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EcoSangha: Buddhism for Non-Buddhists

Eli Gunderman, Volunteer Reporter

One religion was founded over 2,500 years ago in Northeastern India while the other was born in medieval Europe. At Seattle University, Buddhist practice and Ignatian spirituality go hand in hand.

EcoSangha was founded in 2006 by Jason Wirth, a current philosophy professor at Seattle U. It initially served as a meditation group on campus, but branched off into environmental advocacy as well.

The name “EcoSangha” represents their commitment to environmental justice and Buddhist philosophy.

Eddie Salazar, a senior administrative assistant for Jesuit education and a devout Buddhist praised the way Seattle U has treated the EcoSangha community.

“Part of the Jesuit ethos is—if one is a Hindu, how can we help you be a better Hindu, if you are Baptist or Jewish, how can we help you be a better Baptist or Jew?” Salazar said. “As a Zen Buddhist, I feel fully supported, fully encouraged.”

Salazar is appreciative of how the Jesuit Catholic tradition has been more inclusive than other sections of the Catholic Church.

The EcoSangha meditation group holds a weekly meditation where members participate in two rounds of thirty-minute silent seated meditations with a walking meditation in between. Different bells and a singing bowl are utilized in the practice. The goal of the meditation is to be present, practice mindfulness and awaken.

Sofia Sayaballian, a third-year communications major, noted that she recently attended EcoSangha for a second time and enjoyed it. She highlighted how it was a new and positive experience for her.

“I am not a religious person so I didn’t understand a lot of the terminology and it made me feel a little out of place,” Sayaballian said. “But I could definitely look past that and attend again because I felt as if it pushed a refresh button on my whole week—it was a good experience.”

Other than EcoSangha’s professors who lead the program, none of its members identify as Buddhists.

Cullin Egge, a third-year social work and spanish double major, shared his experience attending the EcoSangha meditations.

“My first time was a little difficult. You have thoughts that will come up, your mind will wander, you’ll get distracted. When you’re sitting there, you become aware of how you’re feeling. The main teacher in the room gives lessons, some inspirational words to take with us before we leave,” Egge said.



Like the rest of EcoSangha's members, Egge does not religiously identify as a Buddhist. Rather, he attends the meditations to practice mindfulness.

"It's a really nice break to everything else going on with my life. It's nice to have a set aside time every week to be able to look inward and focus on myself rather than constantly giving attention to everything else around me," Egge said.

"In our wider Buddhist practice, we're called to focus and address the suffering of the world. That's a core tenet of Buddhism. So, we have taken a focus on attending to the earth." Salazar said.

Salazar reflected on the role of community and how it enforces how Buddhism calls attention to earth.

"We try to call on each other, call on the university community to see and understand how we live in the universe really. And what decisions do we need to make as humans as our earth is hurting," Salazar said.

Within the past years, EcoSangha has hosted speakers, conferences and events to highlight important ecological issues. Some of their guest speakers have been prominent Zen poets and teachers. They have also held different workshops such as flower arranging, clay making and other similar activities.

The EcoSangha club meets every Wednesday in the Campion multi-faith prayer room and is open to all Seattle U community members.