



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

By Erik Braun. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. Xvi + 253 pages, ISBN 9780226000800 (hardcover), \$45.00.

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Erik Braun is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. His exhaustively-researched book focuses on Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923) and Ledi’s reformulation of the *sasana* through the popularization of meditation that saw the emergence of mass meditation, including lay people as well as monks, in Burma at the beginning of the twentieth century. Braun’s main interest is the when, why, and how of this reformulation. The book is necessarily interweaved with Ledi’s biography and focuses very much on Ledi’s own writings and reactions to them. One advantage of this to the broader field of Burma Studies and other audiences not focused mainly on religious studies is that the layout of the discussion provides a narrative that scholars in other fields can follow without getting lost in specialist tangents, nor is Braun’s text unnecessarily weighted down with disciplinary jargon. At the same time, this approach also lays out concepts core to Ledi’s thinking and contemporary Buddhist practice in Burma with enough theoretical discussion to make religious studies scholars satisfied. Maintaining this balance between erudition and accessibility is a difficult task that few scholars ever get right but Braun achieves with impressive finesse.

The structure of the book includes a theoretical introduction that also discusses the sources, in particular the three main Burmese-language biographies of Ledi, and a conclusion/epilogue. In-between there are five chapters focusing respectively on Ledi’s formative years, his doctrinal disputes with other Buddhists, his popularization of Abhidhamma, lay study of Abhidhamma, and the emergence of Insight Meditation. After Braun sums up the chief findings of the book in the conclusion, he continues on to discuss the historical progression of Ledi’s teachings, including those teachers without direct links to Ledi. This epilogue of sorts is valuable for highlighting the trajectory of mass insight meditation into the present, which will be a useful lead for those who seek to intersect with the topic for periods after Ledi’s death. Ledi’s life spanned the precolonial and colonial divide and, as Braun rightly points out, the

present study is the first to direct such in-depth attention to an influential Buddhist figure from this period.

What we see most through the insight Braun's study provides are continuities between the premodern and modern periods. Braun suggests that the case of Ledi's particular vision of Buddhism, mixing together as it did old and new, raises the problem of identifying what makes a form of Buddhism modern. Ledi did not invent meditative practice, although he came to understand it in new ways through his interactions with Western knowledge on the body that was partly mediated by interactions with U Hpo Hlaing. Instead, Ledi was responsible for transforming meditative practice to preserve the sasana. Ledi responded to widespread and understandable perceptions of Burmese that the conquest of the Burmese kingdom and dethronement of the Burmese King Thibaw at the hands of the British had ushered in the decline of the Buddhist religion. Ledi thus promoted the study of Abhidhamma as a means of protecting Buddhism and formulated simplified meditative practices as an additional means of defense. By dispersing Buddhist study and practice among the general population, Ledi made it more difficult for the British to eradicate Buddhism. In doing so, Ledi enabled everyday Burmese to participate in the formerly elite task of mastery of Buddhist texts, in particular the Abhidhamma, making textual study the foundation of lay Buddhist life (130). This was a critical turning point, as Braun explains, and "[f]or the first time, serious meditation practice became plausible, appealing, and even patriotic" (5).

Braun views Ledi in the mode of other historical religious innovators. Ledi's chief accomplishment in this regard was in bringing new practices to the laity. He did this through the promotion of study, social organising (95-98), widespread preaching on Abhidhamma and other Buddhist topics (making use of "fan-down" preaching instead of covering his face), and new meditative practices that drew upon Abhidhamma. He also made use of print technology to circulate religious texts he composed in simplified language (and producing, Braun emphasizes, one of Burma's first best-sellers, the Abhidhamma poem, *Summary of the Ultimates*). Indeed, it was Ledi's composition and publication in 1901 of one of his commentaries, the controversial *Paramatthadipani*, which sparked "the great war of the commentaries" (45), raising him to national prominence. All of this allowed Ledi to promote "a new vision of being Buddhist in the modern world," a vision of modernity that was inseparable from his traditional view and one that was able to move beyond the Burmese community. Indeed, Ledi's last book, *Manual of Insight Meditation*, published in English translation in 1915, was written for a Western, European audience, although this audience was admittedly one meeting in Upper Burma at the time.

As successful as Braun's approach to Ledi as an innovator is, some additional avenues might have been taken. Braun's book is hesitant to pull Ledi out and compare him to other kinds of innovators or reformers in other contexts (that is, other than religious reformers or, as in the case of Gandhi, those who mixed religion with politics, to whom Braun does indeed turn on page 147). To do so might have revealed additional determinants of Ledi's behavior and perspectives that went beyond the religious and the social and political issues of his own day. Similarly, the pioneers of the Protestant Reformation who also made use of the new print revolution of their time

to disseminate simplified, more accessible religious tracts and promoted simplified church ritual, would seem to have begged comparisons with Ledi and other Buddhist thinkers of late nineteenth century Burma.

To return to the book's strengths, Braun also draws attention to the question of Ledi's individuality. In his conclusion, for example, Braun argues that the possibilities and outcomes of Ledi's life were determined, through a process of path-dependency, by the events before Ledi's life. The social and institutional environment of Ledi's education, particularly in Mandalay, Braun argues, provided him with his worldview and the resources he used during the colonial period. The resulting "situated freedom" directed not only his institutional and intellectual path but also conditioned his emotional tendencies, so that his love of Abhidhamma and fear of *sasana* decline were not just intellectual, they were deeply heart-felt as well. These observations are crucial to Braun's contribution to the literature, because they reveal again that colonial rule was not the beginning of Burmese modernity. While Ledi did have to face colonial-era challenges, his worldview emanated from a place other than the disruption of colonialism. Seeing Ledi's career as one of improvisation helps us, Braun suggests, to "balance enduring social and religious forces with the freedom of the individual to react to immediate concerns and pressures" (154).

This book is a major contribution to Buddhist and Burma studies alike. It bridges the gap in the literature between studies of precolonial Buddhism, on the one hand, and late-colonial and contemporary Buddhism, on the other. It also shows, in the conclusion, the links between Burma, Ledi, and the mainstreaming of mass insight meditation in America. The present reviewer would recommend that this study be read alongside Alicia's Turner's *Saving Buddhism*, because both books strongly complement each other, presenting together a powerful introduction to the shaping of the lay Buddhist community in a formative period of modern Burmese history. This book should be essential reading for scholars of Buddhism and Southeast Asian Studies alike and will certainly find very welcoming readers in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

Reference

Turner, Alicia. 2014. *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.