

Local Cure, Global Chant: Performing Theravadic Awakening in the Footsteps of the Ledi Sayadaw

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Abstract

This article takes as its starting point a repertoire of protective texts and practices articulated as ritual therapeutics in the early twentieth century by the well-known Burmese scholar-monk, the Ledi Sayadaw. Through an exploration of meditation-practice, meditation-teaching, and meditation-performance contexts in postcolonial Burma and India, I demonstrate the ways in which such texts and practices were adapted and refigured within the teaching models of two important twentieth-century *Vipassanā* meditation masters, Sayagyi U Ba Khin and S. N. Goenka. I argue that these protective texts and practices are constitutive aspects of the meditation modalities developed by these two teachers. I conclude with an exploration of the history of the Black American theologian and student of U Ba Khin, Leon E. Wright. In reflecting on Wright's case, I consider the ways in which modern scholarly practices within Buddhist (modernism) studies continue to participate in the erasure of historically marginalized worlds and persons.

Keywords

Vipassanā – Ledi Sayadaw – U Ba Khin – S. N. Goenka – Leon E. Wright – charismatic healing

In a letter to his meditation teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899–1971), dated July 8, 1969, the now-famous *Vipassanā* meditation teacher S. N. Goenka (1924–2013) reported as follows on the very first *Vipassanā* “camp” (*śivir*) he taught in India:

To all the old students, except my parents, I gave Vipassana quite successfully on Sunday, 6th July, at 2 pm. And then came the auspicious day of Monday the 7th July 1969, when under your immediate guidance, I started giving Vipassana to my parents and all the other new candidates. ... Every batch received the sparkling illumination of *nibbāna-dhātu* which this land of the Buddha had lost contact with since the last two millenniums. The meditation hall was fortunate, the Dharamshala was fortunate, the city of Bombay was fortunate, the entire land of Buddha Desa was fortunate in regaining its lost Dhamma Jewel. I felt myself fortunate enough to have been chosen for this meritorious job, to work as your transformer to induct the powerful *nibbāna-dhātu* from your power house and shower it on the candidates in front of me. I felt simply elated. I share my merits with you and Mother Sayama and all the Devas and Brahmas who are protecting the Sasana and who are helping you in re-establishing the same in the land of its origin, repaying Burma's debt to India which is long overdue. ... *Amyat ! Amyat ! Amyat!*

GOENKA 2020: 2

This communication marks an important moment in the history of modern insight meditations (*Vipassanā*) and globalized mindfulness meditations (*satipaṭṭhāna*). S. N. Goenka was a consequential historical actor in the trans-cultural dissemination of an influential strand of these practice traditions – the majority of which derive from Burmese Buddhist lineages of practice – during the second half of the twentieth century (Stuart 2020). His work to spread such practices in both Asia and the West has had an indelible impact on the contours of many modern meditation teachings and traditions.

Despite S. N. Goenka's historical importance, and that of his teachings and practices, the tradition of practice he disseminated remains poorly understood. The present article emerges from a larger project aimed at a comprehensive historical accounting of the background and development of Goenka's meditation lineage. A fundamental set of problems stands at the center of such a project: Is it possible to make this lineage historically legible to contemporary audiences when much of its history has been deliberately obscured by its own progenitors? Is it possible to make the agencies and practices of those involved

in constructing the lineage legible when most recent scholarship has erased them in the process of articulating a schematic historical sociology of modern insight and mindfulness practices (see Sharf 1995, 2015; McMahan 2008, 2017, 2020; Braun 2013; Wilson 2014, 2017; Schedneck 2015; and Gleig 2019)? At the outset, I would answer both of these questions with an emphatic “no.” The nature of our historiographical sources means that a definitive authoritative narrative without any gaps remains out of reach. I would also, however, suggest that we nonetheless attempt to carry out a process of recovery, however incomplete, keeping this “no” at the front and center of the inquiry.

