

Ingrid Jordt. *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007. xxii + 265 pp. + 14 pp. of plates. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89680-255-1.

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Published on H-Buddhism (January, 2012)

Commissioned by Thomas Borchert



Meditating on Legitimacy and Power in Burma

In 1999, the military junta that ruled Burma sponsored the installation of a new finial (*hti*) on the top of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. This was a portentous and risky move, for the Burmese commonly believe that only a legitimate ruler can successfully put a new *hti* on the structure. When the work was completed without incident, the generals were reported to have exclaimed, “We won!”[1]

As Ingrid Jordt argues in her fascinating and highly valuable book *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*, to properly understand such a jubilant cry we must go beyond the assumption that the junta simply used Buddhism as a cynical means to justify its rule. Jordt shows how the logic of the military government's behavior emerged from a Buddhist cosmological vision revealed in and shaped by the mass meditation movement that developed after World War Two. Many scholars have taken meditation to be, at root, an individualistic and private activity. Jordt makes the astute argument that, while the practice may be important to the individual, modern mass meditation in Burma is a communal endeavor that knits the Burmese people together by creating a shared worldview. In this setting, placing a new top on a pagoda was not just a religious act for political ends, but a political act for religious ends. However much the junta relied upon violence—shown clearly to the world, once again, in the brutal crackdown against the Saffron Revolution in 2007—they also depended upon a legitimacy

shaped by mass insight (*vipassanā*) meditation. Although in March of this year the military ostensibly ceded control to an elected government (albeit one weighted toward military influence), this transition of power hardly makes Jordt's study irrelevant. On the contrary, the new political structure—still very much a work in progress—shows the military's ability to manage change, and thus only underscores the value in her nuanced presentation of the Buddhist logic for such power formed in the milieu of mass insight practice. In particular, Jordt examines the influence of the meditation movement of the monk the Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-82), which had government sponsorship under Burma's first prime minister, U Nu, and has enjoyed great popularity all over the country among rich and poor, in both urban and rural areas.

Jordt's argument that the generals and their minions have had at least partial legitimacy does not mean that the majority of Burmese happily accepted the rule of military leaders or now welcome their influence behind the scenes. But a widely shared cosmology—and cosmology stands as the key analytical concept of the book—has made their power seem an unfortunate but not illegitimate karmic consequence. Thus, it follows that, contrary to a common assumption, Buddhist conceptions of power are not only on the side of those in favor of transparent Western-style democracy, preeminently Aung San Suu Kyi and other figures in the National League for Democracy. As much as Buddhism enables political resistance, it must be seen to support the military's power.

Jordt is well positioned to examine this ambivalent situation. She not only had unusual access to leading religious figures both inside and outside of the Mahasi meditation movement, but to political figures as well, including U Nu. As an anthropologist, Jordt's deep ethnographic experience in Burma forms the core material for the book. But, in affinity with the work of her mentor, S. J. Tambiah, Jordt also includes a deep historical perspective and knowledge of Burmese Buddhism. This approach allows her to take aim more broadly at Burma scholars—anthropologists, but also historians, Buddhist studies specialists, and political scientists—who have tended, in her view, to neglect the deep-seated relationship between Burmese Buddhist cosmology and contemporary political developments.

The first chapter provides the historical information needed to understand how lay Buddhists became the “New Laity,” a group which took on a prominent and unprecedented role in contemporary Burmese society through the Mahasi meditation movement. The removal of the king by the British during the colonial period had destabilized the relationship within what Jordt calls the “ternary order of sangha, state, and laity” (p. 23). After the Second World War, lay people's administrative control of the Mahasi meditation movement enabled them to assume what had been the king's responsibilities to purify and protect the *sangha*. Insight meditation also proved popular because it drew religious power to the practitioner through self-purification, provided prestige, and cemented a sense of lay identity and worldview with political implications.

