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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 Jennifer O'Connell

On Sunday, October 18, 2015, at 9:00 am, I attended the Richmond Zen Group at Ekoji Buddhist Sangha of Richmond, Virginia. Ekoji is quaintly located on 3411 Grove Avenue. It is a multi-denominational Buddhist community that offers many Buddhist-inspired groups. The zazen meditation orientation group led by Kevin Heffernan, provides an opportunity to study and practice Soto Zen Buddhism.

Ekoji Buddhist Sangha of Richmond is located in the Museum District of Richmond, VA. It is a Buddhist temple that has been converted from a house, which was purchased in 1986 with the support of Reverend Kenryu Tsuji. Walking among the quaint homes on Grove Avenue Ekoji appears to be just another home, it is a two story, detached house with a small front porch. It is painted a welcoming light yellow and has pleasant landscaping. The interior of the temple is quiet and dimly lit. The smell of incense lingers in the air, there are stacks of black zabutons and zafus neatly stacked against the wall. Zabutons are mats used during meditation while sitting on the floor to alleviate pressure on the knees and ankles and zafus are round cushions used for sitting that allows both knees to touch the ground allowing for a more stable meditating position. The purpose of the cushions is to provide mindful meditation that is not hindered by body positioning. Situated just a few feet from the front door is a room divider provided to create a space where shoes are to be removed and

stored. On the other side of the divider is an open area where the service is held. The divider creates a more private and intimate setting. Other than Mr. Heffernan and myself another woman joined us for the zazen meditation orientation. I felt very at ease with both of them throughout the orientation and the service. If I had not taken part in the orientation prior to the service I would have been uncomfortable throughout the service as this is where I was informed of what to expect during the service and what others would expect from me. The majority of people attending the service were men, all participants were Caucasian, and approximately between the ages of 30 and 60, the number of people present for this particular service was roughly 15. As this was my first time attending this service and I did not personally know any of the members of the congregation, I was unaware of the participant's social class or ethnic background.

On the day I visited the Ekoji Buddhist temple, it was a cool and beautiful morning. I had parked 2 blocks away so that I could enjoy the walk down historic Grove Avenue. Once I had arrived at the temple I stood on the street, out front and was turning off my cellphone when a gentleman, Kevin Heffernan peeped out the front door and greeted me with a smile. Kevin welcomed me in and informed me that a few other guests were expected to arrive and we would then begin our orientation. By 9:00 a.m., one other guest had arrived, we removed our shoes and followed Kevin up a narrow flight of

stairs. We were given a brief tour of the upstairs, which consisted of an office a restroom and the room where the Tibetan Buddhist group congregates. This room was painted a deep gold with burgundy window treatments and ornately decorated with traditional Tibetan symbols and art work and a gong that sat on the floor. Then we were lead to the room where zazen meditation is practiced, this room was starkly different, it was a small room with two windows and hardwood floors where four or five sets of zabutons and zafus were placed. The room was painted a pale, neutral color with minimal decorations, just a small statue of Buddha that rested atop a small stand, along with a candle and incense. Kevin gave us a brief introduction into zazen meditation, which means seated meditation. Zazen is the main technique used to gain insight into the Buddha's teachings, which emphasizes an awakening that imparts compassion and true freedom in our self. Kevin, then guided us through how to position our bodies on the meditation cushions and how to hold our hands and eyes throughout the meditation process. He discussed how we breathe and to allow our thoughts to come into our minds, but then let to let them go. He demonstrated walking meditation, chanting, and bowing. Before going downstairs for the beginning of the service we practiced our first meditation, which we did facing the wall with our backs to one another. Once our practice meditation has ended, Kevin asked if we had any questions, and I asked him to clarify the purpose of facing the wall. It was explained that in zazen meditation one sits facing a wall to discourage distractions from who we are and allows us to be faced with oneself.

We then left the small upstairs room and joined the service downstairs. Immediately,

you could smell the incense burning downstairs. The purpose of the incense is to create a soothing effect on the mind and offers a tranquility that helps create a positive state of mind. The room and the service was ritualistic and serene. We each went to an empty set of meditation cushions and began the full service, which consisted of 30 minutes of zazen meditation, 10 minutes of walking meditation, 30 additional minutes of meditation followed by the service. It was during the service that we bowed, facing the Buddha, in humble acceptance and chanted mantras. Mantras are specific sounds that assist the mind in entering a state of calmness and peacefulness. Chimes were used to signify the transition between sitting and walking meditation, chanting and the end of the service. Visiting the Ekoji Buddhist temple was insightful and informative. When the service was over I was relaxed and looked forward to attending this service again. I would definitely encourage others who are interested in learning more about zazen meditation and pursuing the Buddhist way to attend a service at Ekoji. •

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