



Historical Evolution of Vipassana Meditation Traditions in Myanmar Buddhism

Ven. Silacari (Myanmar)

Ph.D. Scholar

Lumbini Buddhist University, Lumbini, Nepal

masilacari285@gmail.com

Abstract

*Vipassanā*¹ meditation is central to modern Theravāda Buddhism, especially in Myanmar has been one of the most influential places in its recent development and international transmission. Although previous studies have examined individual teachers, specific techniques, or modern mindfulness, very few studies connect the historical growth of Myanmar *Vipassanā* with a structured comparison of its major practice systems. This article study therefore examines how *Vipassanā* traditions developed in Myanmar, from canonical and commentarial foundations into organized systems for monastic and lay practice. This article uses a qualitative historical-textual review of selected Pāli discourses, the *Visuddhimagga*,² manuals by leading Myanmar teachers, and modern scholarship on Burmese Buddhism. The materials are compared according to four themes: the principal meditation object, the role and meaning of *Samatha*,³ the interpretive framework used to generate insight, and the method of institutional transmission. The study finds that the major Myanmar traditions share the ethical

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- 1 *Vipassanā* means “insight meditation” or “clear seeing.” It is a Buddhist meditation practice that develops wisdom (*paññā*) by directly observing physical and mental phenomena as impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*), leading toward liberation from suffering and the realization of Nibbāna.
- 2 *Visuddhimagga* (“The Path of Purification”) is an influential fifth-century Theravāda Buddhist commentary composed by the scholar-monk Buddhaghosa in Sri Lanka. It systematically explains Buddhist teachings and practices under three main divisions: morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*), leading toward purification and the attainment of Nibbāna.
- 3 *Samatha* means “calm” or “tranquillity meditation.” It is a Buddhist practice that develops mental peace, concentration (*samādhi*), and one-pointedness by focusing the mind steadily on a chosen meditation object. It suppresses the mental hindrances and prepares the mind for the development of insight (*vipassanā*).

and liberative framework of Theravāda Buddhism but differ significantly in technique and pedagogy. The Ledi-U Ba Khin lineage⁴, they specialized to the breath and bodily sensation; the *Mahāsi* method⁵ develops continuous noting and momentary concentration; the Mogok tradition interprets experience through dependent origination; and the Pa-Auk system⁶ gives an extensive preparatory role to absorption concentration. These types of method differences show creative continuity rather than doctrinal fragmentation, however, Myanmar's distinctive contribution was to connect textual learning, disciplined practice, lay followers, retreat organization, and transnational teaching networks. This article concludes that the global success of Myanmar *Vipassanā* practices arose not from one uniform technique but from several carefully systematized paths directed toward insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self.

Keywords: Vipassanā meditation; Myanmar Buddhism; Theravāda Buddhism; Ledi Sayadaw; Mahāsi Sayadaw

Introduction

The practice of Meditation occupies a central place in Buddhist training because it turns doctrine into a practical way of transforming conduct, mind, and understanding, especially in Theravāda Buddhism,⁷ the path is commonly organized as the threefold training in morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*)⁸. About *Vipassanā*, it usually translated as “insight,” belongs especially to the development of wisdom, but it is not merely quietness, relaxation, or attention in a general sense. Its specific purpose is to know conditioned experience as impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and without a permanent self (*anattā*)⁹, because this knowledge weakens attachment and supports progress toward *Nibbāna*¹⁰.

Myanmar has taken an important role in the modern history of this practice, and by the late nineteenth