With these historiographical challenges in mind, I aim in this article to render more legible to scholarship a number of the practices that are constitutive of S. N. Goenka's teaching regime of *Vipassanā* meditation. I do this obliquely, however, focusing on a constellation of historical actors connected to Goenka, but with distinct religious and political projects. The article takes as its starting point a repertoire of protective texts and practices articulated as ritual therapeutics in the early twentieth century by the well-known Burmese scholar-monk, the Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923). Through an exploration of a range of practice, teaching, and performance contexts in postcolonial Burma and India, I demonstrate the ways in which such texts and practices were adapted and refigured within the teaching models of Sayagyi U Ba Khin and then S. N. Goenka. I argue that, far from being mere accoutrements, these protective texts and practices are constitutive aspects of the meditation modalities developed by these two teachers and their students.

In the second part of the article and in a follow-up article, I explore the history of another important but forgotten twentieth-century meditation teacher – the Black American theologian and student of U Ba Khin, Leon E. Wright (1912–1996). Wright taught his own version of U Ba Khin's *Vipassanā* meditation method for more than three decades in his theology classes at Howard University during his tenure as a professor there from 1945 to 1978. I suggest that reflection on Wright's practice modalities and religious identity reveals a telling erasure in the historiography of modern insight and mindfulness meditation. More than that, I argue that an analysis of the particulars of Wright's practice modalities helps make more legible the other meditation-practice modalities explored in this article – those of U Ba Khin in colonial and postcolonial Burma and Goenka in postcolonial India and elsewhere.

Before reaching back to the more distant past, let us return to the historical moment with which we began: S. N. Goenka's first meditation course in India, as evidenced by a course report sent by mail from Bombay to his meditation teacher in Rangoon in July 1969. The passage quoted above contains information about a number of practices and concepts that help set the stage for the

broader historical exploration below. In particular, I would draw attention to how S. N. Goenka conceptualizes the moment of teaching the meditative modality of *Vipassanā*, which became the *sine qua non* of his teaching mission. He notes that under his teacher's "immediate guidance ... Every batch received the sparkling illumination of *nibbāna-dhātu* which this land of the Buddha had lost contact with since the last two millenniums." He goes on to emphasize to his teacher that "I felt myself fortunate enough to have been chosen for this meritorious job, to work as your transformer to induct the powerful *nibbāna-dhātu* from your power house and shower it on the candidates in front of me."

What is going on here? What does it mean that, for Goenka, the teaching of *Vipassanā* involved showering meditation students with *nibbāna-dhātu* under the immediate guidance of a teacher, a guru, who was at a physical remove in Rangoon? What was the mechanism – in emic terms – by which Goenka carried out such acts of transmission? To answer these questions, we must recover the meditation-teaching contexts within which Goenka was trained in the 1950s and 1960s in postcolonial Rangoon. In doing so, I would like to thematize the notion of "performance" along several intersecting axes of thought and practice that are embedded in the multifaceted worlds of traditional Burmese religious frameworks.

When Goenka speaks of "induct[ing] the powerful *nibbāna-dhātu* from [U Ba Khin's] power house and shower[ing] it on the candidates in front of [him]," he is in fact referring to an initiatory performance that he carried out on every single *Vipassanā* meditation course he ever taught. Such courses usually begin with a few days of focused attention on the breath to arouse strong concentration. Once such concentration is achieved, a student gets initiated into the practice of *Vipassanā*, which in Goenka's teachings is defined primarily by the cultivation of awareness of bodily sensations along with an understanding of their impermanence. By actualizing such awareness, a practitioner understands that all experiences are cessative and creates the possibility of coming in contact with *nirvāṇa* or the "element of *nirvāṇa*" (Pāli: *nibbānadhātu*). In Goenka's teaching model, however, the meditation teacher is instrumental in creating a space for such a possibility by performatively channeling the "force" of the "element of *nirvāṇa*" to their students. And in order to enter into such a practice, students formally offer themselves to the teacher for guidance. After a student has formally enacted such a commitment through ritual formulas, Goenka then recites his initiatory "teacher's verses," composed in Hindi:

May the element of *nirvāṇa*, the element of the Dharma, and the element of awakening of the Buddhas – which are the product of infinite merit

and infinite good qualities – arise continuously at the head [of these meditators], arise continuously in the heart [of these meditators], arise continuously throughout the body [of these meditators].