Chapter 2 explores this new identity and worldview in detail, arguing that the practice of insight meditation causes an “epistemic reconstruction” of the meditator through his or her deconstructive analysis of moment-by-moment experience (understood emically as a purification of view). Here Jordt hedges the issue of whether the Mahasi insight method provides access to a genuinely unmediated experience of perception. To my mind, the meditation process, which culminates in the apperception of the truths of Buddhism in individual experience, suggests that the entire process contains preconceived notions about reality that dictate the outcome. (Joanna Cook's recent work could be usefully compared here for its more specific focus on the retreat experience in a related context.[2]) But of great value and most germane to the argument of the book is Jordt's explanation of how the mass meditation movement makes each meditator's moral purification, once a matter reserved for the king, relevant to society's welfare, including its political situ-

ation. Meditating can be seen as a political act because the Burmese understand it to shape the interrelationships of *sangha*, state, and lay persons, and because it produces the criteria of legitimacy, emerging from an “enlightened citizenry,” that the government must heed.

Having examined the mechanics of the meditation technique and its effects upon the political and social sensibilities of the meditator, in the remaining chapters of the book Jordt turns outward to describe the consequences of mass meditation for Burmese society. Chapter 3 studies religious giving (*dāna*). The Mahasi organization, like other groups, produces, as Jordt puts it, “*dāna* cliques” (p. 134) that connect people to organizations, famous monks, and each other. Donor relationships carry through in social and business relationships, too, and the Burmese understand these relationships as having transcendent effects, in that social links forge bonds and even political configurations in future lives. The rich details here of how donor groups form are especially interesting, for, just as in the case for meditation, they show the complex social networks that develop around what is often viewed as an individual act. What Jordt calls a “politics of sincerity” determines the validity of donation. One's intention in giving must be sincere (oriented toward Buddhist values such as compassion, equanimity, morality, and enlightenment) to accrue real benefits. Thus, government figures have engaged in many highly publicized acts of donation to proclaim their pious sincerity. Such acts have supported their right to rule on the basis of Buddhist criteria continually reasserted by the laity in the process of mass insight meditation. Burmese question the government's sincerity, of course, but one cannot be sure of another's intention. To some degree, donative acts have to be taken at face value for the power they confer. So, when the generals have done something like refurbishing the Shwedagon, Burmese have taken it—albeit “with a heavy mood” (p. 122)—as self-evident proof of an earned legitimacy. Many believe the regime simply could not have done it without the spiritual—and, flowing from that, worldly—power derived from a store of good karma.

Granting some legitimacy to the generals has never meant passive acceptance of oppression, as modern Burmese history clearly shows. Yet, examples of resistance in familiar Western ways—street marches, civil disturbances, etc.—have been relatively uncommon. In chapter 4 Jordt seeks to explain why this is the case by describing an overlooked form of resistance outside the civil sphere. Meditation relates to this resistance because the meditative experience provides a vision of the world

that encompasses a critique of politics and supplies a venue for “subtly manifested” (p. 168) political action. Within this “alternate action sphere” (p. 149) formed by meditation, the cultivation of lay-monk networks and the pursuit of insight have provided hope and motivated resistance through the assertion of a moral standard to which the government is subject. Furthermore, insight meditation itself produces good karma, building up individual by individual, that Burmese have trusted will reshape society in better ways in the future. (Jordt observes that this means of resistance has become particularly prominent among women, who find in insight practice greater access to Buddhist learning and achievement than usually available in other settings.) While these modes of resistance in an alternate sphere might seem incapable of fomenting dramatic political change, they are critical to identify, for they describe a form of local agency that counters the notion that most Burmese Buddhists have been inert in the face of oppression. It seems likely that this form of resistance will evolve along with recent political developments. How exactly remains to be seen, but Jordt’s analysis provides the background to explore fruitfully changes that take place in this arena of alternative political critique.

Real resistance notwithstanding, the military junta (in various permutations) managed to hold on to power for close to fifty years and only gave up overt control this year on its own terms. In chapter 5 Jordt surveys various rulers and regimes in the post-independence period to relate their activities to the arguments about legitimacy and mass meditation developed in the prior chapters. Military rulers could not avoid involvement with Buddhism. The mass meditation movement, growing in leaps and bounds as a Buddhist counterweight to an initially secularist post-independence regime, had to be brought under control. To do so, the military leaders of the state became more and more involved in *sāsana* affairs from the mid-1970s onwards. The junta did such things as reorganizing the *sangha*, building pagodas, administering Buddhist culture examinations, conferring monastic titles, and, not the least, topping the Shwedagon with a new *hti*. All of these efforts were modeled on the office of the precolonial king and depended upon a cosmological worldview shared with meditators. Jordt is careful to note, however, that not all government practices can be understood through a Buddhist framework. There is also the bureaucratic development of ministries, tangled in patron-client relations, which have their own institutional logics that at times have conflicted with Buddhist beliefs. There has been an expectation, for instance, that government em-

