

The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw, by Erik Braun, University of Chicago Press. 2013. 257pp., Hb. £30/\$45. ISBN-13: 9780226000800.

Reviewed by Anthony Scott, PhD student, University of Toronto, anthony.scott@utoronto.ca

Keywords

Buddhist modernism, meditation, Burma/Myanmar, *abhidhamma*, *vipassanā*

By harnessing the textual, cosmological and social dimensions of scholar-monk Ledi Sayadaw in early twentieth century Burma, Erik Braun forces one to reconsider the concept of Buddhist modernism and its application today. In *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw*, Braun focuses on the rise of colonialism in Burma as a transformative time, when Ledi Sayadaw operated between the precolonial and the imperial, the laity and the *saṅgha*, the *sāsana* and its inevitable decline. In 257 pages (with notes) Braun captures the scholarly authority and social organizing of this Mahāthera as he mastered the *abhidhamma* and made it accessible to lay practitioners through personal study, print technologies and meditation techniques. Ledi was likewise concerned with soteriology, seeking to inspire his diverse followers to realize for themselves enlightenment here and now. Braun argues that Ledi also acted to stem the decline of the *sāsana* by soliciting material, mental and moral lay support in the absence of a Buddhist monarch. It is ultimately claimed that Ledi Sayadaw was a singular genius who did not merely assimilate or contest colonial rule, but epitomized the Burmese Buddhist thrust of reality as it broke into its own modernity. If so, the genius of Ledi Sayadaw must be considered a conduit for the emergence of Buddhist mass-meditation movements worldwide.

The inspiration in reading *The Birth of Insight* comes from the way Braun weaves his argument through the personal and public rise of Ledi Sayadaw in five chapters, carefully guiding the reader according to the rhythms of the monk's life. Braun makes the case that because of the 'disruptions' caused by British imperialism in Burma, the effortlessly erudite Sayadaw dedicated his life to save the dispensation of the Buddha. The Mahāthera's mission included transforming the way lay and monastics interacted with one another, but also encouraging an interaction with the *sāsana* through embodied understanding of the *abhidhamma* and rigorous learning. The last chapter begins with the death of Ledi Sayadaw in 1923, though this was not the end of his reach. Braun concludes with a genealogy of Ledi's own linear dispensation, notably in the forms of S.N. Goenka, Jack Kornfield and the global proliferation of *vipassanā* centres. At this point our author problematizes some of the narratives and attempts to resolve questions that have arisen with his treatment of imperialism in Burma. He reminds the

reader that although colonial ‘policy and practice’ was pervasive, Ledi was not forced to filter his Buddhist worldview through the superimposed model of western modernity; rather, this scholar-monk reinvigorated a precolonial paradigm by adapting it to a shifting sociopolitical landscape. By arguing for an alternative form of modernity, *The Birth of Insight* would find favour with the object of its study, for Braun combines the best of a handbook of twentieth-century Burmese Buddhism with a summary of *abhidhammic* modernity at a crucial historical moment, thereby necessitating further research on the rise of insight meditation in the contemporary world.