- 4 The Ledi-U Ba Khin lineage refers to a modern Myanmar tradition of *Vipassanā* meditation transmitted from Ledi Sayadaw through Saya Thetgyi to Sayagyi U Ba Khin. It emphasizes the practical observation of bodily sensations to understand impermanence (*anicca*) and develop insight. This lineage later became internationally known through U Ba Khin's students, especially S. N. Goenka.
- 5 The Mahāsi method is a Myanmar tradition of *Vipassanā* meditation developed and popularized by Mahāsi Sayadaw (1904–1982). It emphasizes continuous mindfulness of present physical and mental processes, especially noting the rising and falling movements of the abdomen. Practitioners mentally note experiences such as “walking,” “sitting,” “thinking,” and “feeling” to understand impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*).
- 6 The Pa-Auk system is a Myanmar meditation tradition taught by Pa-Auk Sayadaw. It emphasizes the systematic development of tranquillity meditation (*samatha*), particularly mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*), to attain deep concentration (*jhāna*). Practitioners then use this concentrated mind to develop insight (*vipassanā*) by examining materiality and mentality (*rūpa* and *nāma*), dependent origination, and the three characteristics of existence.
- 7 Theravāda Buddhism (“Doctrine of the Elders”) is the oldest surviving Buddhist tradition, based primarily on the Pāli Tipiṭaka. It emphasizes ethical conduct (*sīla*), mental concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) as the path to liberation from suffering and the realization of Nibbāna. It is widely practised in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.
- 8 *Sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* are the threefold training in Buddhism. *Sīla* means moral conduct or ethical discipline; *samādhi* means mental concentration or collectedness; and *paññā* means wisdom or insight into the true nature of reality. Together, they form the path of practice leading to liberation from suffering and the realization of Nibbāna.
- 9 *Anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* are the three characteristics of conditioned existence in Buddhism. *Anicca* means impermanence—all conditioned things continually arise and pass away. *Dukkha* means suffering, unsatisfactoriness, or the inability of changing phenomena to provide lasting happiness. *Anattā* means non-self—the absence of any permanent, independent, or unchanging self in physical and mental phenomena.
- 10 Nibbāna is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. It means the complete cessation of suffering and liberation from the cycle of birth and death (*samsāra*) through the eradication of greed, hatred, and delusion. It is the supreme state of peace and freedom

and twentieth centuries, Burmese (Myanmar) scholar-monks and lay teachers were translating complex canonical and commentarial teachings into systematic courses that could be followed by people outside a lifelong monastic setting. The Most Venerable Ledi Sayadaw¹¹ made *Abhidhamma* and insight teachings more widely available through manuals, preaching, and lay study associations. His influence continued through lay teachers such as Saya Thetgyi and U Ba Khin¹² and later through S. N. Goenka¹³. In a different network, from them, the most venerable Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw U Nārada and Mahāsi Sayadaw¹⁴ developed and institutionalized a method of continuous mindfulness and mental noting. Venerable Mogok Sayadaw¹⁵ emphasized direct understanding of dependent origination, while¹⁶ organized a detailed path in which deep concentration supports analytical insight, and these systems now influence practitioners across Asia, Europe, North America, and other regions.

This meditation history of Myanmar should not be presented as though one unchanged technique passed continuously from the Buddha to the present, and such a claim confuses religious lineage narratives with documented history. The canonical purpose of insight has remained authoritative, but the forms of teaching, the social position of the laity, the duration of retreats, the use of meditation reports, and the organization of centres have changed. Erik Braun's study of Ledi Sayadaw shows how modern mass meditation grew from a combination of traditional Burmese concerns, textual learning, colonial disruption, print culture, and the wish to preserve the Buddha's dispensation, moreover, Ingrid Jordt demonstrates that post-independence lay meditation became a broad social movement, not simply a private spiritual activity. Robert Sharf likewise warns scholars not to detach "meditative experience" from the institutions and interpretive traditions that give it meaning (Braun; Jordt; Sharf 228–35).

The central problem of this article is therefore not whether Myanmar preserved *Vipassanā* in a completely unchanged form. It asks how several Myanmar traditions maintained a shared Theravāda goal while constructing different practical routes to insight. The article argues that their historical importance

