

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Encountering the Dharma: Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai, and the Globalization of Buddhist Humanism.* Richard Hugh Seager. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2006. xv + 245 pages. \$19.95 paper, ISBN 0-520-24577-6.

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The author of *Buddhism in America* (1999), Richard Hughes Seager, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Hamilton College, has published a new and well-researched book on the lay Buddhist organization Sōka Gakkai. It includes discussions about modern Buddhism and offers an independent view of the Sōka Gakkai.

The book consists of nine chapters with a short preface and includes notes, a useful glossary of Japanese terms, a comprehensive bibliography of secondary literature on the Sōka Gakkai, and an extensive index. In the beginning, Seager expresses his gratitude to the Boston Research Center for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (BRC), an international peace institute founded by the Sōka Gakkai in 1993 which provided financial support. Robert Eppsteiner and Tsumura Rie arranged the interviews and visits with ordinary members and leading or high-ranking figures of the Sōka Gakkai.

While Seager provides descriptive and analytical research on the Sōka Gakkai, introducing the Buddhist concepts which underlie the movement, he also adopts an entertaining, personal narrative tone including autobiographical elements. The passing away of his wife shortly before taking up the research for this book caused an emotional low that, in turn, allowed the research project to become a personal challenge. Accordingly, *Encountering the Dharma* has an unconventional style of writing and is a combination of academic inquiry and a personalized experience of his encounter with the Sōka Gakkai. At the same time, Seager overcomes any strangeness in the spirituality of the Sōka Gakkai through some valuable insights into the organization.

Makiguchi was a reformist educator, author, and philosopher who founded the Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai (Value-Creation Education Society; the forerunner of today's Sōka Gakkai) in 1930. Based on his long career as an educator, he intended to publish a twelve-volume-book series including his observations and proposals for reforming the Japanese educational system. "His [Makiguchi's] arguments are often both subtle and dense, but three central ideas—happiness, value creation, and benefit—are disarming in their essential simplicity, closely resembling the humanistic ideal of an American liberal-arts education" (p. 28). Makiguchi attached great importance to activities that are of value to society and thus contributes to the happiness and benefit of oneself and the community. In 1943, he was imprisoned for opposing the policies of the Japanese militarist regime and in November 1944, he died in prison from malnutrition.

Toda Jōsei, the successor of Makiguchi who was inaugurated as the second president of the Sōka Gakkai in May 1951, enabled the disbanded society to grow into a mass movement. Its rapid expansion in post-war Japan came about as the members of the movement intensely practiced *shakubuku* (vigorous conversion procedures) and through an intensification of the relationship to the Nichiren Shōshū. In Seager's interview with Akiya Einosuke, the previous president of Sōka Gakkai Japan, Akiya remembers seeing "a whole class of disenfranchised citizens with no voice in the political realm. . . . We felt it was important for us to become active, responsible participants in politics." During the mid-1950s, Sōka Gakkai did then enter politics under the leadership of Toda who "was very pained to send his disciples into that world, like pushing them over the cliff" (p. 61). From the beginning of his presidency in 1951 until his death in 1958, the membership of the lay Buddhist movement grew to 750,000 households compared to fewer than 3000 families at the beginning.

The successor of Toda Jōsei was Ikeda Daisaku who became the third president of the Sōka Gakkai in 1960 and resigned in 1979. At present, he is the honorary president of the Sōka Gakkai and current president of the Sōka Gakkai International (SGI) which he established in 1975 "to nurture national movements around the globe," thus "remaining [a] spiritual teacher with a free rein to develop his Buddhist Humanism in the context of a global community" (p. 128). Seager aims at providing a straight and authentic image of Ikeda Daisaku. To understand Ikeda's considerable emphasis on "Nichiren Buddhist Humanism" in the movement, Seager first gathers information on Nichiren himself, a Japanese Buddhist monk of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, thus providing the historical background for understanding Nichiren Buddhism and the importance of the Lotus Sutra. Besides the historical exploration, Seager mentions the Institute of Oriental Philosophy (IOP) and the Min-On Concert Association, institutions which Ikeda had established shortly before he founded the Kōmeitō in 1964, and the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum.

Seager also examines the long-time problematic relationship between the Sōka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood until their split in 1991. Due to the liberalizing tendencies and the self-empowerment of the Sōka Gakkai, the high priest of the Nichiren Shōshū, Abe Nikken, eventually excommunicated what was its largest affiliated lay organization and deprived the new religious movement of their central gathering place Taisekiji, the head temple of Nichiren Shōshū. Instead of being able to go there, Seager had to visit institutions of the Sōka Gakkai like Sōka University and the Makiguchi Hall in Hachioji, Tokyo.

