

Then Britain Began to Chant

Eileen Barker

London School of Economics (em.)

E.Barker@lse.ac.uk

ABSTRACT: It was in March 1974 that Richard Causton, a British businessman, returned from Japan, having found himself a Japanese wife who had introduced him to Nichiren Buddhism. The following year (1975), Nichiren Shoshu of the United Kingdom (NSUK) was officially registered, with Causton as its General Director. Before long, there was a growing number of Japanese immigrants and British natives chanting *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*. After the break with the priests in 1991, the movement has subsequently been referred to by the name of the secular organization SGI-UK (Soka Gakkai International - United Kingdom). Under Causton's leadership, numerous cultural activities were undertaken, many of them being focused on the subject of peace. Initially the "anti-cult movement" spread negative information about SGI-UK, based largely on anti-SGI propaganda about the movement's proselytizing activities in Japan. Some British Buddhists declared that Nichiren Buddhism was not "real Buddhism" and blocked its representation in the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom. However, SGI found more acceptance with a European-based network. Today, SGI-UK receives relatively little interest in the media, especially after it moved its headquarters from London to Taplow Court, a beautiful historic house near Maidenhead, about an hour's drive west of London.

KEYWORDS: Nichiren Shoshu of the United Kingdom, NSUK, Soka Gakkai International - United Kingdom, SGI-UK, Richard Causton, Daisaku Ikeda.

Richard Causton and the First Soka Gakkai Presence in the UK

Despite a reputation for uncompromising proselytizing (*Shakubuku*, sometimes translated as "break and subdue"), neither Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism nor the associated lay organization, Soka Gakkai (Value Creation Society), had spread far beyond the shores of Japan by the time of the death of Soka Gakkai's second president, Josei Toda (1900–1958). The handful of Soka Gakkai members in Britain were likely to have been Japanese businessmen seconded to Britain, or the Japanese wives of British businessmen who, having been posted to Japan, had returned to England (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 12–5).

Then, in 1960, Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023) became Soka Gakkai’s third president and immediately began to expand the organization into a global movement. That same year he visited the members in America, who were largely the Japanese wives of American military men who had returned to the USA in the mid-1950s, and who were scattered and unorganized (Hammond and Machacek 1999, 24). Ikeda encouraged them to organize themselves and to spread Soka Gakkai throughout the States.

Then, the following year, Ikeda journeyed to Europe and on 13 October 1961 he arrived in London where at that time there were just four or five Japanese members. At the airport he met a Japanese woman whom he called “Shizuko Grant” in his novel *The New Human Revolution*, who had joined Soka Gakkai in Japan, then married a British soldier who had been stationed there. Learning that she was lonely, Ikeda encouraged her to keep in touch with the other Japanese members, telling her that she had come to the United Kingdom with a mission to pioneer *kōsen-rufu* (the mission of widespread propagation), and asked her to become the contact person for the UK (Ikeda 2006a, 86–7). On a further visit to Europe in January 1963, Ikeda was instrumental in organizing various European chapters. A District was set up in London with “Shizuko Grant” being appointed District Leader on January 13, when Ikeda was still in the United States (he arrived in Paris on January 15: Ikeda 2006a, 231).

In the 1960s, Richard Causton (1920–1995), a retired army officer who had taken up business, was posted to Japan where he was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin’s (1222–1282) teachings by the woman who was to become his wife, and in 1971 he became a practicing Buddhist. He then got acquainted with President Ikeda, who asked him to become the leader of the movement in the UK (Penfold 1995). In 1974, Causton returned to England to join the two hundred or so pioneer members practicing there at the time (Causton 1988, 1). The following year, Nichiren Shoshu of the United Kingdom (NSUK) was officially registered, with Causton as its General Director. In 1977 he gave up his business to become NSUK’s first permanent staff member (Causton 1988, 1).