- 11 The Most Venerable Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923), born U Ñānadhaja, was an eminent Myanmar Theravāda Buddhist monk, scholar, and meditation master. He played an important role in making *Vipassanā* meditation and Buddhist teachings accessible to both monastics and laypeople. His teachings influenced the modern Ledi–Saya Thetgyi–U Ba Khin–S. N. Goenka meditation lineage.
- 12 Saya Thetgyi and Sayagyi U Ba Khin were influential Myanmar lay teachers in the modern *Vipassanā* tradition. Saya Thetgyi (1873–1945), a disciple of Ledi Sayadaw, helped transmit meditation practice from the monastic community to laypeople. Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899–1971), his disciple, further systematized and taught this method to both Myanmar and international practitioners, contributing significantly to the worldwide spread of *Vipassanā* meditation.
- 13 S. N. Goenka (1924–2013) was a Myanmar-born Indian teacher of *Vipassanā* meditation and a disciple of Sayagyi U Ba Khin. He spread the Ledi–U Ba Khin meditation tradition internationally through ten-day residential courses that emphasize ethical conduct (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and insight (*paññā*), especially the observation of bodily sensations with equanimity.
- 14 Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw U Nārada and Mahāsi Sayadaw were influential Myanmar *Vipassanā* meditation masters. Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw U Nārada (1868–1955) developed a practical insight-meditation method based on continuous mindfulness and mental noting. His disciple, Mahāsi Sayadaw (1904–1982), systematized and widely taught this method, especially observation of the abdomen's rising and falling movements, helping spread the Mahāsi meditation tradition throughout Myanmar and internationally.
- 15 Venerable Mogok Sayadaw (1899–1962) was a renowned Myanmar Theravāda monk and *Vipassanā* meditation master who emphasized dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and insight into impermanence (*anicca*) as the path to Nibbāna.
- 16 Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw (born 1934), also known as Venerable Ācīṇṇa, is a renowned Myanmar Theravāda monk and meditation master. He teaches the systematic development of tranquillity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) meditation, particularly through mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*) and deep concentration (*jhāna*), as presented in the *Visuddhimagga*.

lies in “creative continuity”: canonical and commentarial frameworks were retained, but teaching methods were selected, simplified, sequenced, and institutionalized for new groups of practitioners. This approach makes it possible to respect the traditions’ claims without treating religious memory as identical to critical history.

Modern scholarship provides several strong but partly separate accounts of Burmese meditation, and Braun’s *The Birth of Insight* places Ledi Sayadaw at the centre of the transformation of insight meditation into a widespread lay practice. He expresses that Ledi’s importance was not limited to meditation instructions, and Ledi joined Abhidhamma learning, ethical urgency, vernacular explanation, and the belief that the *sāsana* needed protection. This study corrects the simple view that Burmese meditation modernized only because of Western influence; it also identifies important developments within Burmese Buddhist culture itself.

Jordt states that, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement* examines a later stage in which meditation centres, lay practitioners, political authority, and ideas of religious power became closely related. Her fieldwork demonstrates that *Vipassanā* in Myanmar is both an individual discipline and a social institution. The ability of lay people to claim direct knowledge through meditation changed established relationships among the state, the *Saṅgha*, and the public. Patrick Pranke broadens this picture by comparing the modern *Vipassanā* movement with Burmese *weikza-lam* traditions, and his work shows that Burmese Buddhist practice has never consisted of a single path or a simple opposition between “pure meditation” and “popular religion” (Pranke 453–88).

Textual scholars provide the doctrinal foundation for assessing these historical systems. Bhikkhu Anālayo’s study of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*¹⁷ explains mindfulness of body, feelings, mind, and mental objects as an integrated path rather than a collection of unrelated exercises, and Venerable Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* states the classical commentarial organization of morality, concentration, purification, and insight knowledge. The manuals of Ledi Sayadaw, Mahāsi Sayadaw, and Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw show how modern Myanmar teachers interpret and apply these inherited frameworks.

Comparative scholarship is more limited. Winston King examined Burmese approaches to tranquillity and insight, while Sharf analysed modern claims that meditation provides a direct, universal experience independent of ritual or doctrine. More recently, Otávio Vieira compared the relationship between *samatha* and *vipassanā* in the methods of Goenka, Mahāsi, Mogok, and Pa-Auk. Vieira identifies two broad patterns: systems that use a short preparatory concentration before insight and systems that require a much deeper development of absorption (186–212). This comparison is valuable, but a broader historical explanation is still needed to connect doctrinal choice with pedagogy, lay participation, institutions, and global transmission.

The research gap addressed here has three parts, and firstly, many practice manuals explain what a meditator should do but do not critically explain why modern Myanmar systems developed different sequences. Secondly, historical studies often concentrate on one teacher or one political period,

17 *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (“Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness”) is a key Buddhist teaching on cultivating mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind, and mental phenomena as a direct path to purification and liberation from suffering.

making it difficult to see the shared structure and real diversity of the traditions. Thirdly, popular accounts frequently claim an unchanged ancient lineage or describe *Vipassanā* mainly through health benefits. Both approaches weaken academic analysis: the first exceeds the historical evidence, and the second removes the practice from its ethical and liberative context, therefore, this article responds by comparing four influential practice networks within a common historical and doctrinal framework. The paper aims to examine the historical evolution and comparative features of major Vipassanā traditions in Myanmar Buddhism.

