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*The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and
the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw*

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A Review of: *The Birth of Insight:
Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the
Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw*

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The Birth of Insight: meditation, modern Buddhism, and the Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw. By Erik Braun. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, xvi + 257, ISBN 13: 978-0-226-00080-0 (cloth), US \$45.00, ISBN 13: 978-0-226-00094-7 (e-book), US \$7.00 to \$36.00.

In a pavilion just outside the Shwedagon Temple in Burma stands a large map marking more than 100 *vipassanā* centers around the globe. As the map indicates, meditation has become a global phenomenon. But “mass meditation,” Erik Braun writes in *The Birth of Insight*, “was born in Burma only in the early years of the nineteenth century and at a scale never seen before in Buddhist history” (3). Understanding why the movement began “then and there” is the *sine qua non* of this recent addition to the excellent “Buddhism and Modernity” series published by the University of Chicago Press. *The Birth of Insight* immerses readers in the life and thought of the famed scholar-monk Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923). Although long recognized for his innovative teachings and popularity, this is the most thorough examination of Ledi’s life yet to appear in the English language. Less a biography than an attempt “to unpack what really

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counts in a modern form of Theravada Buddhism” (8), *The Birth of Insight* uses Ledi’s life to show how during a period of momentous historical change—namely, British colonization—large segments of Burma’s populace took up the study of Abhidhamma literature to fend off what they felt to be the harrowing decline of the *sāsana*.

Braun begins his tale by focusing on Ledi’s monastic upbringing as well as the formative years he spent at the royal Thanjaun monastery in Mandalay from 1869-1883. With the keen eye of a meditator, Braun takes the reader through the world that Ledi inhabited, tracing the influence of monastic and court politics, scholastic training and textual mastery, and the consequential events leading up to the full-scale British conquest of Mandalay in 1885. In a political and religious climate in which “literary acumen” was “the means to authority,” (7) Ledi’s scholarly prowess and ability to recite entire scriptures from memory earned him that very power and privilege that so many sought. His mastery of texts earned him friends in high places, especially the lay Minister Hpo Hlaing (1830-1883), who in turn exposed Ledi to both the wider world of Western learning as well as the challenges British rule posed to Burmese Buddhist society. Not long after Ledi left Mandalay to take up meditation practice, he began to show an interest in social affairs. The best way to respond to colonialism, he argued, was to refrain from immoral behavior and sharpen one’s practice of the dhamma (36-38). And at the same time that he began to exploit the connections between Buddhism and science, he also made it quite evident that “science did not explain Buddhism, Buddhism explained science” (82).

Even from his forest retreat near Monywa, Ledi conveyed his authoritative mastery of Buddhist doctrine to more than just his disciples residing nearby. Through the new medium of print, he discovered the “power of print capitalism” (44) and it is this technological and social shift that sets the backdrop for chapter two. The central puzzle of the chapter is why a highly technical, Pāli language commentary—the *Paramatthadīpanī*, or *Manual on the Ultimates*—that Ledi published in 1901 re-

sulted in disorderly public meetings, a book burning and numerous published responses for years to come. To answer this question, Braun takes the reader in painstaking detail through the *Paramatthadīpanī* to demonstrate that despite its explicit criticism of the then current system of Abhidhamma learning, it moved fully “within the bounds of acceptable doctrinal disagreement” (59).

Why the ruckus then? In a masterful analysis, Braun (62-76) links the controversy over the text to a combination of different factors including the rise of a massive print culture that greatly expanded the audience which the *Paramatthadīpanī* reached and the popular belief that an attack on the system of Abhidhamma learning was a sign that Buddhism was in its death-throes. Of real significance here was the doctrinal notion that the *sāsana* was in decline and would eventually disappear from this world, a belief shared widely by Burmese Theravādins. Colonialism had heightened this sense of anxiety: students were being educated in non-Buddhist schools, the Buddhist King had been deposed, the *sangha* was uncertain of its future patronage and there was a perceived decline in moral behavior. But most important of all was the fear over the loss of the canonical texts, the foundation of which was the tradition of learning (*pariyatti sāsana*) that Ledi advocated changing (70). “A shift was taking place,” Braun contends, “from a Buddhism in which expertise centered on a small subset of largely monkish doctrinal experts, to one in which doctrine and learning became the basis for a pan-Burma Buddhist identity . . . [the *Paramatthadīpanī*’s] mass production meant it could reach a wide audience, one that might react to it in ways different from the coterie of elites who specialized in Abhidhamma study” (69). In short, while some felt that the *Paramatthadīpanī* was an attack on the system of learning and thus a sign of decline, Ledi (and his supporters) believed that the decline itself made it necessary to uproot the traditional system of learning and make it more widely available, thus ensuring the future preservation of the *dhamma*.

