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Drikung Dharma Surya: "A Trip to the Temple"

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When I visited my family over Thanksgiving break, I could not decide what I wanted to do for my next field trip. Then, I discovered the Buddhism Temple, Drikung Dharma Surya, at 5300 Ox Road, Fairfax, VA 22030, located right down the street from where I live. Also, as I was explaining my plans to my parents for my field trip, they mentioned the idea of bringing my younger sister, Julia, along with me for a learning experience. At the age of fifteen, she was not too thrilled about the idea of “going to church” voluntarily, but she agreed to go. However, just like me, she was able to experience something that could change her perspective of the way she lived her life.

Before my sister and I attended, I did a good amount of research to prepare my understanding and knowledge of what I was about to experience. Not only for me, but for my sister as well in hope to get her a bit more interested. The word Buddhism comes from budhi (“to awaken”). Its originated approximately 2,500 years ago when Siddhartha Gotama, known as the Buddha, enlightened himself at the age of thirty-five. He realized that wealth and luxury did not guarantee happiness. He then explored the different teachings, religious practices, and philosophies to find the key to human happiness. After six years of study and meditation, he finally found “the middle path” and, thus, led to his achievement of enlightenment. After, the Buddha spent the rest of his life teaching the principles of Buddhism also called the Dhamma (“Truth”).

I found that Buddhism goes beyond religion and is more of a philosophy or way of life. To prevent unnecessary conflict, it is also tolerant of all other beliefs/religions. Thus, is why Buddhists do not preach and try to convert; only seek to provide explanations and wisdom. It is a philosophy meaning love of wisdom and explains the injustice and inequality around the world, and it provides a code of practice that leads to “true happiness”. It also includes a deep understanding of the human mind and natural therapies (meditation), which is used by prominent psychologists today.

There are many different types of Buddhism because the emphasis changes from country to country due to various customs and cultures. However, they all share the idea of dhamma. The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path can sum up the concepts of Buddhism. The first truth is that life is suffering (pain, getting old, disease, and ultimately death, along with psychological suffering like loneliness, frustration, fear, embarrassment, disappointment, and anger) and explains how suffering can be avoided. The second truth is that suffering is caused by craving and aversion. Writer, Brian White states, “We will suffer if we expect other people to conform to our expectation, if we want others to like us, if we do not get something we want.” In other words, wanting deprives us
we followed the others into what is known as the Shrine room (Hondo). The shrine stood out to me throughout the entire service. It was mainly gold with a box and a Buddha statue located in the center. It was also surrounded by beautifully placed décor of exotic plants, statues, and elegant columns. As we got closer, people began to hold their hands before themselves with their palms together and what seemed to be what looked like a bracelet (Ojuzu) with a bow and small tassels. They wrapped it around both sets of fingers and under the thumbs. They raised their arms to an angle for a couple seconds, straightened up, and then proceeded to drop their hands to their sides. After, people began to take a seat in the pews since the incense was not yet lit, according to the locals. Once the incense was lit, people began to make their way down the center aisle. They stopped in front of the burner, stepped forward with their left foot, grabbed a pinch of granular incense, and tossed it onto the burner. They then proceeded to step back with their right foot, bow to the Buddha statue, and return to their seats. After everybody has had their turn, the minister began the service sitting on the raised portion of the shrine, leading a chant known as a Shutra, located in a book used by the participants. Luckily, not only was the book/chants in mostly English, but there was also another chairperson announcing what came next and what page it was on. After the service, we followed others to the back where we helped ourselves to some coffee and donuts generously served by the temple. My sister and I then noticed children attending something known as the Dharma School for after-service activities. A member also informed us that there was a class for adults as well. They even invited us to attend an eight-day Healing and Blessing retreat. After spending

of contentment and may lead to physical suffering by not guaranteeing happiness by getting what we want. The third truth is that suffering can be overcome and that happiness and contentment are, in fact, possible (also referred to as Nirvana, freedom of suffering). The fourth truth is that the Noble Eightfold Path leads to the end of suffering through being moral. Another familiar teaching is Karma. Karma is the simplistic law stating that every cause has an effect; all actions have results. All individuals held responsible for their past and present actions. It is said that a way to test this law is to consider what the intention behind an action is and how it affects oneself, along with how it may affect others. Buddhism depends more on understanding rather than faith.

After going over my gathered information with my sister, we then started our journey to Drikung Dharma Surya Center. On the outside, it looked relatively smaller than I imagined. Considering how popular and well known this belief was, I expected a very large temple. It was a white building with a triangular white roof, which resembled a small pyramid. However, what caught most of my attention was a bronze, small bell (kansho) located near the entrance of the front door. On the inside, however, it looked quite ceremonial with plenty of decorative religious tokens and sacred items. As we walked along the deep red carpet surrounded by white walls, we passed a donations box on our right filled with loose change and small bills. When we stepped a little further through the entrance of the building, we were immediately acknowledged and welcomed by the members. As we stood with minor confusion across our face, a clear and patterned sound, coming from the bell outside, signaled the start of the service and
some time talking with a few of the members, I could tell Julia was ready to go and we headed home discussing what we just experienced.

If I were to compare this field trip to my others, I would, without a doubt, state that this was my most rewarding and enjoyable experience. I have always been interested and eager to learn more about the Buddhism and after doing quite a bit of research and attending the service, it was everything that I figured it would be, yet still nothing I expected at the same time. After understanding that Buddhism is not considered a religion, but a way of life, I knew I was in for quite a different experience than before. I learned that a path along the road of Buddhism can lead a moral life, a more mindfully, self-aware thought process, better actions, and a development of a better understanding. I realized that true wisdom is not just simply believing what we are told, but instead, experiencing and acknowledging truth and reality. After hearing my sister go on and on about what we saw at the service to my parents, she seemed very interested in that particular practice. If so, I hope that it leads her down the Buddhist path of courage, patience, flexibility and intelligence, while also opening her mind to compassion. Buddha, who was not considered a god or ever claimed to be one, was a man who not only molded the minds of millions by challenging the ideas and ways of society, but also taught a path to enlightenment from his own experience, opening our minds to a realistic perspective of true happiness rather than a pessimistic way of life. •

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