This article uses a qualitative historical-textual review. It does not claim to report interviews, participant observation, clinical outcomes, or new archaeological data. The primary materials are selected for their direct relevance to doctrine and practice: the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*;¹⁸ Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*; Ledi Sayadaw's *Vipassanā Dīpanī*; Mahāsi Sayadaw's *Manual of Insight*; and Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw's *Knowing and Seeing*. These works represent the canonical-commentarial foundation and influential Myanmar interpretations of that foundation.

Secondary sources were selected according to three criteria: recognized academic publication, direct attention to Burmese Buddhism or modern Vipassanā, and usefulness for historical or comparative interpretation. The core studies are works by Braun, Jordt, King, Pranke, Sharf, and Vieira. Instead of treating every statement in a teacher's manual as a neutral historical fact, the analysis distinguishes three kinds of evidence: normative texts that state how practice should be understood; historical scholarship that reconstructs institutions and transmission; and practice manuals that organize a specific pedagogical method.

The sources were read comparatively under four analytical themes: (1) the principal meditation object or entry practice; (2) the depth and function of *samatha* before insight; (3) the doctrinal framework through which experience is interpreted; and (4) the institutional form used to transmit the method. This procedure makes the research process explicit and prevents the methodology from becoming a list of possible approaches. It also limits the scope of the conclusion.¹⁹ The article compares documented teachings and institutions; it does not judge the spiritual attainments of individual teachers or claim that one method is superior.

Doctrinal Foundations of Vipassanā

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* provides one of the most important textual foundations for modern Vipassanā. It organizes practice as contemplation of body (*kāya*), feelings (*vedanā*), mind (*citta*), and mental objects or principles (*dhammā*).²⁰ The repeated instruction is to remain ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful while overcoming desire and distress concerning the world (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, MN 10). The four foundations are not four isolated techniques. Together they train the practitioner to observe experience as a conditioned process rather than as "I" or "mine" (Anālayo).

Theravāda sources also distinguish and connect tranquillity and insight. *Samatha* steadies and unifies

18 Majjhima Nikāya ("Collection of Middle-Length Discourses") is the second collection of the *Sutta Piṭaka* in the Pāli Canon, comprising 152 discourses attributed mainly to the Buddha.

19 <https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/jiabs/article/view/9290/3151>

20 [https://grokipedia.com/page/mindfulness_with_breathing_a_manual_for_serious_beginners_\(book\)](https://grokipedia.com/page/mindfulness_with_breathing_a_manual_for_serious_beginners_(book))

the mind; *vipassanā* knows the characteristics of conditioned phenomena. In practice, the relationship is flexible. Some meditators develop absorption concentration before insight. Others develop insight with a level of momentary concentration that becomes strong through continuous mindfulness. The *Visuddhimagga* systematizes concentration subjects, the purifications, the analysis of mentality and materiality, conditionality, and progressive insight knowledge (Buddhaghosa XVIII–XXI). Modern Myanmar systems draw from this common map but give different weight to its parts.

All four traditions examined here also place *sīla* before intensive meditation. Ethical restraint protects the mind from remorse and gives practice a direction beyond private well-being. This point is important because modern discussions sometimes present mindfulness as an independent mental technology. Myanmar manuals generally do not make that separation. Even when instruction is simplified for lay people, morality, refuge in the Triple Gem, confidence in the Dhamma, and the aim of liberation remain part of the practice. The methods differ mainly in how attention and concentration are trained and how impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, non-self, and conditionality are recognized.

Historical Evolution in Myanmar

From Textual Authority to a Modern Lay Movement

Meditation existed within Burmese monastic and textual culture before the colonial period, but the scale and organization of modern Vipassanā were new. British rule ended the traditional relationship between kingship and the Saṅgha and created anxiety about the decline of the Buddha's dispensation. Print technology, wider literacy, lay associations, and new forms of public teaching also created opportunities. Meditation became one way of protecting the *sāsana*: ordinary Buddhists could study Abhidhamma, observe moral discipline, and personally verify the Dhamma.

Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923) was decisive in this transformation. He was a respected scholar of Pāli and Abhidhamma, yet he wrote many explanatory manuals in Burmese and supported lay learning. Braun describes him not as an inventor who rejected tradition but as an “improviser” who selected and reorganized traditional resources for urgent historical needs. Ledi's teaching linked doctrinal analysis with the possibility of insight “in this very life.” This connection gave lay practice intellectual authority and weakened the assumption that advanced meditation belonged only to forest monks or rare specialists.

