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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 Megan Riggs

On Monday, October 26, 2015, I attended a Ligmincha meditation service at Ekoji Buddhist Sangha of Richmond. It is located at 3411 Grove Ave, Richmond, VA 23221. The leader of the session was Greg Kelley.

When I first pulled up to the building, I thought I was lost. It was in a neighborhood in Richmond and it was in a house! I didn't see the sign on the building until I walked closer to the house. The inside of the building was very simple. There were paintings of Buddha on the walls and a statue of him on the wall. There was an area in the front to take off your shoes and leave your possessions. What I really liked about Ekoji was that if you contacted someone beforehand, they would give a small orientation thirty minutes before the service about what you were about to do and guided meditation during the service if you had never meditated before. I met with Greg Kelley beforehand and he explained things about Bön and its origin in Tibet.

When I arrived, I was the only one there. At first, I was nervous that I was going to be the only person there because he had told me that the attendance is very infrequent. However, two more people showed up before we started meditation. It seems as if Ekoji is a smaller community because Greg knew and greeted everyone by name. The gender and age of everyone present was completely split in half. There were two women, including me, and two men. Greg and the other woman there

were both older, and the other man there was about the same age as me. Everyone seemed to be from the same ethnic background and social class.

If I'm being completely honest, I was uncomfortable during the service because I had never meditated before and it was really new to me. However, everyone seemed to be really nice and accepting. After the service, we sat and talked about the service and what was interesting and everyone shared his or her thoughts and opinions. Throughout the entire service, Greg explained everything we were doing and why we were doing it.

I arrived 30 minutes before service so Greg could talk to me about meditation and Bön. I felt that the orientation was a good service to offer because it is important to know the history and background of something you are about to do. The opening of the service was very casual. He explained that we were going to do the 9-round breathing. The purpose of it is to visualize the main 3 energy channels in the body and to calm and clear the mind. The Central Channel starts between the eyebrows, continues back just under the skull, and from the crown of the head it goes straight down to the level of four finger-widths under the navel and stays a little in front of the spine. It is like a transparent blue tube, about the thickness of a thick drinking straw. To the left and to the right are two side-channels, both transparent and the thin. They all connect under the navel.

I really enjoyed this part because I suffer from very bad anxiety and PTSD, so breathing techniques are very important in my everyday life in order to calm my mind. After that, we sat in silence and just cleared our minds from everything in the world and then sang a short prayer in a different language. I'm assuming it is one from Tibet.

We then focused on the Five Warrior Syllables. First, we were supposed to focus on the third eye and chant the syllable "A." We repeated doing that in unison about 7-10 times. Then we focused on the throat chakra and did the same thing, except this time we chanted "Om." After that, we focused on the heart chakra and chanted "Hung." Then we focused on the navel chakra and chanted "Ram." Finally, we focused on the secret chakra, which is at the base of your spine, and chanted "Dza." From what I gathered, the reason we did this is because the syllables are associated with the Five Wisdoms and they are supposed to get rid of fear and ignorance in order to cleanse ourselves of negative emotions. This part I found particularly interesting, especially the chanting part. I loved the idea behind it and that it was supposed to cleanse all negative emotions. After the Five Warrior Syllables, we sat and meditated for about 10 minutes. This part was extremely difficult for me because sitting still is not one of my best skills. After that, we sang another prayer in the same language. That was basically the end of the service! Personally, it felt like it took forever because I do not like complete silence and having to stay still, but it was only about an hour.

The tone of the service was very calm. It was very quiet (unless we were chanting) and relaxing. Everyone participated enthusiastically. They all got really into the chanting

and singing. It may have been because they have been doing it for a while and are used to it. The service itself seemed to be extremely ritualistic. Everything we did had a purpose and an explanation.

Personally, I may want to incorporate meditation into my daily life in some way. It was very calming and relaxing. I asked Greg if I was able to come back and meditate even though I am a Christian. He had told me that it didn't matter what my religious affiliation was because anyone can meditate. I might have to force my boyfriend to go with me next time. •

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