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2015

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Ekaji Buddhist Sangha

by Kennedy Hall

On Sunday October 25, 2015 I visited the 9:00 am Richmond Zen Group at the Ekaji Buddhist Sangha located at 3411 Grove Avenue, Richmond VA 23221. The Ekaju Buddhist Sangha is a multi-denominational community of Buddhist and Buddhist inspired groups. The presiding official of our service was a man named Christian.

The building was a home on Grove Avenue. It was a little intimidating to walk in because I was not sure what I was walking into and at first I was unsure that I was in the right place. A home seemed to be such an intimate environment and I was worried I would not have been welcomed. The service was held downstairs in what would have been the living room area. The inside of the home was dimly lit with natural lighting from outside and with candles. There were black, square mats with round, black pillows placed on top of them that lined the perimeter of the room. I was greeted warmly and was recognized as a new attendee. The community was small. There were only ten to fifteen people, including myself, and it was a diverse crowd. There was an equal mix of males and females, ages ranging from 20's to around 50, and no dominant ethnic group, however, there were more Caucasian people than I expected.

I was comfortable sitting this the other attendees because everyone seemed to be warm and inviting. I was not comfortable talking to those around me though, because no one else

was talking. The service was mainly a quiet time of individual reflection so talking was not encouraged.

The greeter, Christian, who was also the presiding official, explained step by step what was going to happen before the service even began. He then sat with me and explained the proper meditating stance and procedure for the service.

The service began at 9:00, though many people arrived earlier and began meditating right away. Before entering the place of meditation, your shoes must be removed and you bow upon entering. Then you choose a place to sit to meditate. Before sitting down you bow to your seat, to show respect to your place of mediation, then turn to your right and bow to the other people in the room to show respect to them as well. Then you sit facing the wall on the edge of your pillow with your legs crossed. It is important to sit in the right position to prevent your legs from falling asleep while you sit. Then you place your hands in your lap, left hand under right, and press your thumbs together to serve as a point of focus. A gong sounded the beginning of meditation, which lasted for thirty minutes. During meditation you are not supposed to think, but you are also not supposed to not think. The point is not to chase your thoughts but rather allow them to come to you by taking in the sounds around to you come to the conclusion that you are alive. After thirty minutes of meditation

you transition into ten minutes of slow walking, or walking meditation. After ten minutes you bow to everyone on the room and then you sit back down and do thirty more minutes of meditation. When that thirty minutes concludes, there is a ten minute long service. The service begins with bowing three times to the Buddha painting at the head of the room. Bowing starts from a standing posture, then all the way down to your knees with your head to the floor, and then back to a standing position. This is repeated three times. Then kneel on your knees for the service which consists of about four chants that the presiding official chooses from a book. Everyone gets a copy of the book so that you can chant with them. The service is concluded with three more bows to Buddha and then it is over.

The emotional tone of the service was one of reflection. There was also a large sense of respect, for oneself and for the other individuals in the room. The service was quiet, relaxing, and peaceful.

The opening of the service was somewhere between dramatic and casual. The beginning of the meditation service was signaled by a gong ringing three times, which is pretty casual, but when the room is already silent I can see how it is a bit dramatic. Then the signal for meditation to end and for the chanting section of the service to begin was with gong as well, which is startling and dramatic in a silent room.

I would said that the participation of the congregation was neither emotional nor reserved. The congregation was not reserved in the sense that everyone participated in the same way, but it was not emotional either. The Buddhist belief is that nothing really exists

and everything is a sense of “sameness” and “oneness” so being overly emotional would go against that.

The service was very ritualistic. It is the same routine every week and is very precisely timed - with meditation for 30 minutes, walking for 10 minutes, meditation for 30 minutes, and service for 10 minutes and it ended right on time.

The service ended with three bows to Buddha and then the presiding official gave announcements of events for the next week and invited everyone to stay for a cup of tea.

Most of the art was abstract with cool, calming colors. There was one picture and one statue of Buddha, the founder of Buddhism.

One ritual that I experienced on Sunday was the ritual of meditation, which serves to purify and focus the mind with the proper adjustment of body, mind, and breathing. Another ritual was bowing, or the proper term prostration, which is the pay the highest respect for Buddha and his teachings. The final ritual that I was a part of was the chants. Chants are the repetitions of Buddha’s teaching, which serves to train our thoughts and bring clarity. •

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