond wisdom from the Heart Sutra chanting book. SHO SAI MYO KICHIJYO DHARANI was chanted to the beat of the drum. At the end of the chanting, we bowed to the altar and then returned to our sitting positions. The last part of the service portion was the Dedication of Merit. This allows us to share all the blessings, the goodness and the merit that we have earned. A song called the Grass root hut was played, the bowls were chimed once again and that concluded the service.

The act of the Zazen meditation holds a lot of symbolism I think. Every time it is done, it is a reenactment of Buddha's awakening. The act of sitting, standing, bowing and chanting is all very ritualistic. The ritual of the last is supposed to bring one into awakening and enlightenment.

Overall, it was an interesting experience. As I said before, I do believe it takes a lot of practice to sit in stillness and silence. It is difficult to be in the present. I don't meditate regularly but I try to live my life one day at a time and

practice the basic principle of Buddhism which is to be present. •

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