GOENKA 2016a: 0:00–2:30¹

In what follows, I would like to contextualize this performance within S. N. Goenka's teaching lineage in colonial and postcolonial Burma. First, I seek to demonstrate how Goenka's teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, drew on a repertoire of protective and curative incantations that have a historical precedent in ritual-healing practices advocated by the influential scholar-monk, the Ledi Sayadaw, during a plague epidemic that took place in Burma during the first decade of the twentieth century. Second, I seek to show how U Ba Khin reoriented such traditional healing modalities to suit the unique meditation-teaching contexts of his small, urban meditation center in Rangoon. Third, I seek to complexify scholarly understandings of U Ba Khin's teaching and practice models by exploring some of the performative practices – including public demonstrations of meditative mastery, public articulations of charismatic power, and interpersonal therapeutic interventions – that U Ba Khin brought together to construct the meditative experiences of his students. Finally, I gesture at the end of the article toward additional forthcoming historiographical work on the ways in which a non-Asian religious teacher, Leon E. Wright, carried U Ba Khin's teaching modalities into his own distinct teaching contexts in the postwar United States. I briefly introduce Wright and argue that a more developed reflection on Wright's trajectory in a later article will allow scholars to see both U Ba Khin and Goenka in a new light. In the process of this analysis, I seek both to recover U Ba Khin historically and to make him and these two students of his – one well known and one erased – more legible as historical actors.

1 **The Performance of Healing and the Performance of Power: The Manual of Warding Off Pestilence (*Rogantaradīpanī*) and the Role of Text in the Ledi Sayadaw's Apotropaic Anticolonial Politics**

Scholarly accounts of the Ledi Sayadaw's role in the development of the *Vipassanā* meditation movement in colonial Burma have focused largely on his elite theoretical works on doctrine (Houtman 1990; Pranke 2010; Braun 2013).

1 See also Goenka 2006: 2, 66–67.

Here I take up an alternative line of inquiry, one that may allow for a better understanding of his politics and his religious outlook more generally. I argue that an account of the Ledi Sayadaw's cosmological outlook as articulated in the *Rogantaradīpanī* (Ledi Sayadaw 1909 and 1955) – a ritual manual for dealing with disease and demons during a plague epidemic that occurred in the first decade of the twentieth century – allows for a more nuanced discernment of his anticolonial positionality, and of the ontological frameworks within which his teachings on meditation were constructed (see also Stuart, forthcoming).

The Ledi Sayadaw was important in the history of Burmese *Vipassanā* meditation because he provided monastic authority for the idea that laymen – not just monks – could become meditation masters. It is his position as the monastic progenitor of S. N. Goenka's lineage of Burmese lay meditation teachers that makes his influence on the twentieth-century history of *Vipassanā* and mindfulness meditation particularly noteworthy. The Ledi Sayadaw's work on ritual healing, the *Rogantaradīpanī* or the *Manual for Warding Off Pestilence*, is explicitly relevant to helping scholars better apprehend the teaching/healing modalities of the lay meditation teachers in that lineage.

In colonial Burma, the Ledi Sayadaw's meditation student Maung Po Thet (1873–1945) was an important early lay teacher whose *Vipassanā* teachings were intimately tied up with his supernormal and healing powers (Htay Hlaing 1987: 40–42, 90–97 and 148–149; Stuart, forthcoming). In a forthcoming monograph I address the somewhat murky historical identity of Maung Po Thet. But in this article, I would like to focus on Maung Po Thet's most important student, the first Accountant General of independent Burma, U Ba Khin. U Ba Khin was a key figure in the internationalization of lay *Vipassanā* meditation practice during the 1950s and 1960s. Despite his notoriety and influence, however, very little is known of his actual teaching practices.

