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Ekaji Buddhist Sangha

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Ekochi Buddhist Sangha

by Dzhuliyana Handarova

For my second religious experience as a signment, I attended a Buddhist service at the Ekochi Buddhist Sangha. I chose to go to the service of the Richmond Zen Group on Sunday, October 25th at 9 in the morning. The house which served as the place for where the group held their ceremonies was located on 3411 Grove Ave, Richmond, VA 23221. I was greeted by a man named Kevin, the presiding official, who led the Buddhist ceremonies of the Richmond Zen Group. He was incredibly welcoming, and gave me great instructions on how to properly meditate and behave during the service.

The address I went to for the ceremony was a simple house in a neighborhood which looked like a house a family could actually live in. The space where the service was held was decorated with pictures of the original Buddhist teachers, a statue of the God Ganesh, and mats for meditation were laid out on the floor. I was greeted by Kevin, the spiritual leader, who explained to me the proper way to meditate and basically what the ceremony would entail. Having never attended a Buddhist service I very much appreciated his directions and guidance. He was incredibly friendly and welcoming and willing to help me throughout the entire process. The guests that attended the service were all white, however there was about a 50/50 mix of men and women. Most were thirty and older; however, I did notice there was one other person who seemed to be about my age. The leader, Kevin, was a white

male in his forties. I could not tell people's social standing, because everyone was dressed very differently. Kevin was in sweatpants, and a few others were as well, most men wore polos and jeans. Overall, the dress code was very casual which made the atmosphere feel comfortable and personal. I felt very comfortable during the entire time, and people all seemed very friendly, although I did not speak to many because the service was pretty ritualistic. As a newcomer I did feel accepted, and did not feel like I stood out in any way, which I was incredibly happy about.

Before I entered the space where the service was held I had to leave my bag and jacket at the front of the house and also all guests had to remove their shoes. The room was dim and was decorated with pictures of Buddhist leaders and a statue of Ganesh which stood in the middle of the room. Incense was burning. Before we entered the room, all guests had to bow. Then we walked to one of the meditation mats, bowed again, and then took a seat. Kevin explained to me that we were to sit cross-legged, but with our legs on top of each other, to prevent our feet from becoming numb. After taking our seats everyone meditated for thirty minutes. I am no expert at meditation; therefore, this seemed like a painfully long time, as I couldn't properly stop my brain from thinking too many things at once. A bell was rung. Everyone lined up in a single-file line with our hands clasped in front of our chest, and we walked around the room slowly and

silently for ten minutes. Another bell was rung. We turned to the center of the room, bowed, then took out seats again. There was another thirty minute session of meditation, one which again felt extremely long. That was ended with yet another bell. Afterwards, everyone moved their mats to the center of the room. We performed something known as “floor baths”, which is a procedure of bowing and kneeling to the floor in order to cleanse the space before prayer began. Books full of the Buddhist prayers and chants were provided for everyone, and for the most part everyone read along. The chanting was incredibly monotone, because an incredibly important of Buddhism is to be able to detach yourself from your emotions. At the very beginning of the service Kevin explained to me that this is because it is important to be “observant of your emotions, not letting your life be absorbed by them”. The chants we all read along to were Great Wisdom Beyond Wisdom Heart Sutra, Sho Sai Myo Kichijyo Dharani, Dai Hi Shin Dharani, and Song of the Grass Root Hut. Before any of the chanting began we recited the Dedication of Merit, which is just a prayer to thank the original teachers of the Buddhist religion, those of China, India and Japan. We recited this once again at the end of the prayer recitals. After chanting, more floor baths, and this is how the ceremony ended. I was among the first five people to leave the service space. I would say the entire service was very ritualistic, and I have a feeling if I attended another service it would be almost identical. Most guests remained fairly reserved, because chanting and prayers aside, the room remained quiet. During meditation it was dead silent.

Overall I thoroughly enjoyed visiting with the Richmond Zen Group. For my first field trip assignment I attended a Christian Baptist

Church, and I actually felt more at home in a spiritual Buddhist environment. I would recommend this group to anyone who is interested in the Buddhist religion and just trying something different. •

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