

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<http://journals.sfu.ca/cjbs/index.php/cjbs/index>

Number 12, 2017

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The Birth of Insight and “Crossing the Dharmascape”: Professor Erik Braun’s Visit to Toronto and Hamilton

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On January 26th and 27th, Professor Erik Braun visited the University of Toronto and McMaster University as a warmly welcomed Numata speaker, meeting with students, leading a reading group, and delivering a public lecture. In Toronto first, the Associate Professor from the University of Virginia led a reading group on the fifth and sixth chapters of his book, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (winner of a 2014 Toshihide Numata Book Prize in Buddhism, Center for Buddhist Studies, University of California, Berkeley). Professor Braun discussed how the manuscript originally arose from his PhD dissertation, motivated by the questions of why mass-meditation started first in Burma, and what was the role of the *abhidhamma* therein? The answers that Professor Braun found lay in the figure of Ledi Sayadaw, in his unique combination of so-called scholasticism and meditation training, in the foisting of a heavy burden upon the lay population, and in the memory-based *mātikā*-cization of the masses through printed handbooks and their memorization. After Professor Braun’s introduction of Ledi and the last two chapters of the book, the

reading group opened to questions from Professor Srilata Raman concerning the effect of removing the ethical basis from the practice of meditation, followed by a question from Professor Christoph Emmrich about the classification of *abhidhamma* as esoteric and advanced versus the profane and simple, emphasizing the longstanding use of the *Paṭṭhāna* in daily ritual context and lay practice in Burma/Myanmar. In his answers to these questions and more, Professor Braun stressed the importance of Ledi's turn to traditional doctrine and techniques in a new time and with new print technology. A prime example of this turn is Ledi's invocation of *sukkhavipassanā*, or "dry-insight" methods of meditation, sans deep absorptive states. The dry-method, explained Professor Braun, enabled access to enlightenment for the lay practitioner, but also thrust on him or her an enormous burden. Whether simple or not, ended Braun, the embodiment of the *abhidhamma* through the development of dry-insight intensified the day-to-day realm of lay life and Buddhist practice.

At McMaster on the second day, Braun delivered a public lecture titled "Crossing the Dharmascape," where he spoke about the "zones of awkward engagement" between Burmese monastic-meditation lineages, American practitioners, and the global audiences of what is now a major export of modern Myanmar: mass-meditation culture. Professor Braun's conceptual pivot point is the import of so-called mindfulness into the Anglosphere, the Pāli term *sati*, which has been variously defined, reformulated and refit for use in spiritual, clinical, or corporate settings. Braun mentioned, of course, the role of the founding figure Ledi Sayadaw, but he also notes the role of mass-meditation in the first Burmese independence government's nation-building project, then highlights the significance of the 1979 trip to America by Mahasi Sayadaw, a monk who was the emblem of Burmese meditation and a spiritual ambassador under both the U Nu and military governments. This trip and many others by Burmese monks built on the legacy of the Transcendentalist writers

and poets, the writings of D.T. Suzuki, the consumption of Japanese culture after World War II, as well as the early encounter of Theravāda Buddhism through the translations of the Pali Text Society. In the 60s and 70s, Burmese monks began residing and teaching in North America, and their followers still run camps and courses in increasing numbers today. An important point, maintained Braun, was the inherently moral quality of *sati* for the Theravāda, which is sometimes lost when *sati* is glossed, hypostatized, and commodified as “mindfulness” in a modern setting. Whatever the definition given, Braun concludes that mindfulness exists on a global “dharmascape” where the oft contradictory desires of unique Buddhist iterations meet, shape, and overturn one another. “Like modernity,” reminded Braun, “mindfulness is an unfinished project.”