Ledi's influence moved through both monastic and lay networks. Saya Thetgyi became an important lay teacher, and U Ba Khin later combined a demanding career in public service with meditation teaching. This lineage demonstrates a major historical change: a householder could receive, master, and transmit a disciplined path without claiming monastic status. U Ba Khin's teaching later reached S. N. Goenka, who established standardized residential courses outside Myanmar. The portability of a fixed course schedule, repeated instructions, and trained assistant teachers was an important reason for the lineage's global expansion.

Post-Independence Institutionalization

The period around independence in 1948 created another stage of growth. Prime Minister U Nu and lay Buddhist organizations supported projects intended to strengthen the *sāsana*. Mahāsi Sayadaw was invited to Yangon to teach at the newly established Mahāsi Sāsana Yeiktha. The centre developed a structured retreat environment with moral precepts, alternating sitting and walking meditation, continuous mindfulness, teacher interviews, and a clear vocabulary for reporting experience. These features made the method teachable to large numbers of people while maintaining monastic supervision.

Mahāsi Sayadaw's importance was also scholarly. He participated prominently in the Sixth Buddhist Council and produced extensive Burmese explanations of doctrine and practice. His system therefore should not be described as “technique without texts.” It is a practical interpretation of the Pāli discourses, Abhidhamma, and commentaries. The simplicity of beginning with the rising and falling of the abdomen does not imply a simple theory. The method uses continuous noting to develop momentary concentration, distinguish mental and physical processes, observe conditionality, and mature through the insight knowledges described in Theravāda tradition (Mahāsi Sayadaw).

Jordt's research shows that the meditation-centre movement also created a “new laity.” Lay meditators did more than support monks through donations. They undertook intensive discipline and claimed experiential understanding of Buddhist truth. At the same time, their authority remained connected to the Saṅgha, sacred texts, and institutions. This combination of expanded participation and retained monastic legitimacy became a central feature of Myanmar Vipassanā.

Diversification and International Transmission

The twentieth century did not produce one national method. Webu Sayadaw emphasized moral purity, continuity of effort, and mindfulness of breathing. Mogok Sayadaw taught insight through close attention to feeling, mind, and the process of dependent origination. Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw developed an extensive system of tranquillity and insight based strongly on the *Visuddhimagga*. Mahāsi's disciples, including U Paṇḍita and other teachers, carried the noting method to different Asian and Western communities. U Ba Khin's students established several international lines, of which Goenka's became the largest standardized retreat network.

Global transmission required translation and selection. Instructions had to be given in new languages, retreats had to fit modern schedules, and teachers had to decide how much ritual, Abhidhamma, and devotional practice to retain. Sharf cautions that claims of a completely culture-free “pure experience” can hide these interpretive choices (228–83). The international success of Myanmar *Vipassanā* is therefore not evidence that culture disappeared. It shows that Burmese teachers created forms that could cross cultural boundaries while continuing to claim canonical legitimacy.

Comparative Analysis of Major Traditions

The traditions share a common ethical foundation and goal, but their practical diversity is substantial. The following comparison summarizes the most important differences.

Tradition or Network	Main Entry Practice	Role of <i>Samatha</i>	Interpretive Emphasis	Typical Transmission Form
Ledi–Saya Thetgyi–U Ba Khin–Goenka	Mindfulness of breathing followed by systematic observation of bodily sensation	Short preparatory concentration stabilizes attention before insight	Direct observation of impermanence in bodily and mental experience	Standardized residential courses; strong lay-teacher network
Mahāsi	Observation of abdominal movement and mental noting of all prominent phenomena	Momentary concentration develops within continuous insight practice	Mentality and materiality, conditionality, and progressive insight knowledge	Meditation centres, alternating sitting and walking, regular teacher interviews
Mogok	Mindfulness of feeling and mind within the cycle of dependent origination	Preparatory calm is useful but not normally developed into prolonged absorption	Arising and cessation, dependent origination, and interruption of the cycle of suffering	Dhamma explanation joined closely with guided contemplation
Pa-Auk	Mindfulness of breathing or another classical concentration subject	Strong absorption concentration is normally developed before detailed insight	Analysis of mentality-materiality, conditionality, and the three characteristics	Long-term residential training with individualized progress through a detailed curriculum

Sources: Braun; Mahāsi Sayadaw; Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw; Vieira.