Before long, there was a growing number of Japanese immigrants and British natives chanting *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō* before their newly acquired *Gohonzons*, which initially came from the Nichiren Shoshu Head Temple Taiseki-ji on the slopes of Mount Fuji. However, since the break with the priests in 1991, the *Gohonzons* have come from Soka Gakkai headquarters, and NSUK has

subsequently been referred to by the name of the secular organization SGI-UK (Soka Gakkai International - United Kingdom). According to Bryan Wilson (1926–2004) and Karel Dobbelaere, who conducted a comprehensive study of the membership in the early 1990s, there had been some 4,000 people attending meetings by 1988 (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 13); by 1995, there were around 5,000 members (Penfold 1995); and, by 2024, SGI-UK could claim a membership of 15,500.

Diverse Demographics

In the early days, most of the members either were Japanese or had a close tie with someone from Japan, but it was not long before there were just as many British members and today there are members from all over the globe.

At a ceremony on March 10 this year, out of the 76 people who received their *Gohonzon*, less than half a dozen were Japanese, and the range of nationalities was remarkable. Indeed, when I asked what they thought was unusual about the British membership, I was told that (possibly owing to Britain's colonial past) it was the variety of nations which were represented in the movement that was particularly striking. Since the recent events in Hong Kong, around 200 families with British National (Overseas) passports have arrived and more are expected as the situation in the erstwhile Special Administrative Region undergoes further changes. There have also been a considerable number of Indians who have arrived in Britain in the last few years, a large proportion of them having some connection to information technology industries, but there is a wide spread of professions represented among the membership—in fact, the previous General Director, Robert Harrap, told me he found it hard to think of an area of work or a profession where SGI-UK did not have a member.

Unfortunately, there are no current statistics giving us a demographic breakdown of details of employment to compare with the detailed information that Wilson and Dobbelaere collected in 1990. At that time members were disproportionately under 40 years of age (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 113), and the mean age for those beginning to chant was 31 to 32 years old, with the median age being 29 years (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 45).

Those whom I watched receiving their *Gohonzon* in March 2024 looked as though they ranged from their late teens to mid-80s, with the majority around 30. The sex ratio in 1990 was 2:3 in favor of women, which is roughly the same as it is now and, indeed, in most SGI organizations elsewhere. At the time of their survey, Wilson and Dobbelaere concluded that members were considerably better educated than the public at large (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 122), and more likely to be self-employed, taking responsibility for their own lives (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 116), with the caring professions and, more especially, the performing arts and the graphic arts being over-represented when compared to the British public as a whole (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 120).

The movement has continued to attract a large number of members who are artists or creatives of one sort or another (whether writers, actors, dancers, or other performers, or working on the technical side of performance as scenic designers and builders). They are encouraged to play an active role in their local District, aware that it may not always be practical to join local meetings, which may be scheduled at the same time as curtain up. Unlike some other SGI organizations (especially the larger ones), where there are often several support groups for people in the various professions, there are not that many in the UK. That said, however, SGI-UK does have a “City Finance Group,” which supports members who work in finance and law in the City of London, and a group of chefs (the Marronnier group); there is also an informal group of healthcare professionals.

A significant finding from the Wilson-Dobbelaere questionnaire was that the SGI-UK membership was far less likely to be materialistic than the UK population as a whole; the members were more likely:

to stress the need to protect freedom of speech; favour giving people a greater voice in how things are decided, at work, in their communities and in the decisions of government. They favour a friendlier, less impersonal society, and a society in which ideas count for more than money (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 143).

There is no reason to believe that the present chanters differ much in this respect. As far as the political position of the current membership is concerned, I was told that it could be assumed that “the majority are left of center with a greenish tinge.”

A Wide Variety of Programs

People with this kind of mindset have been manifest in the wide variety of programs sponsored by members of Soka Gakkai throughout the world, and those in SGI-UK are no exception. Under Causton's leadership, numerous cultural activities were undertaken, many of them being focused on the subject of peace. In the summer of 1986, Causton invited me to attend a performance of *Alice* at the Hammersmith Odeon. It was a spectacular musical adaptation of Lewis Carroll's (1832–1898) *Alice in Wonderland* with a moral story running through it. It involved hundreds of members working together for weeks, both on stage and behind the scenes. (I later learned that my goddaughter was helping with the make-up.) Another memory I have of around that time is of a beautiful Mozart concert performed by SGI-UK musicians at Taplow Court.