In the closing chapters, Seager describes Sōka Gakkai's global outreach and its adaptable localization capabilities while "Ikeda's network-building and his dialogues played a key role in developing the liberal spirit of Buddhist Humanism as it evolved from the 70's into the 90's" (p. 115). Referring to the movement's international expansion to the U.S., Brazil, and Singapore among other places, Seager

dwells on the principle of *zuihō-bini* 随方毘尼, “which means adapting Buddhist precepts to different cultures” (p. 141). This is explained in the Sōka Gakkai Dictionary of Buddhism as “a Buddhist precept indicating that, in matters the Buddha did not expressly either permit or forbid, one may act in accordance with local custom so long as the fundamental principles of Buddhism are not violated.” Ikeda lays emphasis on creating a state of perpetual peace through education and culture and advised Sōka Gakkai members to moderate their aggressive way of proselytizing. Thus, the author not only describes the impact and explosive growth of the Sōka Gakkai during the national and social changes of post-war Japan, but also the success of the overseas movement by observing the development of the Sōka Gakkai’s road to globalization and acculturation. Besides the history and internal changes of the Sōka Gakkai, he also looks back further into the modern history of Japan starting with the Meiji Restoration in 1868. The adaptation of Buddhism to contemporary society is one of Sōka Gakkai’s main projects and includes education, culture, and peace as its three central issues, presenting the Dharma facing an unjust and unequal world.

Sōka Gakkai has caused much controversy throughout the years, and Seager touches upon some of the concerns, though in the end rejecting them. He does not explicitly address the issues of the lack of financial transparency, the lack of openness in society or the failure to acknowledge dissent. Nor does he address the still outstanding disagreement between Ikeda’s statement that the movement’s central teaching is about self-empowerment and independence on the one hand, and the strict guidance of Sōka Gakkai leaders on the other hand. This could have been expected in his quoting the Belgian sociologist Karel Dobbelaere and referring to his concept of pillarization, “the institution-building done by religious organizations to protect their spiritual core in a highly secular world,” whereupon he explains that “Gakkai organizations . . . are designed to create Buddhist environments in which members can pursue individual interests while remaining within the group” (pp. 102–103). As far as the separation of religion and politics in Japan is concerned, Seager does not take up this delicate subject in depth, like the Japanese media, but simply cites the Kōmeitō politician Hamayotsu Toshiko, who “makes it clear that in Japan, as in the United States, church-state religion-politics issues make for subtle terrain” (p. 106). Another shortcoming of the book may be seen in the general analytical discussion about an innovative approach to a new religion and its subsequent adoption versus the preservation of the traditional belief. The analytical research is therefore inadequate in some respects, and as a result there are minor deficiencies in Seager’s attempt to deliver a clear insight into the organization. It is quite obvious that the author’s project was promoted and financially supported by the Sōka Gakkai and for this reason, it cannot really be classified as a fully scholarly work, even though Seager writes: “Despite the fact that I have been concerned with developing a strong and engaging narrative line, I consider this an academic book” (p. xiii).

Despite these reservations and the overly narrative style, Seager does take up accusations against the Sōka Gakkai, apparently changing his attitude from initial scepticism, doubts and critical thoughts to a better understanding of the movement. It is interesting to follow him and to see how he pursues his studies, arranges his ideas and impressions, and draws conclusions out of them. *Encountering the Dharma* is not only enjoyable to read, but engaging, informative, and revealing. The book introduces one of the most influential new religious movements in Japan, which is also known as an international Buddhist movement, and provides a good overall view of the development of the Sōka Gakkai.

*Zen in Brazil: The Quest for Cosmopolitan Modernity.* Cristina Rocha. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006. xii + 256 pages. \$37.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8248-2976-X.

ELISABETTA PORCU

The book under review, written by the Brazilian anthropologist Cristina Rocha, explores the way Zen Buddhism has been perceived and adapted in Brazil, focusing on “upper- and upper-middle class urban Brazilians” (p. 4). A considerable part of it is dedicated to the results of Rocha’s fieldwork and her monitoring internet resources, in particular, the e-mail list Buddhismo-L. The book is divided into five chapters, an introduction and a brief conclusion.

Chapter One focuses first on a historical overview of Japanese immigration to Brazil and the way it has developed in a religious context. In particular, it explores the history of the Sōtō school mission in Brazil and the establishment of Busshin-ji temple in São Paulo from the 1950s. A great deal of space is dedicated to the case of the non-Japanese-Brazilian nun, Coen-sensei, abbess of this temple from 1995 to 2001, who after her dismissal opened a new one, Tenzui Zen Dōjō, in the same city. This is, according to the author, “a good example of how Zen has become creolized in Brazil,” since various activities linked to both Zen Buddhist and Catholic practices are performed there (p. 54). In this part of the book, as well as in other chapters, Rocha’s analysis of the adaptation of Zen Buddhism which has occurred in Brazil is interesting. She succeeds in depicting the way Zen Buddhism, and other traditions like Tibetan Buddhism for example, have been “creolized”—to use the author’s word—namely, their adaptation to and interaction with other, pre-existing religious practices. Closely linked to this issue is the role Zen Buddhism, or better still, a construction of it which appealed to Euro-American countries, has played in this ‘adapted’ form for its success in Brazil among the white, upper-middle urban class.