I suggest that a historical recovery of some of the performative aspects of U Ba Khin's teaching modalities at the International Meditation Centre (IMC) in Rangoon allows scholars to discern a connection between U Ba Khin's meditation-teaching practices and some of the ritual-healing modalities represented in the Ledi Sayadaw's *Manual for Warding Off Pestilence*. I argue that such connections should also force scholars to reframe how they think about the Ledi Sayadaw's conception of meditation and his political organizing around Buddhist textual learning. That is, the apotropaic aspects of Burmese Buddhist textual practice are foundational for both the Ledi Sayadaw's program of learning and his program to encourage more people to practice meditation. These aspects of the Ledi Sayadaw's outlook come into relief only when we view them in connection with U Ba Khin's later redeployment of the Sayadaw's ritual-healing incantations.



FIGURE 1

Major H. Predmore inoculating against cholera in the bazaar in Mandalay (1906) (Wellcome Collection.

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The Ledi Sayadaw authored the *Manual for Warding Off Pestilence* in 1908, after a number of years during which Burma faced an intractable cholera epidemic (see Figure 1). The *Manual for Warding Off Pestilence* is a revealing historical source because it demonstrates the indeterminate cultural space that the Ledi Sayadaw occupied in colonial Burma as an advocate for traditional Buddhist practices in the face of the growing dominance of British colonial influence. The ambiguity of the Sayadaw's position becomes clear in a number of telling passages on the topic of modern medicine and European doctors.

Demons are normally invisible to the human eye. Only when they wish themselves seen, and change their body into grosser material form, can they become visible. However, they are highly susceptible to certain medicines, [such as textual incantation,] which can cause them grievous hurt or death. It is therefore regrettable that European doctors neglect this type of antidote (*che“vā”* ဆေးဝါး) to evil spirits. That is why they are still unable to go to the root of such epidemics as plague and cholera. ...

They ought to do research to probe the truth or otherwise of the existence of evil spirits and the claim that epidemics are caused by evil spirits. This is because plague as an epidemic is still an incurable disease since olden days. Epidemics are mostly due to the work of evil spirits and very few other causes are assignable to them. ... However, modern-day doctors are more learned and experienced than those of olden days. They are also more energetic and resourceful. Yet epidemics are becoming more and more prevalent. That is why the European doctors in the East should give serious consideration to evil spirits as the source of epidemics and explore the ways and means of countering the evil spirits along the lines described above. If only they come to realize this factor, there are great

prospects for winning the war against evil spirits. In any case, the role of doctors in subduing epidemics of plague and cholera is significant still.

LEDI SAYADAW, n.d.: 14–15²

In this book (see Figure 2) the Ledi Sayadaw demonstrates his outlook on the root causes of disease: they are supernormal. He also presents us with a somewhat agonistic perspective on European biomedicine, suggesting that European doctors have something to learn from traditional healers and religious practitioners with access to remedies that can deal with the root spiritual causalities at work in generating diseases. At the same time, however, the Sayadaw acknowledges the epistemological power of modern medical practices.

But the main thrust of the manual is practical; its primary aim is to provide ritual-healing technologies to the Buddhist community in the context of epidemic. What is more, in detailing these technologies, the Sayadaw repeatedly invokes his own experience and knowledge of them as modes of proof:

We have known an instance of a plague victim recovering due to the forceful and repeated recital near his head of the *Thirteen Powerful Forces of the Universe*. A plague patient should be surrounded by men with swords in hand while a group of reciters including monks and laity read aloud the above mentioned Suttas, Parittas and Charms. The reciters should concentrate all their mental energies on the patient, their minds intent on bringing the utmost good to the patient, thinking, “Let all the words I am uttering enter into the patient’s body.” ...

We have known an instance of a plague patient being saved by emphatic and spirited recital of the *Āṭānāṭṭiya-Sutta* at his head. The efficacy of these scriptural modes of assistance is very evident with those who have a natural confidence in the Triple Gem. However, those taking recourse to them as an expediency may also do definite good if they carry out the recitals with a strong will, saying to themselves, “I will not stop reciting until this patient recovers.” It may be useful to remember that the demons, on being thus cornered, will try to shake the will of the reciters by making the patient assume various stances. It is a battle of wits then. The reciters must prove themselves stronger.

