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The insight, or *vipassanā* meditation movement, has helped to launch Buddhism and meditation into mainstream culture internationally. Its decontextualized nature and portability have allowed it to be inserted into such arenas as health and well-being, therapy, pain relief, parenting, relationships, business leadership, and other secular pursuits. There has been scholarship exploring the modern phenomenon of this movement in Asia, including Ingrid Jordt’s *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction on Power* (2007), which focuses on the Mahasi Sayadaw headquarters in Yangon. Joanna Cook’s *Meditation and Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life* (2010) explores the implications of this movement for Thailand and modern Buddhism through the window of a Northern Thai meditation temple. Moving further outside of Asia, the essays in a special issue of *Contemporary Buddhism* reveal further how the mass lay meditation retreat model has spread and adapted internationally, especially as a more secular form of mindfulness.[1] But no work has investigated extensively the historical roots of this phenomenon. Erik Braun’s *The Birth of Insight* places a large piece into this puzzle of answering how and why *vipassanā* meditation became so popular and widespread.

Braun argues that we can locate the groundwork of this significant religious trend in the Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923). The central claims of the book concern the development of the modern *vipassanā* movement and Ledi’s role as the foundational figure for its emergence. Braun argues that Ledi is so significant not because he created a meditation method for Buddhist laity, which came later with future teachers, but because of his interest in educating the laity in Buddhist doctrine. This education spawned a model of lay activity that created a space for meditation on a large scale. Through his opening of the study of Buddhist texts and meditation practice to the laity, Braun argues, Ledi ultimately facilitated the possibility of this movement.

Braun sees Ledi as a focal point in the history of *vipassanā* meditation, a history that can be
traced back to Burma, present-day Myanmar, where the mass lay meditation movement began. Braun details significant aspects of Ledi's life, but the author is careful to point out that this is not a biography. Instead he has narrower aims in studying Ledi's actions and influence that contribute to the development of meditation as a modern phenomenon. Ledi's life is placed within the contexts of precolonial and colonial Burma, allowing the reader to see both the religious and political worlds that he emerged from. In this way, he becomes a mediating figure between the modern and traditional. This was not only because of his particular moment in history that spanned major changes in Burmese history, but also because of his ideas and actions, which encompassed both old and new. For example, Ledi worked within a traditional Buddhist cosmological worldview and gave a more prominent role to the laity, blurring the monastic-lay distinction in Theravada Buddhism. Braun expands on this argument throughout the book through looking closely at Ledi's life and writings.

Ledi's influence is apparent today not just in his legacy of mass lay meditation but also in bookshops, homes, and temples where people keep or sell a well-known image Ledi made as a learning tool of the twenty-four conditional relations, an important and complex component of one of the three parts of the Pali Canon, the Abhidhamma. This image allowed access to the in-depth study of the Abhidhamma for non-scholastics. He propagated this kind of simplified teaching during Burma's colonial period, after the British seized all of Burma in 1885 and exiled King Thibaw (1859-1916) to India. With no king acting as patron and protector of the religion, many Burmese worried that Buddhism was in decline. Because of this, Ledi's life was bound up with colonialism and the view that the end of Buddhism was near. This social disruption, Braun argues, caused Ledi to seek to protect Buddhism in various ways, including educating not just monastics but also laity. Through making study feasible for laity and meditation something that could be done in a householder's daily life, this practice became more accessible. Braun argues that the implications of this opening up of study and practice for laity were tremendous, ultimately initiating a trajectory that would lead to Burma's mass lay meditation movement and, although not inevitably, more secular applications of the practice seen throughout the world today. Braun writes, “Ledi's career was a critical starting point that set a path of development that made this situation possible” (p. 168).

The book is structured mainly chronologically as the introduction recounts Ledi's life as an intellectual young man who did not depend on a teacher, but developed his ideas about meditation and the role of the laity through independent study. Braun argues that his success with textual learning within the elite monastic environment was the basis for Ledi's propagation of Buddhist teachings and use of Abhidhamma to solve societal problems. Through this focus on study Ledi fits within Burmese Buddhist tradition but his direction toward teaching the laity was less common. Braun carefully and compellingly argues that Ledi is both traditional and modern, and that these categories depend on contextual and contingent factors, pointing to continuities between premodern and modern. Ledi was not a modernist who purified Buddhism of all magical elements but sought ways Buddhism could support Burmese society, which included laypeople's responsibilities to maintain and protect the religion.

