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Intro to World Religions

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Meditation

Examining Ritual Space and Sounds

Walking along the sidewalk there stood a fig tree and a rock that had engraved words: “Philadelphia Meditation Center” standing in front of a white bamboo style screen in the glass window of the run-down building. I have passed this desolate place many times curious as to what was inside and finally on Sunday May 2, 2004 I had my chance to experience the world of meditation formerly known as the Philadelphia Mediation Center, a Buddhist Meditation Center located in Havertown, Pennsylvania. As I entered the room I had slipped my flip-flops off, this is part of the Buddhist traditions, and viewed the bookshelf filled with Buddhist books for sale and free pamphlets. The room was long and narrow in virtual space and used primarily for meditation, yoga, and special guest lectures. That Sunday evening the ritual space was designed for the sole purpose of mediation or quiet concentration. As I walked through the semi-dark room drawn by the light of the burning candle I admired the calm, serene, and beautiful artwork among the walls. Some of the pictures were paintings of abstract oceans and some were prints of the Buddha. A black old-fashioned leather couch and some folding chairs rested against the wall to the right and in the opposite corner were piles of big square cushions, round

pillows and a couple wooden benches all of which we could choose our preference for the sitting meditation. The room looked recently cleaned, smelled of patchouli incense, and I felt the warmth of the candle. I sat in the middle of the room across from the instructor and I reveled in the stillness of the room.

Initially and throughout the entire ritual of the meditation practice it was quiet, calm, and still. There was an instructor who sat on a round cushion next to a table with a big statue of a metal Buddha, fresh cut flowers on each side of him, a candle and incense all sitting upon a beautiful Indian print table cloth, and meditated with the rest of the group. Before the practice began he informed the students of up-coming events and retreats. He told us the procedure about the next hour and a half; there would be a half and hour of sitting meditation and fifteen minutes of walking meditation and the final session of another half hour of sitting meditation and finally followed by tea, if we wished to stay after. He instructed us briefly on how to sit, breathe, and focus while in concentration which is known as Shama. At the very beginning of our first meditation session he read a couple of paragraphs from a book titled Insight Meditation by Joseph Goldstein and proceeded the quiet meditation with softly hitting a mallet three times in a brass bowl that rested in a gold oriental print cushion. That clue was that the meditation would start for the first half hour. As I sat in the half lotus position with my hands open resting on my knees I quickly focused on the soft inhaling and exhaling of my breath through my nose. At first it was a difficult task to stay focused and concentrate on that moment and to “just be” as the instructor previously explained. Shortly after a few moments passed I was able to concentrate and be aware in that moment without worry,

anxiety, or fear. I just felt completely one with the world. Beside the mindfulness of watching my own mind, the sounds that I heard during the first session were ultimately silent. I briefly heard the sound of the fan and a few faint car stereos and traffic. At one point a lady behind me coughed and I felt my heart center jump and I was horribly startled as if I had been watching a scary movie! Thereafter, the same three rings from the brass bowl were heard and I slowly opened my eyes to partake in the next ritual; the walking meditation. Everyone in the room replaced the cushions back to the corner of the room and we all stood against the wall to start our walking mediation. During those fifteen minutes we all walked back and forth from one wall to the next in our own pace ranging from extremely slow to just slow and it was so quiet I barely heard the shuffling of the feet. The idea here was to feel the feet pressing firmly against the earth and to be aware that we were in motion without a sound. Then a small brass bell was ringing by the force of the instructor's hands that this meditation was over alarmed us. Finally, we picked up our cushions and returned for our second session of the silent meditation. Again, it was the same procedure; the instructor read a couple paragraphs and hit the brass bowl to begin the final meditation. Even though the next meditation was another half and hour the silence went by quickly and it was all over with another soft hitting of the brass bowl following a brief reminder from the main teachings of the Buddha that nothing is permanent, everything changes, and to be present in the moment everyday. The instructor simply thanked us all for participating and spoke of good wishes for our future.