In chapter three, Braun traces Ledi's rise as one of Burma's foremost Buddhist preachers, writers, and social organizers. With the decline of Buddhism deep in Ledi's mind, he left his cave on the banks of the Chindwin river for a life of "nearly ceaseless travel" (77). As a writer, he published in inexpensive and accessible formats while embracing the use of "simple language and an unadorned style" (91-92). So powerful were some of Ledi's writings that they went through print runs of more than ten thousand. As a preacher, his face-to-face encounters were equally tantalizing. Moving away from the "ritualized act in which monks spoke Pali in an impassive and droning style," (91) Ledi used wit, humor and the local vernacular to convey Buddhist truths. While Braun acknowledges that neither of these methods was unique to Ledi, he contends that what distinguished Ledi from his peers was his unparalleled emphasis on the Abhidhamma (89). As he traveled around the country founding *ad hoc* study groups and promoting an Abhidhamma system once reserved only for the elite, Ledi put Buddhism "in the hands of all the people" (100).

Chapters four and five continue the analysis of Ledi's Abhidhamma emphasis by focusing more closely on his written works. First, in chapter four, the reader learns how Ledi transformed the "once forbidding in-depth, text-based study of the Abhidhamma" into an activity both "appealing and practical in a group setting" (101). Targeting new audiences, like the youth and women who "had not even the possibility of the same level of access as laymen under the old paradigm," (105) Ledi promised mastery of the Abhidhamma in three to four months time. In popular works, like the *Summary of the Ultimates*, he moved away from the long and complex argumentation of normative Abhidhamma texts towards short verses and abbreviated formulas that helped aid memorization. On the topic of meditation—the subject of chapter five—Ledi also broke new ground. He proclaimed that *anyone* "from hunters and fishermen to the scientific men of other religions" can benefit from meditation practice (125). This was a major leap from the pre-19th century period in which meditation was a domain restricted almost entirely to elite

monks. But in Ledi's view, with a thorough Abhidhamma training, all experience, even going for a walk or watching a movie, could lead to awakening. In other words, the in-depth and widespread study of Abhidhamma literature "made meditation understandable, accessible, and portable to any setting or situation" (145). This, Braun concludes, is why mass meditation began only in Burma. "Ledi used it as the lever to shift meditation from a rare pursuit to a practice poised to become a mass phenomenon" (145).

The figures who turned Ledi's theory into this mass phenomenon are the subject of the last chapter. From U Ba Khin (1899-1971) and Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982) to S.N. Goenka (1924-2013) and a host of American-born teachers, Braun traces the impact Ledi had on them either directly or indirectly. All of these figures, in Braun's approximation, built upon Ledi's reconfiguration of the role of the lay Buddhist and the idea that meditation made sense in and of the modern world (164).

At only 169 pages (not including notes, bibliography and a comprehensive glossary), *The Birth of Insight* is a short but valuable resource for understanding the rise of *vipassanā*. Indeed, there are jewels on almost every page and readers will find Braun's understanding of Abhidhamma literature exceptional. But the heavy emphasis on doctrine can sometimes be difficult to digest and will no doubt deter many social scientists and historians who otherwise may have read the book. Granted, Abhidhamma literature is "distinctively dry" with a "tendency to periphrasis," (as one scholar puts it) (48), so this is perhaps unavoidable. But this is also unfortunate because the wider arguments that *The Birth of Insight* conveys would be of real value to those who dwell outside the halls of Buddhist studies. For the true strength of *The Birth of Insight* is that it goes beyond the abstruse world of Abhidhamma philosophy by demonstrating the manner through which the intellectual practices of the pre-modern Buddhist world endured through the disruptions of the colonial period to forge an appealing and ultimately, influential form of modern Buddhism.

For this reason alone, the book will have interest beyond scholars of Burma for the story that Braun writes closely parallels the story of other South and Southeast Asian Buddhist communities. Those who are already immersed in the field of ‘Buddhist modernity,’ will find *The Birth of Insight* an especially fascinating work. The major theoretical debates driving this field—from the subtleties concerning the “monasticization of the laity” and the role of print technologies, to the ongoing debates over colonialism’s impact and the “traditional” and the “modern”—are all addressed throughout the text with various degrees of depth and sophistication. In short, *The Birth of Insight* demonstrates that for Ledi (and ostensibly, many like him), modernity did not bring a disenchantment of the world but rather, as Braun puts it, “a view . . . not so much that Buddhism fit modern life, as modern life fit Buddhism” (148).