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Ekaji Buddhist Sangha

by Erin Spare

On Saturday October 10, I visited Ekaji Buddhist Sangha of Richmond (3411 Grove Avenue), a local Buddhist temple. In order to attend the 2:00 service I was required to attend a 15 minute orientation beforehand in order to get a better understanding of what was to be expected. It was led by a man named Timothy Whitehead who supervises the temple.

When I arrived at the temple I honestly thought I wasn't at the right place. The temple was actually a two story house that had been converted into a place of worship/meditation. It resembled a traditional suburban house that a family would live in. I went with a girl named Hannah who I befriended in class; we walked up the cement stairs leading up to the house and rang the doorbell. When the door opened we were greeted by an older gentlemen, by the name of Timothy Whitehouse. He was an older, middle class Caucasian man dressed in a pair of loose blue jeans and a nice button down shirt. He asked for us to remove our shoes upon entering the house. We obeyed and followed him inside. Once inside I looked around and observed the setting. The room was medium sized with neutral colored walls that hung traditional Buddhist religious pictures on it. At the head of the room stood a rather large Buddha statue. On the ground laid two rows of black cushions. Timothy led us further into the room and asked if we would take a seat on them. Since we arrived before the service began for the orientation, we were

the only ones present in the room.

He further introduced himself and explained how he found peace within the Buddhist community and why he chose to be a Buddhist. He then asked if we would introduce ourselves in order for him to get a better understanding as to who we are and what we stand for. I felt comfortable talking to him because he was very approachable and he seemed interested in getting to know us. He further proved this by addressing us by name throughout our time there and would remember some of the things we told him about ourselves and would find ways to relate it to some of the Buddhist teachings in order to help us better understand what was going on.

Timothy gave us a brief summary of what we were about to participate in. He gave us a little pamphlet like booklet that had the order of events in the service. It contained various different chants, the times in which we were supposed to meditate and it also had a few of the sacred symbols on each page. We learned that the service was very ritualistic. He concluded the orientation by asking us if we had any further questions and reassured us that we will quickly catch on to what would happen in the service.

As the time was nearing 2:00, two other people came into the house for the service. The first was an older Caucasian man, (seemingly older than Timothy), dressed in loose kaki

pants and a button down. The other was a quiet middle aged Asian woman, who contrary to the manner that everyone else was dressed in, was wearing an older pair of loose jeans and a VCU tee shirt. During the orientation, we were told that the average number of people that attend this service is between 6-8 people, however one of the other main leaders had a minor surgery a few days prior and as a result not as many people attended.

Finally the service began. Timothy quieted us all down and let the middle aged Asian woman (I forgot her name because she was on the quiet side so for the purpose of the rest of this paper I will just address her as “the woman”) help lead the service. She began by ringing the “Bonsho”, which is a large temple bell. The service officially began. Despite the dramatic opening, the overall tone of the room was quiet yet very peaceful. As previously stated in my last field trip paper, I am a confirmed Catholic and during catholic services there are numerous quiet times however none compared to the quietness I experienced during this service. After thinking it over, I think it had something to do with the small number of people in the service and the fact that we were all sitting in a more casual manner on the floor without shoes. We then went on to chant referred to as the “Calling for the “Kansho”. After that was the ringing of the Kansho. The Kansho is often referred to as the Gyoji-sho or “ritual bell” because it is rung just prior to the beginning of the ritual. We then moved on to opening remarks and more chanting (referred to as Sutra chanting). After the chanting the service went on to the reading of the Three Treasures Buddha becomes enlightened to), and the Sangha (the community that tries to live its life based on the Buddha’s teaching). After that we went on to a traditional reading

and concluded with a five minute meditation.

Once the service ended the woman went into the kitchen and made us all herbal tea. We all sat in a big circle and talked about everything that happened and asked questions and talked about the temple itself. We learned that that specific temple was unique because Buddhists of all denominations held services there. We even went on a tour of the house and saw how the different rooms were converted to meet the needs of the specific denominations. Overall I enjoyed my visit at the Ekoji Buddhist Sangha of Richmond. It has even inspired me to incorporate meditation in my everyday life. I got a lot of this visit and I am really grateful for the experience. •

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