

Borneo as a place than with Malaysia as a state and to consider Borneo rather than Malaysia their homeland' (p. 249). This observation, rather inconspicuous as it appears in the book's final chapter, seems to raise questions that ultimately refer us back to the central problems underlying the concept of the Sinophone: If locality ultimately outweighs the nation-state, how accurately can a label such as 'Sinophone *Malaysian*' characterise the literature under discussion here? The politics of sub-national and regional identities and their implications for our understanding of literary and cultural practice in the region are only beginning to come into the purview of Sinophone studies. These questions are only partly addressed here and go unanswered, but *Sinophone Malaysian literature* provides us with the much-needed basis for further explorations of the literary and cultural landscape of Southeast Asia. This insightful, detailed, and knowledgeable study will appeal to students and scholars of Chinese literature and culture, diasporic literature, and Southeast Asian studies.

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The birth of insight: Meditation, modern Buddhism, and the Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw

By ERIK BRAUN

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Erik Braun's *The birth of insight* is a masterful study of both the (pre)history of the *vipassana* insight meditation movement and the history of Buddhism in Burma (Myanmar) through the biography of Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923). It is the first serious study to explain the rise of *vipassana* in its historical context, that is, as a development within the orthodox Burmese tradition evolving during the period of British colonialism. It offers a clear and careful genealogy of what has become one of the most influential strands of Buddhist practice in Southeast Asia and around the world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In this, the book is of great value both for those interested in contemporary meditation movements and global Buddhism and for those seeking to understand Burmese history at the turn of the twentieth century.

This book should stand as a key text for scholars and students seeking to understand the past 200 years of Theravada Buddhism, together with texts like Anne Blackburn's *Locations of Buddhism* (2010) and Anne Hansen's *How to behave* (2007). However, I would argue that the book is important for scholars well beyond Buddhist Studies because it offers a brilliant model of how to write about religious innovation over time. The book serves as an exemplary history of religion by showing religious change embedded equally in textual–philosophical tradition and social

history. Braun marries these two exceptionally well in his writing, laying out the changes which Ledi Sayadaw initiated at each stage and demonstrating the logic of historical continuities and adaptations.

The book builds slowly and chronologically, working through the life of Ledi Sayadaw to explain how the colonial circumstances and his own interpretation of the Burmese scholastic tradition shaped the rise of lay meditation. The second chapter, on the seemingly dry and *recherché* subject of the controversy over Ledi Sayadaw's critique of a commentary of a summary of a set of texts on the canonical Abhidhamma, is a study in rethinking what texts and textual debates do in the world. In it, the reader comes to understand a bit of the Abhidhamma, how it operates and the goals of its classification system, but also why such dry and seemingly obscure texts mattered. This chapter is an excellent pedagogical tool for students of Theravada Buddhism as well, because after a careful discussion of the content of the debate, Braun leads the reader to the realisation that, like so much else in the history of Theravada reform, the content of the debate mattered almost not at all, but the heart of the intervention lies in the form and mastery over the form. In this and the next chapter, Braun explains why Abhidhamma was understood as the vanguard for the preservation of the Buddha's *sāsana*, which was felt to be slipping away under colonial rule, and how Ledi Sayadaw established himself as the scholastic master of this key text.

Chapters 4 and 5 explain how Ledi Sayadaw brought the preservation of the Abhidhamma to the masses, by translating the gist of this complex analytical system into a poem easily memorised by lay people and popularising Abhidhamma through lay associations. Braun explains how what would become the innovative lynchpin for much of 'modern' Buddhism in Southeast Asia — mass lay participation — had a very clear, orthodox cosmological origin. He demonstrates that the link between the textualisation and scholasticism of earlier Theravada reforms (see Anne Blackburn's *Buddhist learning and textual practice* and Michael Charney's *Powerful learning*) and the mass lay meditation movements of the mid to late twentieth century was the popularisation of a limited scholastic tradition for lay people.

Chapter 5 is the key chapter in the book, offering the synthesis of Ledi Sayadaw's innovations in his prescriptions for mass meditation. Braun's analysis of his texts on meditation exposes how Ledi Sayadaw operated within the tradition of textual orthodoxy, even as his method offered a radical innovation. He offered that practitioners could engage in insight meditation after only limited practice of concentration meditation, allowing for the famous possibility of realisation 'in this very life', whereas conventional wisdom presumed insight required extensive mastery of concentration, including *jhanic* states. In this, Ledi Sayadaw was only emphasising an alternative already available in the key orthodox text on the subject — innovation embedded in continuity, which becomes a theme in the book — but one that moved insight to the forefront of meditation and eventually to the most esteemed position in Buddhist practice in Southeast Asia. Braun rounds out this chapter with an argument about the nature of modernity, and approaches to religion in modernity. Relying on Charles Taylor he argues that in contrast to Western modernity, which created a background set of assumptions and an overarching potential for 'spiritual disenchantment', Ledi Sayadaw created the grounds for an interpretation of modernity in

Burma fundamentally rooted in a Buddhist Abhidhamma that held the potential for liberation.

The final chapter, which will be of particular interest to those engaged with the various lineages of contemporary vipassana practice in Southeast Asia and the United States, serves almost as postscript to the larger arc of the book, or perhaps as prelude to Braun's future work. It locates these traditions in relation to Ledi Sayadaw's work, helping the reader to see the continuities and even greater changes and discontinuities in the interpretations that have come to dominate Western understanding. This is particularly the case with the concept of mindfulness, defined by Ledi Sayadaw as 'the recollection of Buddhist truths combined with the awareness of immediate sense experience' in contrast to the practice of just 'base awareness' popularised in recent Western practices (p. 143).

I disagree with some of Braun's analysis of scholarship on religion and colonialism in the final chapter. Where he faults others for emphasising colonialism as a radical break and requiring that the local respond to the colonial, I would argue that the creation of a new set of underlying assumptions that constituted Ledi Sayadaw's Buddhist modernity came out of a synthetic interaction between pre-colonial Buddhist priorities and the disruptive conditions of British colonialism. While Braun's emphasis on continuity is particularly fruitful in this book, colonialism was not a radical rupture (even where it was locally perceived as such) and few scholars have seriously argued that it was, but instead, as this book demonstrates, it served as a catalyst for Burmese to rethink the basic categories that constructed the nature of their world. And while the focus of the book was on the man himself, I would also have liked to read more about the reception of Ledi Sayadaw's ideas among the Burmese laity. But both of these are minor points.

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.

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Global Filipinos: Migrants' lives in the virtual village

By DEIRDRE MCKAY

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In the early twenty-first century, Filipino migrants working overseas comprised the third-largest group of migrant labourers in the world. This global phenomenon has impacted the lives and livelihoods of Filipinos across the Philippine archipelago including indigenous villagers in rural areas in the northern Philippines. How do villagers, both those who migrate to work overseas and those who stay behind, view and interpret migration? How do villagers feel and think about themselves in the world? In