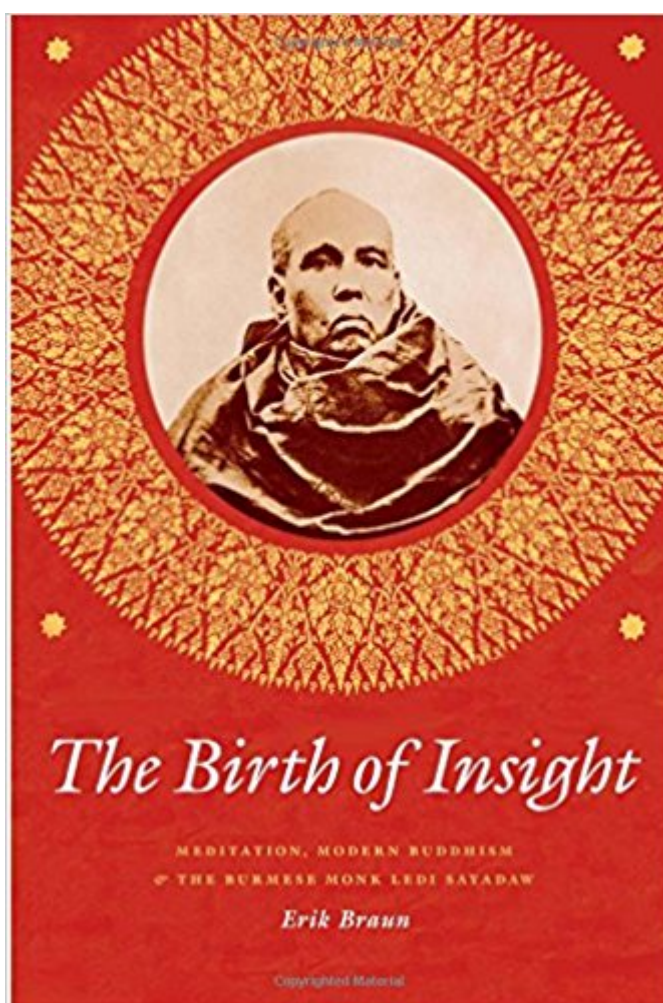


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# The Birth Of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, And The Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw (Buddhism And Modernity)



## Synopsis

Insight meditation, which claims to offer practitioners a chance to escape all suffering by perceiving the true nature of reality, is one of the most popular forms of meditation today. The Theravada Buddhist cultures of South and Southeast Asia often see it as the Buddha's most important gift to humanity. In the first book to examine how this practice came to play such a dominant and relatively recent role in Buddhism, Erik Braun takes readers to Burma, revealing that Burmese Buddhists in the colonial period were pioneers in making insight meditation indispensable to modern Buddhism. Braun focuses on the Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw, a pivotal architect of modern insight meditation, and explores Ledi's popularization of the study of crucial Buddhist philosophical texts in the early twentieth century. By promoting the study of such abstruse texts, Braun shows, Ledi was able to standardize and simplify meditation methods and make them widely accessible—in part to protect Buddhism in Burma after the British takeover in 1885. Braun also addresses the question of what really constitutes the “modern” in colonial and postcolonial forms of Buddhism, arguing that the emergence of this type of meditation was caused by precolonial factors in Burmese culture as well as the disruptive forces of the colonial era. Offering a readable narrative of the life and legacy of one of modern Buddhism's most important figures, *The Birth of Insight* provides an original account of the development of mass meditation.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“This is an exemplary work within the history of religions with its careful argumentation and substantial evidence for the foundation of *vipassana* 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.” (H-Net)

“Masterful. . . . This is an excellent study, one that will deservedly become a classic in the field and make possible many other studies of the history of Burmese Buddhism.” (Journal of Southeast Asian Studies)

“Provides a detailed and masterfully contextualized analysis of the innovative career of Ledi Sayadaw. . . . Because of Ledi’s multi-faceted influence, the book will be of interest to scholars working on both Southeast Asian and Western Buddhism, as well as researchers interested in religion and its relationship with colonialism, modernity, or communication developments.” (Studies in Religion)

“An erudite and thoughtful investigation of a remarkable man and his crucial role in the development of modern Burmese Buddhism. Moreover, from a methodological viewpoint, Braun’s study exhibits a formidable command of primary-source materials that are seamlessly woven into a direct narrative style in a manner that highlights the inseparability of individual historical agents, traditional religious beliefs, and modern political activity.” (Religion)

“The Birth of Insight represents an important addition to current scholarship on modern Burmese Buddhism, which has broader implications for our understanding of contemporary Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia and global Buddhism generally. Engaging and challenging, it restores the study of texts to the repertoire of tools at our disposal for the critical examination of Burmese tradition.” (Patrick Pranke, University of Louisville)

