

## ASK THE AUTHORS

### A DIALOGUE ABOUT THE NEW BOOK “THE BUDDHA IN YOUR MIRROR”

**Living Buddhism:** There are other introductions to Nichiren Buddhism, why write another one?

**Martin:** The SGI-USA doesn't have an introductory book in the public arena. When Middleway Press was first formed, we recognized *The Buddha in Your Mirror* would be one of the first books to get on the shelves of Barnes and Noble, Borders and other bookstores.

How many times has someone asked us if there was a book they could read to learn more about our practice and we didn't have a good answer? Yes, we have *The Winning Life*, but it's very brief. SGI President Ikeda's detailed explanation, *Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth and Death*, is currently out of print. Moreover, *Unlocking* and Richard Causton's book, *The Buddha in Daily Life*, while both excellent, can be a bit difficult for the first-time reader. In a sense, those are the second and third books an interested person might read.

We wanted to create a book that starts from scratch and from the perspective of where the reader is. I think we've accomplished that task with *The Buddha in Your Mirror*.

**Hochswender:** The challenge was to make a narrative that would appeal to people with zero knowledge of our practice, yet still be interesting to people who had experience in the practice. I hope we have some success on both levels. This is a book that the longtime Buddhist practitioner can enjoy and use to enrich his or her own practice, as well as a book that can be given to friends and associates as an introduction to this wonderful thing we do.

**Morino:** I feel the time has come that many more people should benefit from an encounter with Nichiren Buddhism, just as I did decades ago in Japan. To me, writing this book was a way of paying back my debt of gratitude to Nichiren Buddhism and a number of people, including, of course, President Ikeda, who guided me on the correct path.

**Living Buddhism:** What will people find in this book that they won't find in other books on Nichiren Buddhism?

**Martin:** Actually, it's what they won't find that is more pertinent. They won't find a lot of complicated theory. *The Buddha in Your Mirror* is written not with the intention of explaining all about Buddhist theory. Rather, it is written from the perspective of what people are interested in and struggling with. It is eminently practical. We explain how to chant, how to sound out the words, and encourage readers to start right away, even while they're still reading the book. In a sense, it's more like a discussion meeting for guests rather than a beginners-level study meeting.

**Hochswender:** This book moves quickly from an overview of Buddhism in America and the history of Nichiren Buddhism to the nuts and bolts of our practice. It places Buddhism in the context of contemporary society and makes the argument that Buddhism is indeed a religion for the new century. Eventually, of course, it unfolds an eminently reasonable methodology for dealing with everyday problems. There are problem-solving chapters on happiness, health, relationships and death. Experiences of members are interspersed throughout.

**Living Buddhism:** Who was the target audience you had in mind in writing this book?

**Hochswender:** We certainly focused on non-Buddhists or people who were perhaps interested in Buddhism but had never practiced. For this reason, some members may find it a little odd that we, in essence, “back in” to our discussions of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and the Gohonzon. In a Buddhist meeting, naturally, we give guests the concept of chanting first, then

fill them in on the history later. However, for the book, it was decided that we would give them a strong grounding in the Buddhist tradition before placing Nam-myoho-renge-kyo within that tradition. It was also felt that lengthy discussions of the role of the Gohonzon in our practice would be problematic from the standpoint of readers who had never seen or even heard of it. Nevertheless, we feel that *Mirror* will be a powerful tool for members and a great way to introduce people to Nichiren Buddhism.

**Martin:** For many people, there is no radical change of thinking associated with practicing Buddhism. Rather, they find that in many ways Buddhist philosophy matches what they were already thinking. In fact, there is a body of research that indicates that there may be more than 40 million adult Americans who are already “proto-Buddhists,” people already thinking as Buddhists but probably don’t know it. For many of them, reading *The Buddha in Your Mirror* will be an experience of coming home, of finding a place both new and familiar at the same time.

**Living Buddhism:** How will this book help people?

**Morino:** Since life-affirming statements abound in this book, even people who are not familiar with Nichiren Buddhism will get a good feeling from reading it. In addition, of course, if readers of this book decide to try chanting, it means they will get some immediate result by doing so. It is my hope that people will get closer to the correct Buddhist practice that is prevalent in the SGI. It is also my hope that people will learn something about what kind of person Daisaku Ikeda is, who is quoted several times.

**Living Buddhism:** What was it about Nichiren Buddhism that was the most challenging to explain?

**Hochswender:** It was difficult to explain the Gohonzon without being able to show it and it was certainly a challenge to try to teach people how to chant without being there (as in a meeting situation) to actually coach them on pronunciation and rhythm. I also found it quite daunting to explain the Buddhist view of the afterlife or reincarnation, especially the notion of one’s karma surviving intact into the next lifetime. This is not something that comes easily to the Western mind.

**Morino:** It can be said that the conclusion of Nichiren Buddhism is very simple, and his Buddhism is indeed powerful and relevant. Yes, it is a religion, but it may be more adequate to say that it is a way of living. How to make that clear through this book was a challenge.

**Living Buddhism:** What hurdles were there in addressing stereotypes about Buddhism?

**Hochswender:** We endeavored from the very start of the book to dispel the idea of Buddhism as a hard-to-understand, monastic religion. We felt it was crucial to demonstrate that modern Buddhism was grounded in logic and reason, and required no big lifestyle changes on the part of the practitioner. We definitely wanted to bring the image of Buddhism down from the mountaintops—and onto the streets where we live.

**Martin:** *The Buddha in Your Mirror* explains that the practice of this Buddhism brings the mountaintop into each practitioner’s living room; that the Buddha is not some saint or sage whom we, the grasshoppers of the world, beseech for some mysterious wisdom; that each person possesses the Buddha nature and there is a readily accessible method for manifesting that life-state amid everyday reality.

