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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: “The Richmond Meditative Inquiry Group”

by Kia Montgomery

On Sunday November 22, 2015 at 6:15 PM I attended a Meditative Inquiry Group at an Ekochi Buddhist Temple by myself. The Ekochi Buddhist Temple is located at 3411 Grove Avenue, Richmond, Virginia 23221. I went there because Dr. Garvin- Sanchez had suggested it seeing as a lot of other students went there often when doing their field trips. The Ekochi Buddhist Sangha of Richmond is a multidenominational community. The session I attended was lead by Mark Bryant and Kirk Warren Brown.

Structurally, the outside of the Ekochi Buddhist Temple was a corner house on the end of a street in a neighborhood. It had at least seven steps before stepping onto the spacious patio. There was one main door to enter through, and then on each side of the doorway were two windows that were the same size. Over top of the doorway was another small top window and to the left of the doorway was a board that said Ekochi Buddhist Center. The entrance way was under the porch, which was lined with three pillars. Over top of the porch was a single window and two other windows. Inside the Buddhist center there was a small place to the right where you could put your shoes and or bag, to the left was a closet where you could put your coat. The floor space was empty but all around the parameter of the room were square pillows and then a round cushion on top as well as three chairs along the wall. The living room was kind of oddly shaped almost like the letter L if you

were to draw it backwards. There was an upstairs that had a bathroom in the hallway and then another room that was called the Zen room, which was where I had my orientation. It was sent up nicely with lighted candles and the same square pillows and round cushions just like downstairs. I was told there was a library past the bathroom on the first floor but I did not get the opportunity to see it.

The session usually starts at 7:00 PM but since it was my first time coming there Mark asked me to arrive at 6:15 for me to have an orientation. When I got there I was kind of scared at first because I had no idea what to expect especially because I was by myself. Mark that told me where to put my belongings after he greeted me with a welcoming smile as he shook my hand and told me he was glad I could make it. The orientation had gone well, he explained what meditation was, some of the things I might experience and how the session would go. It was really nice to have a walkthrough of everything.

The people who had attended the session were definitely older than me; I would say between the ages of 28-60, even there were only about fifteen to twenty people there in total including me. The ethnic background was mostly white but there were two to three people of other races although I was the only African American. I would say they were more women then men since there were only four men there and two of them were the leaders

of the meditative group. But they all seemed to know each other for the most part when it came to the group dialogue. During the group dialogue Mark introduced me to the group and everyone was so welcoming with smiles and small waves, which was so nice as a newcomer. They made me all feel welcomed and comfortable being there, at first I was reserved but as the group dialogue went on I threw out the question of “what made them come to this service/ religion?” and a lot of them were very open to the questions and responded so I learned a lot and appreciated their answers.

The service usually starts at 7:00 PM, which I have mentioned before. So from 7-7:30 PM they have a sitting meditation but since it was my first time and I was not use to sitting on the cushion for a long period of time I deiced to sit on a chair. Then from 7:30-7:40 PM they do a silent walking mediation in which you stand up slow and follow the person in front of you with slow half steps. You usually make almost two full rotations around the room and then you return to where ever you were seated. Following that is a short talk or reading and then tea right before the group dialogue. Group dialogue is from 7:40-8:45 PM and it is where anyone can throw out a question, anything they want to share or talk about and at some points it can be silent group meditation. After that is a short 5-10 minute sitting meditation and then they end the session at 9:00 PM.

The emotional tone of the session is very calm and relaxing. It is a time to let go and slightly loose yourself, to focus on your breath and becoming one with your body as a whole. It is a very casual setting, everyone is in what is comfy for him or her, no one is being judged, and everyone is very open. The session itself is

casual and flows easily; it is very ritualistic in how they followed the same service at least for Sunday nights. The service ends with a short sitting meditation and the ringing of a bell. I did see little framed pictures along the walls of the living room but I did not get the chance to ask what they represented or stood for.

Overall the mediation was an amazing experience; I think everyone should try it at least once. I know the sitting for thirty minutes can seem long but it is a great way to find yourself and experience piece of mind. •

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