When I first met NSUK in the late 1970s or early 1980s, its headquarters was a house in Richmond, Surrey, to which I used to take my students every year. Causton would introduce them to Nichiren Buddhism, and the students would try chanting for a short time in front of the *Gohonzon*. Later, however, we would travel to Taplow Court, a beautiful 19th century mansion near Maidenhead about thirty miles to the west of London, situated on a site that can trace its history back to the iron age and which was home to a manor house before the Norman conquest of England in 1066 (Tomalin and Starkey 2014). In 1987, SGI-UK acquired the freehold of Taplow Court with money from the Japanese organization, and it is now the UK headquarters. The house, which accommodates a substantial library of books related to Buddhism, is open to visitors three days a week and numerous events are hosted there and in the surrounding properties, including weddings, funerals, and various rituals such as the ceremony when new members receive their *Gohonzon*. There have also been conferences held at Taplow Court, including one that resulted in a book, *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, edited by Bryan Wilson and Jamie Cresswell (1999).

A well-stocked shop carries multiple copies of the *Lotus Sutra* and other volumes related to Nichiren Buddhism, including books by Richard Causton (e.g., Causton 1988) and the erstwhile Zen Buddhist monk, Clark Strand, who, having been impressed by Josei Toda's resolve in prison, came to consider Nichiren Buddhism as "an ideal way ahead of its time" (Strand 2014, 6). One can also purchase several study guides and the SGI-UK's monthly magazine, *Art of Living*,

as well as *butsudan* (altars to house the *Gohonzon*), gongs, bells, beads, and various other paraphernalia.

SGI-UK has three other centers: the London Ikeda Peace Centre, the South London National Centre in Brixton, and the West London Centre in Acton. Local discussion meetings throughout England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are usually held in members' houses. As at the time of the study by Wilson and Dobbelaere, the concentration of membership lied mainly, but certainly not exclusively, around London and the Home Counties (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 41).

Each member of SGI-UK is primarily a member of a local District, consisting of 15–20 individuals who hold discussion meetings, chant together, and encourage one another in their practice and study. Volunteer leaders of the Districts are usually representatives of the four “divisions” (the men’s, the women’s, the young men’s, and the young women’s) in that particular area. The 627 Districts are organized into 171 Chapters and 69 Headquarters, and these, in turn, form 18 Areas. Currently, SGI-UK has around 3,000 volunteers taking responsibility as leaders in their local areas. While decisions on what activities take place are reached through the consensus of those involved at the various levels, there is a National Committee which is the decision-making body for faith activities in SGI-UK, and this sets the national direction.

SGI-UK’s website, <https://sgi-uk.org/>, indicates the wide variety of projects undertaken by the members. Most of these will be familiar to the international community of Soka Gakkai, stemming in large part from President Ikeda’s global concerns. Top of the list is Peace, but Environmentalism and Climate Change are high up there too, with SGI-UK having had a representative presence at COP meetings. Interfaith dialogue also features strongly, as do gender issues, with a Rainbow Committee dedicated to welcoming those who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, partners being able to receive their *Gohonzons* as a couple. It might also be mentioned that although previous General Directors of SGI-UK have all been male, the present Director General, who was appointed in January 2024, is a woman. SGI-UK currently employs 35 members of staff (29 full-time and 6 part-time, not all of whom are members) and the rest of the activities are performed by volunteer members.

