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Intro to World Religions

December 8, 2013

Site Visit Report Two

Prior to taking the Intro to World Religions course at Lorain County Community College, I had no religious affiliation, despite my Lutheran upbringing. Now that I have taken the course, I realize that I do not have a single religious affiliation, but a reverence and respect for all religions, as well as greater respect for the right of individuals to practice whatever religion they feel best guides them.

I had initially registered for the Intro to World Religions course with a desire to learn more about Buddhism. With that in mind, I chose to attend a meditation session with the Cleveland Shambhala Meditation Group on Sunday, December 8th 2013. The Shambhala worship center is located at 17309 Madison Avenue in Lakewood, Ohio, area code 44107. According to one of the meditation instructors, Barbara (Barb for short), the Shambhala tradition stems from Tibetan Buddhism and was founded by the father of Sakyong Mipham. They follow the teachings of Sakyong himself as well, who followed in his father's footsteps. Their goal is to bring greater awareness and enlightenment, not only to individuals, but to society as a whole.

The worship facility is located among many shops that face Madison Avenue, a main road in Lakewood. It gives the appearance of a small shop, and unless you pay close attention while driving, you could easily confuse it for one. Despite its small size, it is divided into five

areas: an entrance in which you place your shoes, set off by dividers (so as not to disturb mediation practice), an area with cushions on which to sit during group meditation, a discussion area with circular seating and a table at the far wall for tea and cookies, a kitchen, bathroom, and a very small room in which beginners are taught the art of meditation. On the wall of one of the entrance dividers, there is a picture of a sun with waving rays (this is the group's logo). In the group meditation area, there is a small table at which the time keeper, who times the different meditations, sits. On the wall that the cushions face, there is a picture of Sakyong Mipham. The dividers for the discussion area are adorned with oriental cloth. I did not walk into the kitchen or the bathroom, but the small meditation instruction room is plain and dimly lit (it gives a very soft, relaxing impression).

Services for the Shambhala Meditation Group are held on Tuesday evenings from 7:00pm-9:00pm, and on Sundays from 10:00am-12:00pm. The first hour of the service is meditation. The second hour consists of group discussion. Barb had said that many times the group will read a book together- passing the book around and allowing each person to read a paragraph out loud-and then discuss it. The book is usually about meditation or the Buddhist tradition. Visitors are welcome, and there is no charge. There were twelve people at the meditation group on December 8th, five of which were males. There were no children in attendance. All visitors were seated in chairs (in a circular arrangement) in the discussion room until the service began. When it began, everyone moved to the cushions in the group meditation area. The cushions were set up in rows.

The instructors, of which there were three, wore casual clothing. Barb, for example, wore a sweater and black leggings. The other female wore a long skirt and a sweater, and the male (who was the time keeper) wore a sweater and jeans. All instructors appeared to be of equal

importance. Barb instructed my mother, me, and another new individual named Kim. She first taught us how to meditate in three steps: what to do with your body, what to do with your mind, and what to do when your mind gets off track during meditation. She led by demonstration, and then by having us try what she had just taught. After trying each element of meditation for a timed minute (at the end of which she gently tapped an oriental looking bell), we joined the group. She said that for about 20 minutes, they meditate seated. After that time has passed, the time keeper taps a gong and the group engages in standing meditation for 10 minutes, in which they walk around the cushions. They do this to prevent any pain in the body from sitting, which interferes with meditation. At the end of the ten minutes, the time keeper knocks two wooden blocks together, signaling that the group is to resume seated meditation. They alternate until the hour is up. Discussion occurs afterwards.

The experience was very pleasant. The individuals were warm and welcoming. They were also very curious about motivations for attendance, but not in a way that would make you feel like an unwelcomed outsider. The instructors were very good at communicating, but even more importantly...they were very good at listening. With this skill, they help people discover how to fine-tune meditation, which is not an easy practice. I would strongly recommend a visit to anyone who has never attended.