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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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Ekaji Buddhist Sangha: “Insight Meditation Community of Richmond”

by Alexa Hagin

I chose to attend the Insight Meditation Community of Richmond, located at stunningly beautiful and instantly calming Ekaji Buddhist Sangha on Grove Avenue. This meditation community meets on Tuesday evenings at 7pm and Friday evenings at 5:45pm, and welcomes all newcomers. They were very excited to have me and my boyfriend join their meditation last Friday, September 25, 2015. We were running a little late, as the traffic from the UCI Bike Race has been hectic and challenging, yet though the meditation was beginning, we were still welcomed in and given a place to sit and think. It appears as though it is located in someones residence, and when we arrived we were a little unsure, however the building is dedicated to the Ekaji Buddhist Sangha and it feels very traditional. There is a parking lot around the back side of the building, which is easily accessible from multiple side streets. You are encouraged to enter through which ever door you please, front or back, though you must remove your shoes before entering the meditation space. They had a nice little area beside the front door where we placed our shoes and our belongings, and prepared for meditation.

The home was open and welcoming; we let ourselves in and removed our shoes. They provided mats and pillows for comfort as you sit, and some were already set, hopeful someone would fill them. When we entered the meditation space, there was a large mantle and an altar at the back of the room. On the

mantle there was a iron statue of Buddha and there was a lit candle burning at his feet. The lights were off, and there was one window in the room, which had a cream colored sheet over it, muting the natural light and creating a warm and quite mood in the room. There were pictures hanging on the walls of the practice and the sacred. Although the room was obviously a living room, with a bathroom and a kitchen in eyesight, they did a great job of changing the mood of the room to feel welcoming and tranquil for relaxing, unconditioned thought. There were multiple places set for expected visitors, and only about half were taken, very sporadically. There were five people present, three women and two men; they ranged in age from late forties to early seventies. They were already seated and ready to begin meditation, and we mingled in and sat down.

When we began, the leader of the group, who is an older woman with a soft voice and a warm presence, rang a gong to signal the beginning of the sitting meditation. During this time, I found my mind wandering incessantly. I was mulling over every little detail of my day and my practice and my school work and who I am and it was almost overwhelming at first. I found myself really struggling to slow down, and just be. However, soon into the meditation, I began to realize that maybe it's not all about mastering the art of turning your mind off, disconnecting from the word, and being blank for moments in time. I think that maybe, if you

just take the time to sit for an hour and literally meditate on your day, mentally plan and consider, really ponder, reflect, and deliberate life, that is just as useful. Instead of focusing on a mantra and trying to be still, I used that time to sit and ruminate on my art practice. I think critically thinking about life can provide healing similarly to disconnecting and turning off for a while. I will use meditation in both senses more often, to engage fully and to disengage fully.

The sitting meditation lasted for one hour, and at the sound of the gong, it concluded, marking the beginning of the thirty minute walking meditation. My boyfriend and I were not aware of the walking meditation, and we thought the practice was over. We were kind of standing there, very unsure of ourselves, when the lady came to my side and whispered that we were going to begin a walking meditation and that I was to follow the person behind me. I was very thankful for her kind instruction, as it allowed my boyfriend and I to participate more comfortably and more directed. We walked in a circle, very slowly, almost methodically. I found myself incredibly focused on my footsteps, and the act of walking. I noticed the pressure in the balls of my feet, the tension in the arch and the eager movements of my toes; my mind was really focused on the extraordinary qualities of ordinary things, like walking, or brushing your teeth. Some people walked with their eyes closed, and some with their eyes on the ground. Some people would make eye contact, but that felt unnatural and awkward. For me, the room was at its best when my eyes were closed, although I was usually peeking to see where I was going. It was interesting to me that my mind was wandering while sitting, but incredibly focused while walking. I am going to

think about that idea more.

When the walking meditation concluded, the gong rang three times. This seemed to signal the end of a sacred time, and people began to shuffle and chit chat for the first time. We moved to sit in a circle; this was when my boyfriend and I said hello and shook hands. The circle was a ritualistic meeting to discuss that night's meditation and reflect on your thoughts with the group. I was glad to hear that others had trouble turning their minds off too, and were busy thinking about the trials of their daily lives. It confirmed my suspicion that meditation can exist in many forms, as long as you are connecting with your mind. The instructor mentioned she was wishing good health to her loved ones, and I really appreciated that. I felt a little embarrassed that I selfishly spent the entire hour thinking about my work and my life, instead of meditating on the good graces of others, but I will focus more on those qualities of spirituality next time. After the small discussion about our meditation, people were free to leave, however they were invited to stay for a reading and some tea. While most people left, including us, there was another hour of group discussion and collaboration. I think next time we will stay for the reading, but we were feeling pretty shy and overwhelmed, so we decided to go and have a rest.

Upon leaving, we thanked the congregation for having us and welcoming us into their meditation; we put our mats away, donned our shoes, and walked home. Discussing our experience, my boyfriend and I both agreed the practice of meditating for an hour can be incredibly therapeutic, and should be integrated more into our daily lives. We felt energized and drained at the same time, excited for a future

of practicing our own forms of meditation. We even grabbed a few information fliers, advertising the Insight Meditation Group, as well as a few other groups the Ekoji Buddhist Sangha facilitates. These helped to provide a little more insight into the community and their practice. We learned they are practicing Vipassana, or insight meditation, which is a systematic method of cultivating mindfulness, taught in the traditional Buddhism of Southeast Asia. We learned that the sound of the gong is a relaxation technique, used to release stress as the sound resonates and the vibration breaks up emotional blockages. It seemed very traditional and ritualistic, even the act of walking in the circle seemed controlled and almost rehearsed. While the ritualistic silence was a little intimidating, I think the experience of meditation was thoroughly enjoyable, and will continue to be a part of our daily lives. We do plan to attend the temple again, and although we may not become dedicated attendees, we will still continue to use meditation as a relaxation technique to employ positivity and purity in the mind and the body. •

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