



THE TRANSMISSION AND GLOBALIZATION OF VIPASSANĀ MEDITATION FROM MYANMAR

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Abstract

This dissertation article studies the historical transmission and globalization of Vipassanā meditation beginning from the contribution and teaching of the Most Venerable Ledi Sayadaw in Myanmar, his teaching about Vipassanā meditation, which means insight or clear seeing, is an important practice in Theravāda Buddhism for understanding impermanence, suffering, and non-self. During the British colonial period in Myanmar, the most venerable Ledi Sayadaw worked to preserve Buddhist teachings and made meditation practice accessible not only to monks but also to laypeople. His teachings and writings inspired many important meditation teachers such as Saya Thetgyi, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, Sayagyi S. N. Goenka, and the Most Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw became the famous meditation teachers. Through their efforts, Vipassanā meditation spread from Myanmar to many countries around the world. Today, Vipassanā meditation is practiced widely for mindfulness, mental peace, stress reduction, improvement of awareness and spiritual development. This research dissertation study explains how Myanmar meditation practice became a global movement and continue to benefit modern society.

Keywords: *Vipassanā Meditation, Ledi Sayadaw, Theravāda Buddhism, Myanmar Meditation Tradition, Mindfulness, Globalization of Buddhism, Mahasi Sayadaw, S. N. Goenka*

Introduction

Vipassanā meditation is one of the most important meditation practices in Theravāda Buddhism. The meaning of “*Vipassanā*” means “insight” or “clear seeing” which, refers to the

practice of observing the true nature of body and mind. By this meditation, practitioners develop wisdom by understanding impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*).¹ The foundation of *Vipassanā* practice can be traced back to the teachings of the Buddha, especially in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*² after the enlightenment of the Buddha. Previously, for many centuries, meditation practice was mainly preserved in monasteries, however, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Myanmar became an important center for the revival and spread of *Vipassanā* meditation. Among the great meditation masters, Most Venerable Ledi Sayadaw³ played a very important role in preserving and transmitting *Vipassanā* meditation to both monks and laypeople, and his teachings later became influenced many famous teachers who spread *Vipassanā* throughout the world. This article studies the historical transmission and globalization of *Vipassanā* meditation beginning from the most venerable Ledi Sayadaw and explains how Myanmar meditation traditions became a worldwide movement.

The Life and Contribution of the Most Venerable Ledi Sayadaw

The famous meditation teacher, the most venerable Ledi Sayadaw was born in 1846 in Shwebo District, Myanmar, and he was one of the most learned monks of his time and became famous for his deep knowledge of the *Pāli* Buddhist Canon and meditation practice. During the British colonial period in Myanmar, Buddhism faced many challenges and difficulties, because of political and social changes. At that time, the famous Ledi Sayadaw believed that meditation and Buddhist education were necessary to preserve the Buddha's teaching.

Therefore, one of the greatest contributions of the prominent Ledi Sayadaw was making *Vipassanā* meditation accessible to the laypeople. Traditionally, meditation practice was especially practiced by the monks living in forests or meditation centers. But the most venerable Ledi Sayadaw taught that practices to the lay followers and means, it could also practice meditation in daily life and progress spiritually. This idea became very important in modern Theravāda Buddhism. The Most Venerable Ledi Sayadaw wrote many famous Buddhist books and manuals in simple Burmese language so ordinary people could understand Buddhist

¹ *Anicca* (impermanence): the doctrine that all conditioned things are constantly changing and unstable.

Dukkha (suffering): the unsatisfactory nature of existence, including pain, dissatisfaction, and suffering.

Anattā (non-self): the teaching that there is no permanent, unchanging self or soul in living beings. <https://so13.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/Buddho/article/view/3196>

² *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*: a discourse found in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN 10) that explains the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as the direct path to purification, insight, and liberation.

Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta: an expanded version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* found in the *Dīgha Nikāya* (DN 22), with a more detailed explanation of the Four Noble Truths.

³ The Most Venerable Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923) was an influential Theravada Buddhist monk in Myanmar (Burma), recognized as a master of both scriptural knowledge (*Abhidhamma*) and *Vipassanā* meditation.

teachings easily. His writings explained mainly about the morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) in practical ways. According to Erik Braun, the most venerable Ledi Sayadaw helped create a “mass meditation movement” in Myanmar by encouraging meditation among the public (Braun 5).

Transmission of Vipassanā in Myanmar

The transmission of *Vipassanā* meditation from the most senior Ledi Sayadaw continued through his disciples and laypersons, among that, one of his important lay disciples was Saya Thetgyi,⁴ who became a well-known meditation teacher. Saya Thetgyi taught many lay practitioners and continued the meditation lineage of Ledi Sayadaw. Later, Sayagyi U Ba Khin⁵ became one of the most influential meditation teachers in Myanmar, and Sayagyi U Ba Khin combined meditation practice in the daily life and taught many international followers. He especially emphasized mindfulness, awareness of breathing, and observation of bodily sensations.