Although SGI-UK has autonomy in what it does, and, unlike several other national organizations, has always had a British leadership, it is closely connected

with other Soka Gakkai bodies, including the European Network. The greatest influence has, however, undoubtedly been that of President Ikeda, who inspired many of the projects carried out by the national movements through his talks and writings and frequent visits to SGI-UK. It was in the UK that he was to meet and have long conversations with two Englishmen that resulted in weighty volumes. These were the historian Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), whom he met in 1972 and 1973 (Ikeda 2006b, 24; Toynbee and Ikeda 1976a, 1976b), and the sociologist of religion Bryan Wilson, whom he first met in Oxford in 1977, and then in Japan in 1978 (Ikeda 2006b, 26–34; Wilson and Ikeda 1984).

SGI-UK is a registered charity limited by guarantee (number 1104491) and, as such, has a certain status and is entitled to certain tax relief benefits. It does not fundraise outside the organization and its members are not asked to give membership dues. However, most do contribute regularly whatever they feel they can, and one can pick up forms to fill in details for Gift Aid Donations for the Kōsen-rufu Fund at Taplow Court and elsewhere. For the year ending 31 December 2022, SGI-UK declared a total gross income of £2.62 million, and a total expenditure of £3.38m; £2.16m was received through donations, £363.60k came from charitable activities, £95.2k from income investment, and £297.24 from legacies (Charity Commissioners 2024).

Anti-Cult Opposition and Intra-Buddhist Controversies

The growth of Nichiren Buddhism in the West coincided with the development of the so-called “anti-cult movement,” when many of the new religions of the time were being vilified in the media, which were full of stories of youth being brainwashed by sinister cults, and hundreds of their members were being illegally kidnapped and forcibly “deprogrammed” (Barker 1989; Beckford 1982; Shupe and Bromley 1980). Although there were some reports, nearly all taken from Japanese media, of the movement having aggressive proselytizing tactics, on the whole NSUK managed to stay under the radar and escape any extreme anti-cult vitriol.

It was not, however, welcomed with open arms by the various Buddhist traditions that had been establishing themselves in Britain since the early twentieth century and who had supported each other through the Buddhist Society, which had been officially founded in 1924 by Christmas Humphreys (1901–1983).

Nichiren Buddhism was not accepted as “real Buddhism” by the members of the Buddhist Society. It was regarded as a heresy which, unlike the other traditions, had practically no ethnic Asian practitioners but, instead, trendy westerners who were chanting for materialist goals such as getting a new Porsche or job promotion, and attracting western celebrities.

The most influential body representing “accepted” religions is the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom (IFN) which was established in 1987,

...with the agreed purpose and hope of promoting greater understanding between the members of the different faith communities to which we belong and of encouraging the growth of our relationships of respect and trust and mutual enrichment in our life together (Inter Faith Network 1987).

There were nine-national faith community representative bodies in IFN, which included the Buddhist Society representing the Buddhist traditions—but not NSUK. Indeed, none of the representative bodies, including the Church of England, was keen to have any kind of dialogue with any of the new religious movements (Barker 2019).

Then, in 1993, a group of Buddhists, who were to call themselves the Network of Buddhist Organisations (NBO), met together to invite the Dalai Lama to visit the UK, and a member of SGI-UK, Jamie Cresswell, was invited by an individual from Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) to attend the meetings. A year or so later, the NBO wanted to appoint a chair and Cresswell applied but was turned down as some of the other Buddhists were still treating Nichiren Buddhism with suspicion. Cresswell persisted in attending the meetings and by the turn of the century he was on the council and, eventually, appointed chair. Around the same time, Cresswell’s FWBO friend invited him to attend a meeting of the European Buddhist Union (EBU). Again, there were objections to SGI voiced by some of the other Buddhist groups, but, again, Cresswell persisted in attending meetings and forging personal relationship with the other Buddhists, and, despite SGI-UK’s initial application to join being blocked, it was eventually allowed to join and has since played a prominent role. Cresswell has served as chair for both the EBU and the NBO, the latter eventually being admitted to the IFN.

There did continue to be some complaints, especially claims that the NBO was not representative of British Buddhism. Questions were asked in Parliament about government money for work it carried out in schools; and a few disgruntled former members, some calling themselves SGI Whistleblowers, air their complaints

online, but these tend to have little substance and to be aimed primarily at the historical SG in Japan.