“Insight meditation (*vipassana*) is increasingly central to the modern practice of Buddhism, worldwide; mindfulness practices (*sati*) are ever more widely used in contemporary western psychotherapies. Tracing the genealogy of these developments takes us to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Burma, and Erik Braun’s fascinating and lucid account of Ledi Sayadaw provides a detailed and illuminating historical context, notably in relation to colonialism, for the beginnings of the whole process. A final chapter describes Ledi’s influence on other teachers in Burma, and through them on the American disciples who brought the techniques to the West.” A very fine book. (Steven Collins, University of Chicago)

“Erik Braun’s superbly researched, elegantly crafted, and eminently accessible book is the most authoritative study to date of Ledi Sayadaw and the origins of the modern Buddhist meditation revival in Burma. But its significance goes well beyond the confines of twentieth-century Burmese

history. Ledi Sayadaw and his followers laid the foundation for Buddhist modernism, and by the last quarter of the twentieth century their innovative – if sometimes controversial – approach to Buddhist doctrine and practice had spread to the rest of Asia, as well as to Europe, America, and beyond. Braun's account of their achievements should be required reading for anyone interested in the roots of modern insight (or mindfulness) meditation practice. (Robert H. Sharf, University of California, Berkeley)

Erik Braun is associate professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia.

Three years ago I was in Myanmar to attend a 30-day silent Vipassana meditation retreat at one of SN Goenka's centres in Mandalay. On my brief pilgrimage which bookended my retreat I visited Ledi Sayadaw's meditation cave on the banks of the Chindwin River near Monywa. I also visited the Archives and Library of Buddhism at Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon in a bid to do some research into the history of meditation practice in Burma. Unfortunately, without letters of recommendation from a university in my home country I was unable to access their collections. Thank you to Erik Braun for *Birth of Insight*. This is an extremely important work that charts the origins of one of the most influential forms of modern Buddhism to the person of Ledi Sayadaw and his efforts to safeguard the Sasana from the disruptive effects of British colonisation Burma in the 1880s. For anyone who is a practitioner of any strain of Burmese Buddhism, practitioners of 'mindfulness' meditation or those seeking to develop their understanding of Modern Burmese power relations, this work provides a grounding in the powerful social and political contexts that were at play. This is a must read.

This book was a winner of the Numata book prize in Buddhism in 2014. The structure and style of this book is strictly historical, not narrative for entertaining reading. The author was attracted by the wide variety of discourses and claims about various Buddhist meditation methods. Let me come to the point quickly, if prejudicially: Almost everything you think you know about Buddhist meditation was invented in twentieth century Burma and Thailand. Based on his extensive study of Abhidhamma documents from medieval Buddhism, Ledi Sayadaw wrote very many treatises translating and commenting these ancient doctrines according to his own lights. Disciples of Ledi's later lineage of monks invented meditation methods that they believed complied with and revealed

the truth of these Ledi doctrines to the Burmese people. When the gullible westerners came to marvel and imitate this wisdom, it was all passed off as the original teachings of The Buddha. Now those gullible westerners are teaching all manner of assertions that cannot be found in the Suttas, pretending that there is a non-existent historicity in the Suttas. You can read the Suttas and the Abhidhamma from cover to cover and you will not find adequate instructions for any method of meditation (with the marginal exception of the Anapanasati Sutta, in its numerous variations). Modern people experiment with meditation and they decide they know the minds and the experiences, and the intentions of the ancients, and Bingo! they start teaching meditation, just like The Buddha. As Braun carefully explains, the Buddhist motives of Ledi and his brethren had a lot to do with revitalizing postcolonial Burmese society and culture, perhaps more directly than concern for religious practice for its own sake. Braun knows his way around the meditation cushion, but this book is about the history and culture of religious formation, not about the details of meditation methods. Credit the cynical remarks about westerners to this reviewer, as such crass judgements are avoided by this author. If you have some knowledge of the ancient Suttas and like to investigate the alienization of western "teachings", then I suggest "Reexamining the Jhanas". To pretend that we can know anything at all about the meditations and beliefs of the ancient Indians requires extensive exercises in picking and choosing the evidence.

What Ledi Sayadaw is to contemporary vipassana meditation movement is what T. Krishnamacharya is to modern hatha yoga. The book clarifies the roots and development of current "insight" meditation that has even been adopted in clinical contexts lately. Braun does an excellent job explaining how Ledi Sayadaw, as well as Mingun Sayadaw and his celebrated disciple Mahasi Sayadaw, modernized the ancient method of Buddhist meditation as the means of protecting Buddhism at the time Burma faced a political crisis with the British colonization. The book is full of new information, at least to me, and is written in a highly readable manner. I highly recommend it to any serious student in Buddhist meditation.

I was excited to read the article in Buddhadharma magazine about the book. The book itself is ok technically, but it is not as compelling or as inspirational as the article. Good for textbook purposes.

Thorough and insightful history of the development of modern insight meditation practice in Burma and its influence on Buddhist practice in the west.

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