Among Sayagyi U Ba Khin’s students, Sayagyi S. N. Goenka⁶ became especially important for the global spread of *Vipassanā* meditation. Sayagyi Goenka established many meditation centers around the world and especially introduced the ten-day *Vipassanā* meditation courses for people of different religions and cultures, because his teaching method emphasized universal human values rather than sectarian identity. Another important meditation teacher in Myanmar was one of the famous Senior monks, named the most venerable Mahasi Sayadaw,⁷ who developed the Mahasi method of mindfulness meditation, and his meditation method became very popular internationally and influenced meditation centers in Asia, Europe, and America.

Globalization of Vipassanā Meditation

The starting point of globalization of *Vipassanā* meditation became especially strong during the twentieth century at the end of British administration. Many Western travelers,

⁴ Saya Thetgyi (1873–1945) was a renowned Burmese lay meditation master and a key figure in the lineage of Vipassana meditation. As the first prominent lay teacher of Vipassana since the time of the Buddha, he was appointed by the famous Ledi Sayadaw to teach meditation to others

⁵ Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899–1971) was a renowned Burmese meditation master and the first Accountant General of the Union of Burma. As a highly respected lay teacher ("Sayagyi" meaning "great teacher"), he founded the International Meditation Centre (IMC) in Yangon and was a leading 20th-century authority on Vipassana meditation, particularly influential for teaching both Burmese and Western students

⁶ Sayagyi S. N. Goenka (1924–2013) was a renowned teacher of Vipassana meditation who played a key role in making this ancient, non-sectarian technique accessible to people worldwide. Born in Burma to an Indian family, he was a student of Sayagyi U Ba Khin and began teaching in India in 1969

⁷ Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982) was a renowned Burmese Theravada Buddhist monk and meditation master who played a crucial role in reviving Vipassana (insight) meditation in the 20th century. He is best known for teaching a structured mindfulness method focusing on observing the rising and falling of the abdomen

scholars, and spiritual seekers came to Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka to study and practice meditation. They later introduced these practices to Europe, North America, some western countries and other regions. Some point and factors supported for the well-known of globalization of *Vipassanā* meditation practice. The teaching method was simple and practical, because that *Vipassana* meditation was presented as a universal practice for developing peace, awareness and mindfulness.

Secondly, meditation teachers translated Buddhist teachings into modern languages and explained them in understandable ways, not only for the monks and nuns, but also for the lay devotees also. Thirdly, because of the international meditation centers and retreat programs, they provided systematic training for practitioners. Therefore, in present days, *Vipassanā* meditation is practiced in many countries around the world, and even the non-Buddhist people can practice. Meditation centers based on the traditions, methods and meditation centers of Goenka, Mahasi Sayadaw, and Pa-Auk Sayadaw⁸ can be found in Asia, Europe, Australia, and America. Furthermore, many universities and scientific researchers also study mindfulness and meditation for mental health, stress management and emotional well-being.

The global spread of *Vipassanā* has also influenced modern mindfulness movements, even some modern mindfulness programs are presented in secular forms, many of their foundations come from traditional Buddhist meditation practices, which preserved in Myanmar and other Theravāda countries.

Importance of Vipassanā in Modern Society

In the contemporary era, *Vipassanā* meditation has become important in modern society because it helps people reduce stress, anxiety, anger, hatred and reduce for mental suffering. Many people search for peace but most of them are not found it, because peace comes from inner peace and emotional balance from individually. Only *Vipassanā* teaches mindfulness, patience, loving-kindness, cultivating inner peace and wisdom. The practice of *Vipassana* also supports moral conduct, aware on social conduct and improve social harmony. By observing one's own mind carefully with awareness, people know to avoid hatred, greed, and delusion. Therefore, *Vipassanā* is not just a meditation technique for such kinds of religions, but also a way of life based on ethical conduct and wisdom. The contribution of Myanmar meditation masters, especially started from the most venerable Ledi Sayadaw, its remains very significant

⁸ The Pa-Auk Sayadaw (Ven. Bhaddanta Āciṇṇa) is a renowned Burmese Theravāda monk and meditation master known for establishing a strict, Pali Canon-based meditation system focusing on deep concentration (*samatha*) before insight (*vipassanā*).
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today, and without their efforts, the ancient insight meditation tradition might not have become a worldwide spiritual movement.

Conclusion

The historical transmission and globalization of *Vipassanā* meditation began strongly with the efforts of Most Ven. Ledi Sayadaw in Myanmar, because, he preserved *Vipassana* Buddhist meditation during a difficult historical period and opened meditation practice to laypeople. Through his disciples' monks and lay persons, later famous teachers such as Saya Thetgyi, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, Sayagyi S. N. Goenka, and the most venerable Mahasi Sayadaw, that *Vipassanā* meditation practice spread across the world. Today, millions of people practice *Vipassanā* meditation for spiritual development, mindfulness, awareness and mental peace. The globalization of *Vipassanā* shows that, how the ancient teachings of the Buddha continue to benefit modern society even over 2600 years. The great contribution of the most venerable Ledi Sayadaw remains one of the most important chapters in the modern history of Theravāda Buddhism and meditation practice.

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