Chapter 1 continues to describe Ledi's education and the beginning of his monastic career in Mandalay until the founding of his own monastery. This chapter not only gives background on Ledi's early career but also puts his life into historical, societal, political, and religious settings. Ledi was born during the Konbaung dynasty (1752-1885) under King Mindon (1808-78). Through the information available, Braun makes plausible arguments about Ledi's influences that would affect his future choices. For example,
Braun argues that Ledi’s participation in the Fifth Buddhist Council (1871) in Mandalay, sponsored by King Mindon, would have impressed upon him the importance of learning. Braun also notes the role of Hpo Hlaing, a layman who brought Western knowledge to bear on new ideas of meditation. Braun describes how Hpo Hlaing’s writings on meditation made the practice accessible to laity and how this was likely to presage and inform Ledi’s concerns later on. These writings were not a call to practice nor did they describe a particular kind of practice. Instead Braun calls these “the seeds for innovative ideas” (p. 34). This is what Braun does well, tracing these seeds in conceivable ways. Another influence he finds in Ledi’s early career is his evocative move to the forest. Although he did not renounce scholarship as other forest monks did, this move is an important step in Ledi’s career and is symbolic of the isolated, meditating forest-dweller within the Buddhist tradition. Braun reads this as evidence of Ledi’s ability to take risks that in turn shaped his career as a leading figure in the Burmese sangha. Braun helps the reader to imagine what was at stake for Ledi and Burmese Buddhists during these tumultuous times, the meanings of his actions and their possible effects.

Chapter 2 continues to develop the trajectory of Ledi’s life and career as well as Braun’s larger argument about Ledi’s role within modern Buddhism. To this end, this chapter focuses specifically on Ledi’s 1901 publication of the Paramatthadipani, a commentary on a twelfth-century Abhidhamma handbook. Braun skillfully takes the reader through some complicated, systematic ideas of the Abhidhamma and Ledi’s related work that caused controversy. The debate over the value of Ledi’s Paramatthadipani demonstrates the importance of the Abhidhamma in this culture. The focus of Ledi’s commentary, the Abhidhammathasagaha, was a foundational text of monastic education in Burma. In the course of his writing, Ledi sought to correct previous interpretations of this work that many Burmese found to be correct.

Ledi’s refutation of these earlier works was severe and generated disagreement and discussion. As a result of British colonialism and the exile of Buddhism’s protector, no one could adjudicate Ledi’s points of refutation with the authoritative twelfth-century Sri Lankan Abhidhamma handbook, so his piece went to the opinion of the public sphere. Therefore this chapter illustrates the developing significance and competing claims of the public sphere related to Buddhist ideas in Burmese society. Braun also illustrates the importance of this work in particular for Ledi’s career, arguing that it helped him become well-known and showed him the emerging importance and power of print culture within Burmese society. In addition, through this debate Ledi was able to see the potential and interest of laypeople in learning the Abhidhamma. Braun continually reminds the reader of his larger argument concerning Ledi’s influence on the modern mass lay meditation movement through his efforts to engage Buddhist laity.

Chapter 3 illustrates how Ledi propagated Buddhism nationally. In a practical sense, Ledi made Buddhist study and practice accessible for laity through the nature of his preaching and use of print culture. Ledi minimized the use of Pali and difficult vocabulary, instead speaking plainly and simply in his preaching and using simplified Burmese in cheap and easy to find formats. Through these strategies, he changed the way doctrine was enacted and propagated while maintaining orthodoxy. Braun argues that instead of a personal relationship between monastic and student, Ledi established the text as the teacher for the laity. Braun carefully makes a case for the influence of Christian missionaries in the development of this style. At the same time, however, Ledi was rooted within a Buddhist worldview. His responses to political realities were based on a karmic outlook and moral development as the means to solve problems. Therefore education and guarding the individual morality of the laypeople were methods for protecting the reli-
gion. Braun notes that this change in the role of the laity followed a trajectory of Ledi’s affinity for learning and training in the monastic culture that valued this. This popular lay learning, Braun argues, was “the genetic basis for mass meditation” (p. 88). Braun sees participation in meditation as the logical conclusion of this lay responsibility and involvement. He finds that “meditation was the culmination of a conceptual framework in which he empowered the laity to adopt more virtuous lives and undertake study as powerful preparation for practice” (p. 89).

We see the further development of this basis for mass meditation in the next chapter where Braun highlights Ledi’s popular Abhidhamma poem, or condensed version of the Abhidhamma handbook, the *Abhidhammathasagaha*, called the *Summary of the Ultimates*. Braun’s main purpose here is to discuss how Ledi used this poem to empower the laity to study the Abhidhamma on their own. Although the *Summary of the Ultimates* can seem esoteric, the points Braun makes about the work are clear and not too detailed or complex. Braun explains that this work focuses on morality for the laity, discussing the realm of human beings in a way that emphasizes lay study. He argues that this focus on study directly correlates to lay practice. For Ledi, study was a tool for development, even awakening in this life. The laity studied the *Summary of the Ultimates* in groups, even forming study circles to recite the text. Therefore, Ledi’s success in reaching out to the laity was at least in part the product of his providing an outlet for a growing lay interest in pursuing their own study of Buddhist knowledge. This *Summary of the Ultimates* illustrates concretely Ledi’s concern for the laity and their participation in Buddhist learning in order to build a moral Burmese society.

