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2015

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Ekaji Buddhist Sangha

by Callie Moore

Ekaji Buddhist Sangha of Richmond is home for the practice of five different sects of Buddhism. Located at 3411 Grove Avenue in the Museum District of Richmond, Soto Zen, Theravada (Vipassana), Pure Land, Tibetan Karma Kagyu, and Meditative Inquiry all come together and share the space at Ekaji Buddhist Sangha. On the evening of Wednesday September 23, my friend and I attended a Soto Zen meditation and teaching as part of the “Richmond Zen Group.” Kevin Heffernan and Lay Leader are the presiding officials of the group, and we had special guest speaker Josho Pat Phelan from the Chapel Hill Zen Center provide a teaching after the meditation.

The building itself is a Museum District house that has been converted into a Buddhist practice space. The front yard is equipped with a Zen garden; there is a sign over the entrance denoting the Ekaji Buddhist Sangha, and a list of all of the Sangha groups offered in the front window. Once inside there is a rack for shoes to the right of the door. The floor is carpeted and the walls are a calming light yellow with different framed and hung images and artworks of Buddha and Japanese writings. There is a dividing screen to separate the entrance of the space from the meditation space. Black cushions are already arranged on all edges of the room and there is a sort of shrine at the back of the space with a statue of Buddha and a burning candle and incense. There is also space upstairs for when there is an abundance of people, but I stayed on the first level of the

building.

As people entered the space, they would first take off their shoes, and bow before entering the meditation space. There was very little talking, as to be polite and courteous to those already meditating in the space. Ages ranged from my age (young college student) to the very elderly, with what seemed to be a multitude of different social classes and ethnic backgrounds. There were about twenty individuals present, with about equal men and women. I did see people casually conversing once the meditations and teaching had concluded; everyone seemed to be very friendly and genuinely happy to see one another.

We were greeted right away by one of the presiding officials. After we took off our shoes he introduced himself as Kevin, asked our names, and if we had ever done meditation before. After telling him we had not, he was more than happy to explain the process and the schedule for that evening. He told us that meditating is sort of like “driving by yourself in your car at night, on a road you don’t know.” He informed us that we were going to have a guest speaker, so we were only going to have one round of meditation, instead of two, and he showed us the correct sitting postures and hand placements for the meditations we would be doing. He was very welcoming and made coming into a new environment much less nerve racking.

After being instructed on the correct seated position for meditation (legs cross with feet in front of you with one hand in the palm of the other with thumbs touching) we began our seated meditation. The beginning of meditation was noted by the ringing of a bell. We were instructed to keep our eyes open and soften our gaze to a forty-five degree angle downwards. In my reading as preparation for my mediation, I found that it is also advised to keep your mouth shut, teeth together, and tongue touching the roof of the mouth. During the meditation, there is a cycle of focusing on your breath, then your posture, then back to your breath, and so on. The circle made by the hands with the thumbs touching is a symbol of this meditative cycle.

The seated meditation was a thirty minute long session. I do not think I was truly able to meditate on my first try, but part of meditation is not judging your mediation. After discussing our experiences afterwards, my friend and I seemed to have similar occurrences. My vision blurred and my breathing was very shallow. Whenever I would focus on my breath, I felt slightly inhibited, like I could not inhale all the way. My back became very sore and my arms grew very tired. I felt as though I was salivating a lot, and had to keep swallowing to keep from coughing. I did notice that I became very unaware that there was anyone else in the space. I was incredibly internally focused. My perception of time became distorted and I did not know if it had been five minutes, or thirty. I was not able to shut off my outside thoughts, but I think it could come with practice.

With the sound of a second bell, we all rolled up our cushions and stood one behind the other in a square. This was the walking

meditation. We had our hands against our bellies with one hand in a fist around our thumbs and the other surrounding it. We took very small and slow steps around the square. Kevin told us that the point of this short walking meditation was to simply “slow down.” After ten minutes, the bell rang again. I assume we would normally transfer back to our seated meditation to repeat this process, but because of the guest speaker, we arranged the cushions on the floor in rows to all face the back of the building, towards the shrine.

Joshua Pat Phelan bowed to the shrine and statue of Buddha standing and then on her knees, placing her forehead to the ground in a cycle several times before the bell was rung and she took her place on the floor next to the shrine. Before the lecture, we were all handed a paper book of “Small Verses.” Before she began speaking, we all chanted,

“An unsurpassed, penetrating and perfect
Dharma

Is rarely met with
even in a hundred thousand million kalpas.
Having it to see and listen to,
to remember and accept,
I vow to taste the truth
Of the Tathagata’s words.”

Joshua Pat Phelan proceeded to speak of our “evil desires” and our “Buddha nature.” She then recounted Buddha’s enlightenment story. How he tried different methods of meditation and asceticism, before realizing that to reach enlightenment, he needed to focus on his body and mind. She spoke of how Buddha was able to defeat his own Mara (demon). Mara set forth challenges, trials, temptations, and tasks before Buddha during his meditation, but he

remained calm and his mind and body unaltered, thus defeating Mara. She also spoke of the Four Noble Truths, and the Eight Fold Path.

After finishing her teaching, we had a casual and open discussion. Several people asked questions or talked about difficulties they had faced with their meditations and she provided insights. Once the discussion had come to a close, we chanted a "Dedication,"

"May our intention equally extend
to every being and place
With the true merit of Buddha's Way."

After the Dedication, we chanted the "Four Vows" three times in repetition,

"Beings are numberless; I vow to awaken with them.
Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.
Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.
Buddha's Way is unsurpassable; I vow to become it."

With the completion of our chant, Josho Pat Phelan ceremoniously left the room and was followed out by someone carrying the teachings from that evening on a tray. Kevin then began to give general announcements about a retreat coming up and thanked everyone for coming to the evening's mediation. With that conclusion, we were free to gather our shoes and other belongings and go on our way.

I enjoyed my time at Ekoji Buddhist Sangha of Richmond, and I hope to return. Even if I did not fully achieve meditation, I did feel calm and centered afterward. I also found the atmosphere very casual and welcoming. Some people were still in their clothes from work,

while others in jeans, and others in comfortable loose clothing. As meditation is such an inward practice, there is not much time for socializing, but as an introvert, I found it preferable and soothing. I felt as if I had a perfect introduction to the practice of Soto Zen Buddhism, and I would recommend Ekoji Buddhist Sangha to anyone interested in Buddhism or to anyone who has ever just wanted to try a structured mediation. •

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