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# Ekaji Buddhist Sangha

by Jennifer Jones

On Thursday, October 29th, I attended the Richmond Zen Group, which is a weekly group session hosted by the Ekaji Buddhist Sangha organization. The session was held at a house located at 3411 Grove Avenue in Richmond. It started at 7:00 p.m. but it was requested that we show up at least fifteen minutes before. For my first field trip for this class I attended a service at the Sacred Heart Cathedral and was not very active during the service. I knew that this would be different because I knew I would be required to meditate or do something of the sorts. There were two Buddhist practitioners during the session, who were identified by their long, black cloaks. However, it was announced that the group would have a guest practitioner leading us that night who was presented to us as “Jabba.” Jabba was a female who, if I had to guess, was about 55-60 years old. She was very small but I learned throughout the session that she was far from being small-minded.

First off, I was surprised that the session was in a house and not in either a studio or some sort of hall-like structure. Then it dawned on me that zazen isn't necessarily a religion where you have to worship in a particular building. The idea is to focus more on the inner body experience than the outer body experience. When I first walked into the door I was greeted by a woman who asked if we were here voluntarily or for a class. I told her for class and she showed me where to take off my shoes and put my belongings. She then

directed me to one of the many cushions on the floor and told me that I would need to first bow to the cushion before sitting down on it, in order to show reverence and obedience.

At first, I thought that the lady who had greeted me at the door was the person facilitating the session. Then I noticed two men in long black cloaks and came to the realization that she must just be helping out by greeting the visitors. There were only seventeen of us in total involved in the session. Of these seventeen, I think about seven of us were visitors by the way we were greeted upon arrival there. We were asked why we were here, if we had been here before, and directed what to do. The others, I observed, knew to bow before they stepped foot in the house, where to go, and seemingly what to do and expect.

First off, I was surprised that the session was in a house. I was expecting either a temple or a community building-like setting. Instead, we walked up to a three-story house that resembled all the other houses in the “Richmond Fan.” The houses were all connected to each other throughout the street and I could tell most of them were family houses by the flags hanging off the rails and the toys spread about in the front yard.

The inside of the house was smaller than I expected, well at least where we held the session at. When you first walk in to the right is the space where the shoes and jackets go.

This little space is cut off from the rest of the room by a large plastic board. Walking around the board is where the session took place. In another corner adjacent to this board was where all the mats were. We were instructed to get a mat and find a place on the floor. I found a place and sat next to my friend who I came with and, ironically, one of my classmates from this same religious studies class. Unfortunately, my mat was hard and uncomfortable but I didn't want to seem rude by going back and choosing another mat so I just made do.

Since I came early, as requested, I had time to observe the room before the session began. There were several pictures hanging on the wall across the room of Asian leaders, who appeared to be Buddha and some monks. The lighting was dim and there were a couple candles lit in the front of the room. Where the candles were was also a bowl filled with what looked like folded papers with people's names on it. A website I found said that this bowl of names represents people whose souls and bodies either need healing or guidance. Basically, it is like a prayer box. There wasn't any soft, meditating music playing in the background which I had originally thought it would be. Instead, one of the men in the black cloaks was sitting in the front occasionally hitting a cymbal on a small lap drum.

The place was rather quiet, besides the occasional dinging of the drum and the front door being opened. Once the room started filling up with mats I noticed the lady who had let us in get herself a mat and find a place on the floor like the rest of us. By this time I had looked at the time and saw that the session was about to begin and figured that's why she finally sat down. Before the session started the guy in

the front of the room hit the drum five times and then there was nothing but silence.

I, for one, was confused because nobody said anything but apparently we had began the mediation process. I had assumed that the process would be explained to us first-timers visiting the place but it wasn't. Instead, we kind of just had to jump in with the rest of the more familiar visitors. So, for the next thirty minutes we sat in complete silence on our mats with our eyes closed. I kept mine open at first to understand and observe what everyone else around me was doing. We were told beforehand that we were to place our mats towards the wall while meditating. I found out that this was to respect the privacy of everyone else in the room and also to block out any distractions.

The thirty minutes ended with the dinging of the cymbal yet again five times. Then, people started standing up so I did the same. Everyone began facing to the back of the person to right of them so that ultimately we were all standing in one big circle in the room. At first it felt like I was standing in the same spot for like five or ten minutes and that maybe we were just supposed to be standing in silence like this, until I noticed that the guy in front of me was significantly farther away from me than before. That's when I realized that we were slowly, and I mean slowly, walking in the circle. This took quite a while being that we only took a half step every fifteen seconds or so. Once we finally finished the circle the cymbal was hit five more times and people returned to their mats, of course bowing first before sitting down.

Next, one of the guys in the cloaks introduced the speaker for the night, Jabba, and told us

that we could turn our mats to face her. Jabba introduced herself some more and talked for about an hour about various myths that she had picked up over the years and how these myths could be turned into life lessons. She spoke a lot about an Emperor Wu and how his situations with others along his road of transitions could in fact be our own selves. A lot of what she said made sense and made me think about some instances in life I could recall on. Other times, she lost me. Either way, I'm glad I was able to attend this class and get a new perspective on something I would have probably never tried otherwise. •

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