The commonly held idea is that the journey to enlightenment — across the sea of suffering or up the difficult mountain—is not only difficult, but also nearly impossible for anyone other than saints and sages. We explain that the history of Buddhist thought has been based on the search for the “great vehicle” that can take not just a few, but all people on that voyage across the sea or to the mountain top. The chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and practice in the

SGI, we explain, is that “great vehicle.”

**Living Buddhism:** What do you feel is Buddhism’s greatest appeal?

**Martin:** It works! It is also practical and accessible. When we first sent a manuscript of the book to the publicist we hoped would represent our book, we didn’t hear from her for a couple of weeks. Then she contacted us, saying that she’d been chanting two hours a day on her daily commute and that “miracles” were happening. She also told her brother and father, and they are chanting too, along with others in her office. She’s just recently subscribed to the *World Tribune* and *Living Buddhism* and is connected to a district in her area.

This is what we had hoped for. To inspire people to try chanting on their own, gain experience and contact us to find out more. I was so pleased to hear of this response from one of the very first non-members to read the book.

**Hochswender:** Buddhism is reason. Buddhism makes sense. The more you read about it, the more it seems to be suited to our skeptical modern age. Buddhism never requires the individual to believe in something that has already been undermined by science, or to follow absolutist moral codes devised from an earlier era.

**Morino:** To me, the greatest appeal of Nichiren Buddhism is that it enables me to go to my ultimate force within anytime I please. I can pull out this force anytime I want; Nichiren describes it as “the roar of a lion.” It’s such a happy thing that you have a place to return to within yourself, which I learned through Nichiren, who says: “Realizing that you are originally a Buddha is equal to tapping the greatest joy. Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the greatest of all joys” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 788).

**Living Buddhism:** What are your long-term goals for the book?

**Martin:** Promoting the book has two goals. We, of course, hope that it will become a popular book for our members to recommend as an introduction to Buddhist practice. We hope it will be promoted by word of mouth. To accomplish that, we will be holding book-signings in bookstores in major cities around the country and doing print, radio and television interviews; all with the intention of getting the word out about this book.

Promoting *Mirror* is also an important way for us, the authors, to introduce President Ikeda’s books to the American public. We will use the opportunities that we will have as authors of *Mirror* to speak to people about the books of President Ikeda. Our hope? That *Mirror*, together with *For the Sake of Peace* and *The Way of Youth*, will attain bestseller status.

**Hochswender:** It is my determination that this book gets into the hands of all the people who can benefit from it. I sincerely hope that many thousands of people will read it and pass it along to their friends and co-workers — exposing a whole new segment of our country to Nichiren’s vision for world peace. In that sense, it could become the ultimate book for introducing others to the practice — that would make me very happy!

**Morino:** I would like to see it become a perennial seller. I would be gratified if this book would continue inspiring people to practice Nichiren Buddhism for many years to come.

**Living Buddhism:** What was your overall experience in working together to write this book?

**Morino:** Through participating in this project, I wanted to make sure that we were solid in presenting the doctrinal basis of Nichiren Buddhism. I will continue to practice Nichiren Buddhism to my best ability to prove its credibility. Working together with two great co-authors, Woody and Greg, was quite a learning experience. It was such an honor to work with them.

**Martin:** It was great and it was difficult at the same time. Writing and editing a book “by committee” was challenging. At the same time, the process was very good and the quality of the

result testifies to that. Each of us wrote the first draft of several chapters. Then we discussed the chapters together and with our editors one-by-one, arguing and disagreeing at times but finding the best way to express things through the process. Then it was read by several others and further edited. Of course, as writers we develop certain attachments to our own ways of expression, but having the critical eyes of many others reviewing the text was very constructive. I am certainly very happy with the result and able to recommend it with confidence and pride. **Hochswender:** It was so interesting sharing ideas with Greg and Ted, as well as with our editors, Joel Drazner and Dave McNeill. They are the best! Even after the book was finished, I was still learning profound things about the practice from these guys that I wished I could have included in the text! Oh well, I'll just put them in the next book!

## About the Authors

**Woody Hochswender**, a writer and 25-year Buddhist, has worked as a reporter for *The New York Times*, an editor and columnist for *Esquire* and *Harper's Bazaar*, and a section editor of the Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*. His first "real" job, landed after many, many hours of chanting, was as an assistant copywriter for Avon Books in 1975. He had been working as a mechanic before receiving the Gohonzon. He currently writes and lives with his wife, Cynthia, and their eight-year-old daughter, Kate, in a 200-year-old colonial house about 100 miles north of New York.

**Greg Martin's** senior year in high school in the late '60s began his eye-opening to the world. His next four years at Rutgers was a shocking, head-spinning awakening of drugs, politics and philosophy. He began practicing Buddhism in 1971 after attending an introductory seminar at the university. In quick succession, he gave up drugs, got married, graduated from college, had two children and got a real job. For the past three decades, he has been both seeking to master Buddhist practice and teach it at the same time. He lives in Westchester, California, with his wife Momoyo. They are expecting their first grandchild.

**Ted Morino** began to practice Nichiren Buddhism as a high school student in Japan, where he became friends with Soka Gakkai members his age. After moving to the United States, he has for much of the past 30 years been involved in translating and writing about Nichiren Buddhism for an American audience. After 38 years of practice, he feels the greatest result has been that he has become truer to himself. Currently editor-in-chief of the *World Tribune* and *Living Buddhism*, Morino lives in Tustin Ranch, California, with his wife Cindy.