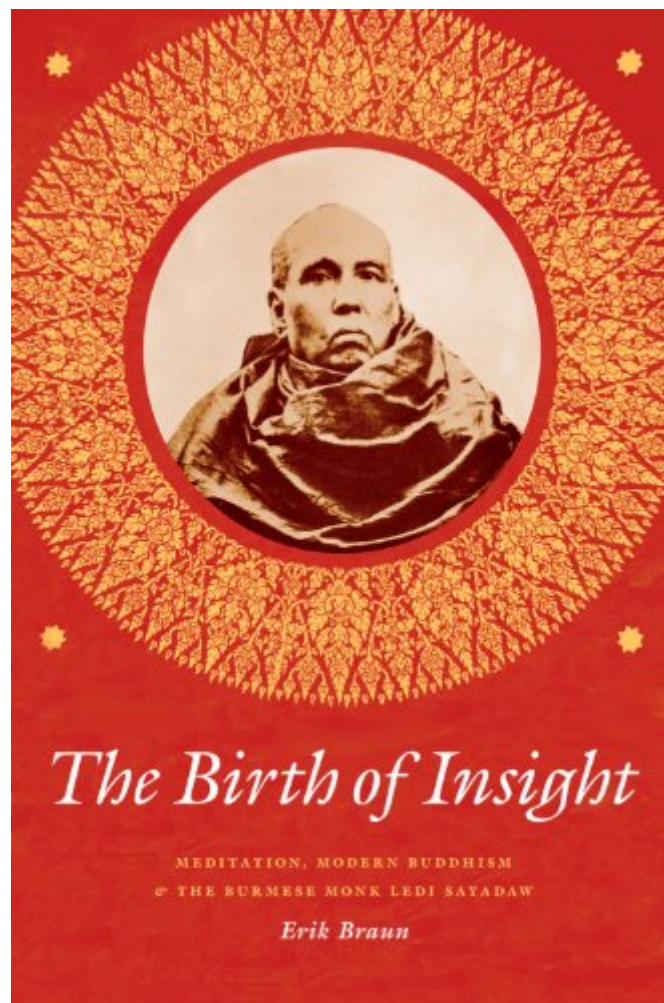


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The Birth Of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, And The Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw (Buddhism And Modernity)



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.

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Customer Reviews

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 Buddhistic 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.

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