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# Ekaji Buddhist Sangha

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# Ekaji Buddhist Sangha

by Madison Bray

The Buddhist temple was named the Ekaji Buddhist Sangha. There are about eight different groups of Buddhists. The address of the Buddhist “temple” is 3411 Grove Avenue Richmond, Virginia 23221. Their denomination of Buddhism is Insight meditation or Vipassana. The date that I went was on September 29, 2015 from 7pm to 9pm. The name of the presiding officials were Mike, who led us in our meditations and ending prayer and Whitney who lead us in the religious internal and external discussion about our meditation and the recording we listened to. I didn’t get there last names because the whole service almost felt slightly anonymous. We gave our first names but never our last names and that kind of gave me a feeling of freedom so that I felt ok with being open and that caused their discussion have more of an impact on me.

The building looks rather homey from the outside because the temple is in a neighborhood area. From the front it looks like someone’s home and that that person loves nature because there were plants and flowers planted on the outside. I think there were two trees planted beside the side of the house hiding the little ally way that leads to the back of the building which still holds that feeling of home-like. The back of the building from the outside has no green grassed back yard because in the back there is a parking lot that members of the religion can use when they come to worship instead of trying to find street parking. Once

you walk inside the “temple” there is a waiting room styled entrance way where people have to take off their shoes. They also leave their other personal belonging out in this area so that they don’t have any distractions while meditating. After you walk past the entrance way there’s a place where the meditation pillows and stools sit against the wall. There are also two other room beside the main worship room that are in view. The first one is off to the side and it’s sort of a walk around to get to the bathroom without cutting through the ceremony area. The second room is a storage/bathroom area. The overall feel of the building was tranquil, warm, and a safe place for those who practice Buddhism.

The way that visitors that had come to the Buddhist temple were very open with one another like they were seeing friends. I was greeted very warmly and with open arms by everyone, that welcoming feeling gave me the feeling that it was ok for me to ask questions and not be condemned for my curiosity. The variety of people that came to the service ranged from college student to business men and women. This meant that they were all different ages ranging from 19 to their early 50’s. I’d say the average age of everyone there was 30 years of age. The ethnic background was white, black, Native American, and possibly Hispanic, so the Buddhist faith clearly doesn’t discriminate against race, gender, and sexual orientation. The dominate gender that was there when I went was females, but only

by one or two. However, the total number that came to the service was about 12.

Since I arrived early I had the chance to sit with the one presiding over the service about my questions and give me a rundown of how the evening was going to go. He also invited me to stay for the discussion at the end of the evening about everyone's thoughts. He wasn't the only one willing to sit and talk to me. All member of the congregation was welcoming and willing to explain things as well. This made me feel comfortable listening everyone share their feelings on that days teaching, what they got out of it, how they felt personally about it, and even personal stories that were triggered by the recording about Buddha's teachings that was listened to at the end before the discussion.

The group insight meditation (Vipassana) is the "systematic method of cultivating mindfulness of body, feeling, mind and Dhamma (the Teaching or mental objects), which leads to purification of mind, to overcoming grief and sorrow, to overcoming pain and suffering, to treading the path leading to liberation" (Bhante Henepola Gunaratana). Before the service started I was given a thirty minute orientation about how to meditate; so what my body, mind, and soul should get out of it and how I should feel while going through the meditation process. However, I found that meditation is a lot harder than people may believe and I personally couldn't get my mind to focus or my body to stop moving during the entire sitting meditation. Personally the walking meditation was easier for me because my body was doing an action that my mind could focus on, which was easier for me then focusing on my breathing and staying stationary.

After the walking meditation my mind was again struggling to follow their practice of breathing and stationary meditation, while listening to a recording of a women talking about how she applies Buddhist practice in her everyday life. However, once we got to the discussion part of the evening I felt that I could fully focus because I wasn't trying to focus my mind on something so small. Having that discussion with the congregation helped me process all was said about their faith and how they applied what the speaker (recoding) was saying to their everyday lives. This caused me to reflect about how I carry myself in everyday life as well and how I could apply what the recording was saying to my life.

The service focus on meditation was so that you could reach a path of enlightenment in your mind and reach mental clarity, precision, and freeness. The reason they try to reach mental clarity is because they believe what the Buddha said about suffering; that people suffer because they believe themselves to suffer. To Buddhist suffering and pain are different things, one can experience pain but not suffer for it. Suffering is almost like a disease of the mind that has to be cleared away before one can truly see, have self- control, increased awareness, non-delusions, and peace.

The Emotional tone at the opening of the service was tranquil/peaceful and warm/inviting. Since the opening was on the casual side and no one felt as though they were left out or the odd man out. That feeling of casual calmness stayed that way throughout the entire service, the environment never changed. The congregation wasn't either emotional or reserved. They were open in their minds and body language, which created a more spiritually aware space that I believe they believed

helped them connect with the teaching and spiritual energy of Buddha. The service from beginning to finish was what I believe is ritualistic. With that in mind you could almost imagine you were at a Buddhist temple in the Middle East because of the atmosphere and style of the service. Their service ended with what I assume is a Buddhist prayer, which one member would say the prayer first and the rest of the congregation would repeat it back, almost like a vow that they were making for themselves on how to live their life, treat people, and treat themselves.

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The art that was around the building was very in tune with the spiritual nature of the whole temple. The art was of different images of Buddha and of a Buddhist/Hindu god and in the images they were shown with the ordinary people that chose to follow their practice. As well as the painting/ still images of Buddha, they also had statues of in four different spots that were visible in the area of worship and the entrance way. When members of the congregation would pass one of the statues they would do a slow bow to show their respect for the Buddhist practice and also to show their open minded and heartedness throughout the service.

When you walked into the temple at first you could smell the faint but distinct scent of incents burning near one of the statues of Buddha. Also, every once in a while the presider of the service would ring this gong like bowl to signal a transition from one moment in the service to the next. The bell was always rung four times as well. The bell was a symbol of the acceptance that it was time to move one and let the past go as part of the "clear-seeing" practice, to not hold it with you so that it could have the chance to eat away at you. •