While SGI-UK and Nichiren Buddhism are still relatively unknown in the UK, those who have got to know the members tend to be positive about the chanters in their midst. Many of the Districts are involved in local events and contribute to local life. Taplow Court plays a significant role in the surrounding neighborhood. The Buckinghamshire Council uses it for Citizen Ceremonies; and when a local school had accommodation problems following a flood, they gratefully accepted an offer to use Taplow Court until the problem was sorted. At a national level, the BBC has an early morning program called “Pause for Thought,” when members of different religious communities speak for three minutes on a subject of their choice, bringing in something related to their faith. For several years Robert Harrap, the previous General Director of SGI-UK, who is now Co-Chair of SGI-Europe, was regularly invited to speak and, more recently, a second-generation member, Gabrielle Westhead, fills the slot (BBC Radio 2 2023, 2024).

In short, it would seem that, over the years, SGI-UK has come to be regarded as a respectable and respected member of British society.

References

- Barker, Eileen. 1989. *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction*. London: HMSO.
- Barker, Eileen. 2019. “We’re Happy to Talk, but Dialogue...? Courteous Discrimination in Establishment Parlance.” In *Limitations of Religious Freedom by Privileged State Religions (Ecclesiae)*, edited by Gerhard Besier, 143–68. Zurich: Lit Verlag.
- BBC Radio 2. 2023. “Pause for Thought. Gabrielle Westhead: ‘Repaying Debts of Gratitude.’” Accessed June 10, 2024. <https://bit.ly/4ejFXa3>.
- BBC Radio 2. 2024 [last updated]. “Pause for Thought. Robert Harrap: ‘Youth Is a State of Mind, Not a Number.’” Accessed June 10, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3XgnZPS>.
- Beckford, James A. 1982. “Beyond the Pale: Cults, Culture and Conflict.” In *New Religious Movements: A Perspective for Understanding Society*, edited by Eileen Barker, 284–301. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Causton, Richard. 1988. *Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism: An Introduction*. London: Rider.

- Charity Commissioners. 2024. Soka Gakkai International-UK. Accessed June 10, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3Xd5nQN>.
- Hammond, Phillip, and David Machacek. 1999. *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ikeda, Daisaku. 2006a. *SGI President Ikeda in Europe Vol. 1*: SGI-UK.
- Ikeda, Daisaku. 2006b. *SGI President Ikeda in Europe Vol. 4*: SGI-UK.
- Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom. 1987. *Founding Resolution*. Accessed June 10, 2024. <https://bit.ly/45fkQSI>.
- Penfold, Ted. 1995. "Richard Causton." *Eaglepeak*. Accessed June 10, 2024. <https://bit.ly/4bRchzn>.
- Shupe, Anson D., and David G. Bromley. 1980. *The New Vigilantes: Deprogrammers, Anti-Cultists, and the New Religions*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Strand, Clark. 2014. *Waking the Buddha: How the Most Dynamic and Empowering Buddhist Movement in History Is Changing Our Concept of Religion*. Santa Monica, CA: Middleway Press.
- Tomalin, Emma, and Caroline Starkey. 2014. "A Responsibility for Past, Present, and Future: Soka Gakkai UK and Taplow Court." *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, August 20. Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3RkrqK8>.
- Toynbee, Arnold J., and Daisaku Ikeda. 1976a. *Choose Life: A Dialogue*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Toynbee, Arnold J., and Daisaku Ikeda. 1976b. *The Toynbee-Ikeda Dialogue: Man Himself Must Choose*. London: Harper and Row.
- Wilson, Bryan R., and Jamie Cresswell, eds. 1999. *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*. London: Routledge.
- Wilson, Bryan R., and Karel Dobbelaere. 1994. *A Time to Chant: The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wilson, Bryan R., and Daisaku Ikeda. 1984. *Human Values in a Changing World: A Dialogue on the Social Role of Religion*. London and Sydney: Macdonald.