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Ekaji Buddhist Temple

by Alexander M Dutchak

On Sunday, September 27, I attended the 11am service at the Ekaji Buddhist Temple at 6500 Lakehaven Lane, Fairfax Station, Virginia 22039 with the company of my brother, Adam. The Ekaji temple is of the Shin Buddhism denomination and was founded in 1981 by Reverend Kenryu Tsuji. The name Ekaji means “The Temple of the Gift of Light.”

The Ekaji Temple is located in a secluded area off of the main roads and is surrounded by thick groves of trees. As we approached the parking lot we passed a few mid-sized houses that were spread out from one another with large yards and driveways. The parking lot seemed lacking in cars, but as we walked up to the door we could see that there were many people inside chatting before the beginning of the service. Perhaps they carpool with one another. As I talked with some of the service attendees I believed that to be true even more. They are a very close knit community, gathering even on days when the Temple is inactive to practice Yoga or take part in group meditations.

Surrounding the temple are lots of scattered cherry blossoms and a wooden deck that lines two walls of the building. I noticed a lonesome charcoal grill on the deck which lead me to believe they recently had a social gathering of some sort. Before entering the temple a short, stocky African American woman with thin dreadlocks approached my brother and me and asked if it was our first visit to the temple.

We told her that it in fact was our first visit, and that we were interested in learning more about the Buddhist way of life. She kindly welcomed us inside the building and gave us a few simple instructions: take off our shoes before entering the congregation room, find a seat, and get comfortable.

The congregation room is smaller than those of some of the Christian churches I have visited in the past, but still has plenty of space for everyone to sit comfortably. The white walls and dark wooden pews have a nice contrast to them, and along the walls there are large windows looking out over the meditation garden, called the “Three Treasures Garden.” At the front of the room there was a small stage complete with a podium, a large gong, and a Monk seated behind a table with a few books and a bowl-shaped chime on it. At the back of the stage was a large scroll with Japanese writing on it hung for all to see.

The service began with leaders of the group addressing the congregation and welcoming us all to the service. My brother and I sat near the front so that we could have a clear view of what was happening on stage. After they were finished making the morning announcements; most of which concerned upcoming social gatherings, Yoga practices, and guided meditations; we opened a booklet that we were handed before the service began to start the days activities. We performed several chants as a congregation which were led by

the Japanese monk who sat behind the chime on the stage. The chants were easy enough to follow along with for the most part, but my brother and I had some trouble with the Tibetan pronunciations of some words.

We followed along with the chanting for most of the first part of the service, only to take a break between chants for a guided meditation. The meditation had some chanting in it as well, but it was read almost exclusively by the Japanese monk while we relaxed into the pews and tried to stay awake. This is also when the great bowl-shaped chime came into play. The monk struck it occasionally during the meditation, perhaps for the atmosphere the sound created, or maybe to keep us alert.

After the congregation had had its fair share of chanting and guided meditation, we collectively moved towards the doors to take a lap or three around the "Three Treasures Garden." This was intended to be a time for individual meditation and for taking in the beauty of nature while not straying too far from the temple. This was by far my favorite part of the whole service. I'm a sucker for nature walks, and this garden had some wonderful flowers growing along the sides of the white pebble pathway as well as a few interesting statues that complimented the scenery very well.

My brother and I took a few extra laps around the garden, re-entering the building well after everyone else had. Once the garden walk came to a conclusion, the people of the congregation began standing and walking to the front in order of the pews in which they sat. This caught me off guard, because it reminded me of a traditional Christian communion with bread and wine, but I quickly learned that it is a very different type of ritual. When I came

to the front of the line I was told to bow and then approach the incense. I took the incense and placed it in the bowl full of the previously lit incense embers. This was known as Oshoko, the offering of incense. I then bowed again as is customary and returned to my seat. That concluded the service and people began to make their way back to their abandoned pairs of shoes and prepared to depart. My brother and I followed suit.

On our way out we were approached again by the African American woman, Dana. She asked for our thoughts on the service and invited us to her private Yoga practice later in the week. She was very wise and experienced in the teachings of Shin Buddhism and was happy to answer our questions. She explained that the chanting is part of what connects the teachings of Buddha, the "Dharma," to our lives. Through meditation and chanting we may better understand these teachings and make sense of them in our own individual ways. When I asked about the offering of incense at the end of the service she told me that it is a time to show respect and be thankful for the teachings of Buddha. The offering of incense represents our fleeting existence and allows us to acknowledge it. We thank her and head back to the car to start the journey home. •

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