

## Book review

***Journal of Global Buddhism* 11 (2010): 51-52**



### *Chanting in the Hillsides: The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin in Wales and the Borders*

Jeanne and Merv Fowler. Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2009, xiv + 283 pages, ISBN 978-1-84519-258-7 (paper), £11.99/\$24.99.

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B o o k   R e v i e w

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This is a book about Soka Gakkai International (SGI) in the UK drawing its examples from SGI practitioners in Wales and the borders between Wales and England. The book is well informed and draws together secondary, scholarly sources on Mahayana Buddhism, internal SGI accounts of the movement's history and doctrine, and primary quantitative and qualitative research on the experience of members of the movement.

The majority of the chapters are about SGI as an organisation: its own understanding of its history; its distinctive presentation of the doctrine of the Buddhist tradition and of Nichiren; its practices and symbols; its attitudes to study and proselytising. The first chapter forms a prologue to the book and is concerned with the experience of the Japanese born matriarch of Buddhism in Wales and her British husband. The ninth and final chapter is an edited collection of experiences written by SGI-UK members from Wales, some of which have been previously published in the SGI-UK journal *Art of Living*. These accounts give a taste of what it can be like to attend SGI meetings in the UK and open up that world to those who have never delved into SGI publications or carried out fieldwork with these chanting Buddhists.

Chapter four presents statistical data on SGI in Wales and the borders, comparing this with other recent studies of SGI in locality. It represents the most original research in the volume and as such it is a useful addition to our knowledge of SGI as a global religion. However, although the book is presented as an account of Nichiren Buddhism in Wales and the borders, it is more accurately an account of SGI in the UK using Welsh examples. Wales and the borders come under the jurisdiction of SGI-UK and, by this account, there is little to distinguish Welsh members from their co-religionists the other side of the border with England. There is little data supplied in the volume on Welsh society, more mainstream religion in Wales, or on what makes Wales distinctive. This does not help to justify the idea that Wales is sufficiently different from the rest of the UK to merit separate treatment and the case for this is not directly addressed.

The Fowlers write in the preface and acknowledgements of their book that an independent study of Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism had long been their aim (ix). This is indeed an independent account in the sense that the authors are not writing as insiders. They do, however, accept SGI's own version of the history and doctrine of Japanese and of Nichiren

Buddhism. There is little critical engagement with the ways in which, for example, SGI-UK presents itself as a movement or with how members experience an adapted Japanese tradition in twenty-first century Britain. The study does not explore the extent to which the movement exemplifies or bucks general social and religious trends in the UK. Members of SGI reading the volume will encounter a thorough and well informed account of themselves, but, if they have read their own organisation's literature, the book will add little to their knowledge. This has implications for the scholarly reader of the book who will find that the theoretical underpinning to the descriptive content is the world-view of SGI. A reader who wants an account of SGI-UK practice and doctrine will therefore find this to be a useful volume. If this is what the authors intended, they achieved what they set out to do. All the chapters are written in an accessible style and the warmth and enthusiasm the authors feel for their subject is evident throughout.