

Toshihide Numata Book Prize in Buddhism  
Special Lecture at Ryukoku University

<b>Theme</b>	“The Many Lives of Insight: The Abhidhamma and Transformations in Theravada Meditative Practice, Past to Present.”
<b>Date</b>	June 5, 2015 15:00~16:30
<b>Place</b>	Ryukoku University, Omiya Campus, Seiwakan, third floor hall
<b>Presenter</b>	Dr. Erik C. Braun (Associate Professor, Oklahoma University)
<b>Facilitator</b>	NASU Eishō ( Professor, Ryukoku University )
<b>Sponsor</b>	Research Institute for Buddhist Culture, Ryukoku University
<b>Cosponsor</b>	Research Center for World Buddhist Cultures, Ryukoku University
<b>Supporter</b>	Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai (Society for the Promotional of Buddhism)

“Insight meditation” or “mindful meditation” currently attracts great attention from many Buddhists in various countries both in the East and West. Dr. Erik Braun, an expert of Buddhism in Myanmar, explains the relationship between Abhidhamma, one of the “three treasures,” and insight meditation, and between the ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ in contemporary Buddhism.

“Insight meditation” has a significant influence on the lives of many people. Prominent figures who largely contributed to the formation or reconstitution of this meditation technique are Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923) and Pa Auk Sayadaw (1934- ). These two Buddhist monks, born in Myanmar, skillfully combined the Abhidhamma with “insight meditation.” In other words, the Abhidhamma is regarded as the foundation of their mindful revolution.

The Abhidhamma consists of dividing the world into four different categories, of which there are 82 dhammas in total. The first category is 1 consciousness (citta), next is the 28 physical factors (rūpa), next is the 52 mental factors (cetasika), and finally the 1 dhamma of nibbāna / nirvāṇa / or awakening. Generally speaking, before Ledi, only a handful of elite Buddhist monks regarded the Abhidhamma as important. By means of his

extensive works, however, Ledi widely spread the Abhidhamma practice among the masses “like falling rain.” Ledi crucially connected the study of the Abhidhamma with group meditation.

His commentarial works on the Abhidhamma, which attempts to identify errors in other commentaries, caused a fierce controversy which Dr. Braun calls “the great war of commentaries.” Myanmar was a colony of Britain in those days, and many people there worried that Buddhism might disappear along with their country. Ledi’s critique of the other commentaries on the Abhidhamma, a work considered to be a vital component of Myanmar Buddhism, led to him being labeled a heretic and even anti-Buddhist. However, what is undeniable is the fact that his work led to a reviving interest in the Abhidhamma.

Ledi disseminated the method of meditation based on the study of the Abhidhamma. He also made a poem through which people in Myanmar could easily understand the essence of Abhidhamma. Ledi wrote many texts during his lifetime, focusing in detail the connection between academic study and practice. In addition, he frequently used the terms and concepts drawn from the Abhidhamma in order to explain his method of meditation. Specifically, he introduces a meditation technique in which the practitioner skips “samatha,” the practice of mental concentration of calming the mind, and goes straight to “vipassanā,” the insight into the true nature of reality. (Traditionally, a practitioner completes “samatha” before moving onto “vipassanā.”)

On the other hand, Pa Auk’s approach to meditation is distinctive for his emphasis on the practice of “jhānas,” that is, deep concentration. Ledi omitted such deep concentration in his method of meditation.

Pa Auk’s distinctive meditation technique also requires a practitioner to see his/her future lives. Many monks argued this practice to be unrealistic and beyond anyone’s mental capacity. Today, however, Pa Auk’s view that one should observe all future lives is explained by his students in expressions which are easy to understand and more acceptable.

Today, many American Buddhist teachers believe meditation to have psycho-therapeutic implications. Meditation is frequently presented in scientific, psychological, and neurological fields. Simply put, the secular mindful revolution is popular right now. The developments from Ledi and Pa Auk might contribute to the secularization of Buddhism or what is referred to as “post-Buddhism.” It is necessary for us to reconsider the relationship between Buddhism and secularism, and to explore Buddhism’s future trajectory.



Dr. Erik C. Braun (Associate Professor, Oklahoma University)

Research Center for World Buddhist Cultures, Ryukoku University,  
editor.