Chapter 5, “The Birth of Insight,” is the crux of the book, focusing on Ledi’s specific efforts to promote meditation. The import and meaning of this can only be seen through his emphasis on outreach to lay Buddhists. Although the Abhidhamma was Ledi’s main teaching tool, he also advocated the practice of meditation in one’s present life. The early history of the lay meditation movement within Southeast Asia consists of teachers, such as the Sri Lankan Anagarika Dharmapala, the Thai forest masters, and other Burmese Sayadaws. However, Braun notes, their efforts did not result in a widespread movement. He argues that the precedents and possibilities for widespread lay practice did not begin until Ledi set in motion the trajectory of lay participation in study and practice. Braun uses a wide range of Ledi’s works on meditation in this chapter, noting major themes and concerns, and demonstrating comprehensive knowledge of his writing. For Ledi, meditation was another role that laity could enact and fulfill. He did not, however, write about meditation techniques but framed the practice of meditation within Abhidhamma learning. Therefore Braun argues that his efforts helped to set up possibilities for the institution of the meditation center, even though, for Ledi, meditation was part of a larger project of education. Through his elite text-centered education, challenges of colonialism, and his innovation to transform Abhidhamma into daily practices of meditation for laity, Ledi created new opportunities and innovations while working within the Burmese Buddhist worldview.

The conclusion to *Birth of Insight* connects the mass lay meditation movement in Burma and throughout the world today to Ledi’s focus on the study of the Abhidhamma, and the role of the laity. Braun distinguishes between two lineages or trajectories of Ledi’s influence: one embedded within Buddhist worldview, namely, Burma’s mass lay meditation movement; and one embedded within ideas of psychology, secularism, and romanticism that has become popular more recently in America. He looks at the major figures in this movement in addition to Ledi, particularly Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-82) and U Ba Khin (1899-1971). Although Mahasi was not a direct disciple of Ledi and he taught one specific medita-
tion technique instead of study, his method uses an Abhidhammic approach and the features of lay meditation Ledi helped to form. U Ba Khin, who is within Ledi’s lineage through Saya Thetgyi (1873-1945), also approached meditation through the Abhidhamma concepts but simplified a particular technique within a structured retreat format and downplayed dhamma study. U Ba Khin’s most famous disciple who propagated a secularized meditation retreat throughout the world is S. N. Goenka (1924-2013). This secularized approach continues particularly with the first American *vipassanā* teachers: Jack Kornfield (born 1945), Joseph Goldstein (born 1944), and Sharon Salzberg (born 1952). Braun argues that the trajectory of insight practice in America, although it has moved beyond Ledi’s Burmese Buddhist world, draws from the path of lay learning he established. Braun does not sketch a direct line from Ledi to these meditation teachers but argues that Ledi’s ideas, practices, and writings were foundational within Burma and thus for the wider meditation movement. Braun is careful to state that these developments were not inevitable results of Ledi’s actions. Instead he finds that although Ledi’s influence is important, the lay model he shaped is ultimately dependent on particular contexts within American culture, Burmese lineages, and the agency of individual teachers.

*The Birth of Insight* is well written, clear, and carefully argued, with every point relating to the larger argument that the contemporary widespread fascination with meditation has its roots within the writings and ideas of Ledi. Braun uses important and appropriate Burmese sources throughout, especially relevant works by Ledi. It is well-known that the Abhidhamma is an important area of study within Burma, but it is less well-known why, and this book highlights its practical importance for Burmese Buddhists. Braun also engages with an important scholarly debate about the role of the laity during the colonial period, discussing such terms as “laicization” and “monasticization.” He finds that scholars either characterize this role as a process of laicization, where Buddhism becomes more focused on lay concerns, or as monasticization, where laypeople enact Buddhism more closely to monastics. Instead of arguing that one term is more useful than the other, Braun finds that both are valid but neither describes adequately the transformations of Ledi’s time. For Ledi, the monastic/lay distinction remained important and Braun argues, following Steven Collins and Justin McDaniel, that it “is perhaps best to speak of a pluralization of practices and statuses that could potentially blur the lay/monk boundary” (p. 99).[2]

This is an important study of Theravada Buddhism in the colonial period that frames how we should understand the emerging and changing roles of laity. Braun also teaches us about Ledi and his world, specifically about how he changed Buddhist practice through his individuality and how he was embedded within particular social and historical circumstances within Burmese society. Braun is careful to articulate this balanced approach of noting Ledi’s particularity but also his influences and contexts that allowed him to be a precursor to the popular meditation movement. This is an exemplary work within the history of religions with its careful argumentation and substantial evidence for the foundation of *vipassanā* meditation to be located within the ideas of an important nineteenth-century Burmese monk. This book will be important reading for students in the history of religions and Southeast Asian studies, and those interested in meditation and Buddhism.

Note