ployees will skim goods and services from their jobs to make ends meet, much to the dismay of devout Buddhists caught between their moral precepts (*sīla*) and the need to get by. Furthermore, the new government’s cancellation of the Myitsone Dam Project, release of political prisoners, and willingness to allow Aung San Suu Kyi to run for parliament suggest political calculations that make sense within a Buddhist framework of power but are not necessarily dependent upon it.

In the epilogue Jordt concludes with a general discussion of the Buddhist cosmological worldview she sees as underlying societal developments during the time of military rule. She argues that mass meditation is not just numerically significant as a movement, but that its large number of participants (over a million purportedly with certified achievements) points to a shared outlook in the broader Burmese society that has shaped political realities. The Mahasi movement has been unquestionably influential, and this fact is part of what makes Jordt’s analysis extremely worthwhile. Yet it is not clear to me that its effects are quite as pervasive as argued here. (Juliane Schober has recently observed, for instance, that the main Mahasi center in Yangon appears lately to have undergone serious decline.[3]) Even among those who have achieved accredited levels of realization using the Mahasi method, perhaps we cannot be so sure of the effect. We should keep in mind, as well, that most Burmese do not meditate (at least in the systematized way meant here). Furthermore, not all who do practice meditation follow the Mahasi method with its distinct epistemic approach. Jordt does not address the many other practice traditions in Burma (such as those of the Mogok Sayadaw, the Pa Auk Sayadaw, and U Ba Khin). We should bear in mind that the explanation for meditation’s later phenomenal growth includes factors, such as the strong Abhidhamma textual tradition in Burma and the effects of colonialism, that crosscut Mahasi, other meditation traditions, and even the majority that never seriously practices insight meditation. Awareness of this complexity in the Burmese situation undercuts somewhat the distinctiveness of the Mahasi movement’s influence.

The assumption of a consensus of worldview among meditators also suggests that meditation, and the cosmology it assumes, comprise a totalizing force. Jordt is well aware that poststructural scholars may criticize this approach as obscuring how individuals and competing groups negotiate dominant ideas about belief and practice. But she maintains that an unapologetic stress on the “structural force” of Buddhist cosmology clarifies the meditation movement’s function as an encompassing

“culture-making mechanism” (p. 208). Here Jordt is addressing the critique in recent anthropological thought of any “holism” (p. 207), such as cosmology, that obscures the reality of contestation and change among individuals and groups. At the very least, Jordt’s approach, viewed as a heuristic strategy, allows her to capture with clarity the cohesive logic of the system of religion and politics in Burma, even if, in fact, a society never really stays in a coherent equilibrium.[4] It is a testament to the value of Jordt’s thoughtful and convincing book that scholars of Buddhism, Burma, and Southeast Asia can depend on its perceptive analysis if they wish to pursue where disequilibrium and difference push at conceptual balance. More generally, scholars and students interested in the relations of religion and politics in Asia will benefit from reading the book, given its detail and theoretical rigor. So, too, will those with an interest in political change in Burma, for Jordt’s study suggests that, though the generals may have had cause to cheer “Aung Pyi! We Won!” when they renovated the Shwedagon, the ambivalent effects of karma make their legitimacy inherently unstable. The karmic right to rule must constantly be reasserted, creating the need to respond to pressures both inside

and outside of Burmese society. Recent events exemplify such responses and offer the hope of change for the better in what Jordt describes as the potential for “a new synthesis of Buddhist truths and political experience” (p. 219).

Notes

[1]. Seth Mydans, “What Makes Monks Mad,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 2007. Jordt tells this story on p. 122 and discusses the refurbishment of the Shwedagon on pp. 188-189.

[2]. Joanna Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[3]. Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctions in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), 93.

[4]. Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), 4.

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Citation: Erik Braun. Review of Jordt, Ingrid, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.

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