The Ledi–U Ba Khin Lineage

The Ledi-related lineage is historically important because it connects scholarly monastic reform with lay transmission. Ledi’s writings explain insight through categories such as the aggregates, sense bases, elements, truths, and conditional relations. The later U Ba Khin–Goenka method gives less classroom time to this full scholastic structure, but it preserves a disciplined sequence. Practitioners first stabilize attention with natural breathing and then observe bodily sensations with equanimity. Sensations become a practical field in which arising and passing can be known directly.

The strength of this system is standardization. A residential timetable limits distraction, noble silence supports continuity, and repeated instructions reduce dependence on individual improvisation (Goenka). Standardization also made international expansion possible. However, scholarly analysis should distinguish Ledi’s broad intellectual programme from every later technique attributed to his lineage. Braun’s work supports continuity of influence, not the claim that each later course format was taught in exactly the same form by Ledi or by earlier generations (Ledi Sayadaw).

The Mahāsi Tradition

The Mahāsi method begins from whatever phenomenon is most clearly present. The abdominal movement is commonly used as an initial object because it is easy to observe, but it is not treated

as the only proper object. When hearing, pain, intention, thought, emotion, or movement becomes prominent, the meditator notes it and returns to the primary object when it passes. Walking meditation and mindfulness of ordinary activities prevent long gaps in awareness.

Mahāsi's distinctive contribution is the systematic use of mental noting together with momentary concentration. Noting is a temporary support for accurate recognition, not an exercise in discursive thinking. As continuity strengthens, the meditator distinguishes the knowing mind from its object and sees both as changing processes. The method is sometimes called “dry insight” because it does not require prior mastery of absorption. Yet it does not reject concentration. It argues that continuous attention produces a concentration adequate for insight (Mahāsi Sayadaw; Vieira 186–212).

The institutional setting is equally important. Short instructions are supported by intensive schedules and personal interviews. A teacher can correct misunderstanding and assess whether a meditator is observing present experience or merely repeating labels. This relationship between simple entry instruction and expert supervision helps explain why the method became influential in Myanmar and abroad.

The Mogok Tradition

Mogok Sayadaw's approach gives unusual prominence to dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*)²¹. The practitioner learns to identify the immediate arising of feeling, craving, and attachment and to interrupt the habitual movement from experience to suffering. Contemplation of impermanence is therefore joined to a causal explanation: phenomena do not only disappear; they arise because of conditions and cease when those conditions change.

In comparison with Mahāsi, the Mogok tradition often gives a larger role to explanatory Dhamma talks that prepare the meditator to interpret experience correctly. Unlike Pa-Auk, it does not normally require long preliminary absorption. Vieira describes Mogok and Goenka as giving priority to insight after limited preparatory tranquillity, although their objects and explanatory frameworks differ (186–212). Thus, diversity among Myanmar traditions concerns both bodily technique and the conceptual grammar that turns observation into wisdom.

The Pa-Auk Tradition

Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw's system represents the most concentration-intensive approach in this comparison. Practitioners commonly begin with mindfulness of breathing and may develop the four absorptions. They can also train in other concentration subjects described in the *Visuddhimagga*. After the mind becomes bright, stable, and workable, the meditator proceeds to detailed discernment of materiality and mentality, conditional relations, past and present causes, and the three characteristics (Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw).

This method challenges the idea that modern *Vipassanā* always means “bare attention” without deep concentration. Its long curriculum, technical vocabulary, and reliance on commentarial analysis

21 *Paṭiccasamuppāda* (“dependent origination”) is the Buddhist teaching that all physical and mental phenomena arise and cease according to causes and conditions; it explains the conditioned origin and cessation of suffering.

preserve a strong scholastic-practical relationship. It is less easily reduced to a short universal course, but international monasteries and translated manuals have nevertheless made it transnational. The Pa-Auk case confirms the central argument of this article: Myanmar's global contribution consists of several systems, not one uniform national technique.

Findings and Discussion

The first finding is that unity among Myanmar *Vipassanā* traditions lies mainly in ethical purpose and liberative interpretation, not in a single meditation object. All require moral discipline, sustained attention, and the cultivation of wisdom. All interpret insight through impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, non-self, and conditionality. The object may be breath, abdominal movement, bodily sensation, feeling, mind, or analytically discerned mentality and materiality. The shared question is whether observation reduces attachment and leads to knowledge consistent with the Dhamma.

