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## Ekaji Buddhist Sangha

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# Ekaji Buddhist Sangha

by Janel Boyles De Rondon

On Sunday, October 18, 2015 I visited a Buddhist Zen center in Richmond, Virginia. Because I was a first time visitor to the center, I arrived fifteen minutes earlier than the scheduled nine o'clock class. The temple is called Ekaji Buddhist Sangha of Richmond and it's located at 3411 Grove Ave, Richmond, VA 23221. The leader of the meditation group was a man named Kevin, he began the meditations and he led the Sunday group.

The location is very small, it's located in a suburban neighborhood, that's very quiet and peaceful. The building is like a small house with not a lot of land around the house to separate itself from the neighbors. It wasn't what I was expecting because I thought it would be more dramatic and that the center would sit on a big landscape. I'm glad that it was small because it gave me the opportunity to not feel so out of place.

When I first arrived, I went with a friend, she and I had to have our orientation before the session actually began. The orientation included instruction on Zen meditation and an introduction to zendo forms which is used during mindfulness. The instructions were difficult at first but the instructor helped walk through the process, and it became easier.

The group had a range of members, it was a mixture of male and females from ages of twenty until about the age of forty. The members were mostly white, but even with that

being the dominant population, I still felt comfortable being with the group. There weren't any children present, because the group was mainly for a focus on meditation with adults. Everyone wore comfortable, loose fitting clothing that would allow them to stretch and get into position, they also didn't wear any shoes. Also, everyone wore dark toned colors and nothing that contained logos or graphics that would be a distraction.

The center was encouraging of new guest; they always expect someone new to attend. I felt free enough to ask someone close by for help if I had a hard time doing anything. Once everything began a large bell called a densho rang to let everyone know that we would begin and that they should be entering the zendo. Everyone got into their seats, I took a spot towards the back of the room. The Chief Junior of the center performed rounds to make sure that everyone and everything is in order. Zazen meditation began for about thirty minutes once the gong was struck three times. Concurrent with zazen is sanzen which is formal on Sundays and it's like an interview process with a teacher, not everyone had to participate because it is voluntary. I chose not to participate being that it was my first time at the center. But the people that did participate had a brief question to ask the teacher and before they entered the room they had to bow slightly in gassho, which means that they put their palms together. It's also symbolizes oneness of all beings and it's used to show

respect and prevent mind scattering.

Everyone was in good spirit, they were calm and focused on their meditation. It was very peaceful and the room didn't have any air conditioning so it got a little warm as well. After the zazen meditation it was time for walking meditation, which is also known as kinhin; it's done to help stretch your legs. It's mostly significant in helping a person maintain the mind of zazen while moving at the same time. Walking meditation lasted about ten minutes and this was the part that I found most difficult to accomplish. The main intention of this type of meditation is to be in the moment, to be present. It can be done in a pace that a person chooses, I chose to do this in a very slow pace because it helped me to be more concentrated, it could also range to a normal walking pace. The next thing that we did after the walking meditation was another zazen meditation for thirty minutes. This form of meditation is seated meditation, it's primarily the religious practice. We took our seats on a pillow or as it's also called a zafu and then we get into the seated position. The position that we were in was the Burmese position, I watched as everyone did this position which is known to be its simplest, where you put both of your knees flat and one of your ankles is positioned in front of the other. Once your body was in the Burmese position, everyone placed their hands in the cosmic mudra, where the right hand is turned palm up and your left is placed underneath cradling it. The symbolism behind mudras is that it's supposed to help with the energy inside of us and it allows our life force to stay within the body without escaping through our finger tips during meditation. We were sealing our meditative position with our hands and helping preserve our life forces. Specifically, cosmic

mudras help increase self awareness and it brings our attention and mind inward.

Once the thirty minutes were up, we began service for ten minutes. We stood up and bowed to our zafu and then bowed to the center of the room and made gassho. We kneeled and placed our forehead on the ground while lifting our hands. Afterwards we made a few more bows toward people across from us and three more facing the altar and finally we took our seat facing the center. The significance of bowing is to dissipate arrogance and ego. During service, we were given chant books also known as sutra books. Because I was new, I thought the best thing to do was listen to what others were doing and follow that. Chanting was done in unison, we didn't just listen to our own voices but everyone's as a group.

The last part of the meeting was tea and discussion, which lasted an hour. Everyone got up properly and began socializing with each other. I started talking with a few people who had been attending the center for a quite some time. Everyone was inviting and asked a lot of questions as to why I decided to attend the center. Once discussion ended, we had dharma talk with the speaker and afterwards we had time for question and answer and once the speaker left, the bong went off to let us know it was done, we straightened our seats and exited the zendo. •

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