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Ekaji Buddhist Sangha

by Ellen Kruse

For the second field trip I chose to attend a Buddhist meditation. I went to the Ekaji Buddhist Sangha which is located at 3411 Grove Avenue, Richmond VA 23221. I attended the Kagyu Tibetan Buddhist practice group on Thursday October 22, 2015 from 7:30-8:30pm. The practice was led by Lama Chodron.

I was very surprised as I walked up to the building because it was not any special type of building from the outside. There were no symbols or any type of hints that this was a place of Buddhist worship. If I had not known that Buddhist practices were held there then I would have assumed it was like any other house on the street. There were no signs that it was a Buddhist worship place and it looked very plain and simple almost blending into the row of houses.

I walked into the house and the meditation room was very modest. The colors of the floor and walls were very modest brown and beige. I was greeted by the teacher Lama Chodron and several others who were already in the room. I was instructed to remove my shoes before walking into the meditation room. At the very front of the room I noticed a sort of tribute type set up with a statue, some flowers, a candle, and some bowls. There were cushions on the ground for us to sit on while we meditated and also some small benches were available around the room. I noticed that most of the people who were attending this meditation were fairly young; between the ages of 20 and

40 and seemed to be a very diverse group of people. There were people of all races, seemed to be a more middle class type group as well though. There were about equal men and women and in total about 10-15 people were present that night.

Everyone in attendance was very friendly and talkative. They were extremely welcoming and made me feel very at ease for it being my first time attending. I felt relatively comfortable despite being a bit nervous because I did not know what to expect. The atmosphere and mood of the room was very calming and helped to ease my nervousness. No one offered to sit with me, however the people around me were friendly and did not make me feel pressured so they were a big help in getting me accustomed to the practice.

I did not know what to expect going in to this practice. I had done some research online before I visited but I was still uncertain about how it would feel to meditate. The leader of the practice, Lama Chodron, sat at the front of the room facing the group of us in the traditional Tibetan Buddhist robes which I remember associating with the Dalai Lama. Everyone else was dressed comfortably in loose clothing I would associate with exercise type clothing. The meditation session began with a prayer. I did not know the exact wording of the prayer and the words were in Tibetan so of course I could not understand them. However, I listened and most everyone

else was chanting the prayer along with the teacher, Lama Chodron. The chanting was very rhythmic and almost like a song when everyone was chanting together. Even though I couldn't actively participate in this part of the meditation I was able to listen and enjoy the calming atmosphere created by the chanting. The prayer and chanting continued for some time but there were several different prayers which I remembered from my research that were meant to stand for different things relating to the teachings of Buddha. After the prayers came the heart of the meditation. I had learned how to sit in the proper position for meditation in the full or half lotus position with my hands in a somewhat vertical oval with my thumbs slightly touching to for the top of the oval, and placing my hands slightly below the belly button area. This position did not come naturally for me, but it felt relaxing as I began to get used to it. Our heads were straight but our eyes were supposed to be slightly opened and facing the ground at a 45 degree angle.

The meditation began and the room was extremely silent for this part of the practice. We were instructed to take deep breaths in and out. This was continued for quite some time. I cannot recall how long this was but it seemed to carry on for a while. The point of the breathing was centered on flushing out any thoughts and solely focusing on the breathing and relaxing. I found this portion very difficult because I am usually quite a busy thinker and there is always something on my mind. However, I tried my best and focused on the breathing and not paying attention to any thoughts that ran through my head. This was quite relaxing and I could really feel my breathing deep and saw how beneficial meditation can be.

After these extended breathes of meditation, the leader of the practice, Lama Chodron, started more of the chanting. Again the words were in Tibetan so I could not make out the meanings or what they were saying but listening and taking in the emotional atmosphere was almost just as satisfying as if I was participating in the chanting. This prayer lasted a little bit longer than the prayers at the beginning and was a bit more rhythmic. The last of the prayers were chanted all together and served to close out the meditation practice and end the session. Following this was a discussion portion however I was not able to stay for this part, only the actual meditation portion.

Overall, the feel of this meditation session was very spiritual and a relaxing but focused atmosphere. The meditation was easing on my mind but I was also focused on my breathing and not giving in to any distracting thoughts. Everyone in attendance was very participatory and seemed more emotionally involved than in other religious practices I have seen. The practice also seemed very ritualistic and the people who were frequent returners knew everything that was supposed to happen and how and when to participate in the meditation and chanting. Some symbols that may have been present were several statues of the Buddha and the position that we were supposed to sit and meditate in I think represented peace and tranquility but also a focus and preciseness. I think these symbols greatly resemble the practice of Buddhism and the values that it entails. The meanings of the prayers, which I looked up following the session, were supposed to be dedications and recitations of the Buddha's teachings. These made up almost half of the time given for the meditation hour. The meditation itself was used to relax the mind and teach the lesson

of being at peace without the distractions of thought or everyday life or problems which I thoroughly enjoyed.

I had never really known much about the practice of Buddhism except for that it involved a lot of values such as peace, non-violence, and of course meditation. However, after attending this meditation session it seems much more intriguing and complex than I had originally thought. I am much more motivated to explore more about the different types of practices and what the meaning behind the chanting is and possibly learn a little more about the Tibetan Buddhism which I attended. •

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