Second, the differences can be explained through four variables: entry object, concentration threshold, interpretive grammar, and organizational format. The Mahāsi and Pa-Auk traditions differ strongly in the concentration threshold expected before detailed insight. The U Ba Khin–Goenka and Mogok traditions both use preparatory calm, yet one emphasizes systematic bodily sensation while the other foregrounds dependent origination. These are structured doctrinal and pedagogical choices, not random variations.

Third, modern Myanmar *Vipassanā* expanded through the democratization of serious practice. “Democratization” does not mean the removal of the Saṅgha or the denial of textual authority. It means that lay people, including women and people with family or professional responsibilities, received organized opportunities for intensive meditation. Ledi's vernacular manuals, U Ba Khin's lay teaching, Mahāsi's centre system, and the multiplication of retreat centres all contributed to this development. Jordt's analysis shows that lay meditation also changed ideas of religious agency and power.

Fourth, textual learning and practical simplification supported each other. Ledi and Mahāsi were not anti-intellectual reformers; both were respected scholars. Their innovation was to connect complex maps of mind and liberation with practices that could begin immediately. Pa-Auk retained a longer scholastic-practical curriculum, while Goenka's network reduced the amount of technical explanation in introductory courses. Each system made a different judgment about what a beginner needed, but none can be understood apart from Theravāda textual categories.

Fifth, international transmission depended on institutional design. A method spreads when it can train teachers, translate instructions, organize time, and guide large numbers of practitioners without losing its core discipline. The Goenka network achieved this through standardized courses; the Mahāsi tradition through centres, interviews, and successor teachers; and the Pa-Auk system through monasteries and long-term curricula. Myanmar's global influence therefore resulted from organization as well as spiritual teaching.

These findings qualify two common claims. The statement that Myanmar preserved one “unchanged” *Vipassanā* technique is historically too simple.²² The opposite statement—that modern systems are

22 This means that Myanmar did not preserve only one fixed and completely unchanged *Vipassanā* technique. Different meditation lineages—such as the Ledi, Mahāsi, Mogok, and Pa-Auk traditions—interpreted, systematized, and taught insight

merely inventions unrelated to Theravāda—is also inadequate. Braun’s account of Ledi demonstrates how innovation can occur inside a traditional world of texts, merit, *sāsana* decline, and liberation. “Creative continuity” describes this relationship more accurately: inherited authority guided new forms, and new forms gave inherited teachings wider social life.

The study has limitations, because it is a textual and historical review of selected influential traditions, not an ethnography of present-day centres. It does not examine every regional lineage, women’s teaching network, ethnic minority tradition, or contemporary digital form of meditation. English translations also cannot fully represent the technical and cultural meanings of Burmese and Pāli terms. Future research should include interviews, observation in multiple centres, Burmese-language sources, and closer study of female renunciants and lay teachers. Such work would test how the formal methods described in manuals are adapted in actual practice.

Conclusion

The historical evolution of *Vipassanā* in Myanmar is best understood as a movement of continuity, selection, and adaptation. Canonical mindfulness, commentarial maps of purification, Abhidhamma analysis, monastic authority, and the goal of liberation provided a common foundation. Within that foundation, teachers created different practical systems. The Ledi–U Ba Khin lineage linked scholarly reform to lay and international transmission. Mahāsi Sayadaw institutionalized continuous noting and momentary concentration. Mogok Sayadaw made dependent origination a direct framework for contemplation. Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw restored an extensive role for absorption and detailed analysis before mature insight.

The revised analysis therefore supports the plural word “traditions.” Myanmar *Vipassanā* is neither a single fixed technique nor a loose collection of unrelated practices. It is a family of disciplined Theravāda paths whose differences arise from distinct interpretations of how morality, concentration, mindfulness, and wisdom should be sequenced. Their common achievement was to make demanding meditation available through manuals, centres, retreats, teacher training, and transnational networks.

Myanmar’s enduring contribution to global Buddhism should not be measured only by the modern popularity of mindfulness. Its deeper contribution is the preservation of a liberative framework in which mindfulness is joined to ethics, concentration, insight, and freedom from attachment. Recognizing both historical change and doctrinal continuity gives a more accurate understanding of this heritage and provides a stronger basis for future scholarship.

meditation in different ways according to particular texts, teachers, and historical circumstances.

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