LEDI SAYADAW, n.d.: 29³

2 Ledi Sayadaw 1955: 22–26. This is a slightly modified version of U Tin U (Myaung)’s translation.

3 Ledi Sayadaw 1909: 81–83. This is a slightly modified version of U Tin U (Myaung)’s translation.

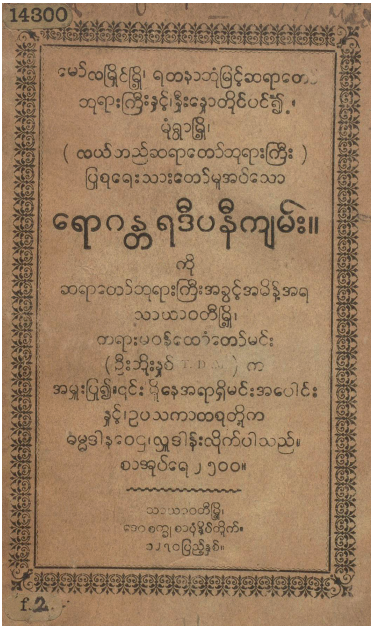


FIGURE 2
The 1909 edition of the *Rogantaradīpanī*

I would call particular attention to the notion that the words of a recitation can “enter into the patient’s body” and thereby serve to remove the demons that cause disease from the body of the patient. This specific therapeutic technique participates in a cosmovision in which various mental and material forces (*dhāt*), including the powerful sounds of Buddhist scriptural recitation, can at times work to counteract one another within the bodies of humans. We might also note here that the top of the head of the patient is a key entry point for the words of the incantation to enter into the patient’s body. What is more, the demons are not always dispatched without resistance, and the Ledi Sayadaw frames such therapeutic rituals as something of a battle of forces. We will return below to see how such conceptualizations became central to how U Ba Khin understood the process of *Vipassanā* meditation and the role of the teacher in helping to counteract forces that might cause illness and/or interfere with meditation.

We also find incidental references to the use of such protective practices in the Ledi Sayadaw’s treatises specifically devoted to the practice of meditation. For instance, in his discussion of the practice of the meditation on impurity wherein a meditation practitioner sees directly—“as seen with open eyes” – the sign of meditation leading into the first meditative absorption (*jhāna*), the Sayadaw notes:

In gazing at unimpaired corpses in the ten types of meditation on impurity, when [the *yogī*] comes close to the apprehension of the sign (*nimitta*), it might, because of fright, appear to the mind as if the corpse is rising up and coming towards him or following him.

At that time, [the *yogī*] might be filled with intense fright and become deranged. He should be very careful, [telling himself]: “A tree, a stump or a log which is not conscious cannot rise up and follow you. So, how can a corpse which is lifeless rise up and follow you? This illusion appears in you because your mind has strengthened and you are about to apprehend the sign. You should not therefore be afraid.” [The *yogī*] should thus admonish himself, drive away fear, and go on gazing with joy.

[However,] if the skin of the corpse is not yet impaired and is still whole, an evil spirit might possess it. If the corpse were possessed by an evil spirit and the corpse were to [indeed] rise up, the *yogī* should push it back to the ground with his walking staff or should chant protective verses and mantras (*parit'mantan'* ပရိတ်မန္တန်) to drive away the spirit. Anyone who goes to the cemetery alone to meditate on impurity should take a walking staff with him or should be able to recite protective verses. This should be most carefully taken into consideration.

LEDI SAYADAW, n.d.: 34⁴

Along with a focus on practical concerns, a recurrent subtext of the *Manual for Warding Off Pestilence* is the epistemological fragmentation of the Buddhist community in the context of British colonial rule and the need for traditional textual recitation practices to be renewed as part of a broader Buddhist cosmological renewal, over and against the cosmologically disruptive colonial forces. The Ledi Sayadaw frames the project of textual learning, therefore, as primarily an apotropaic project:

There are certain *suttas* which have the specific effect of warding off evil. For instance: the *Āṭṇāṇṭiya Sutta* in the Dīgha Nikāya, the *Mahāsamaya Sutta*, and also another well-known composition, the *Upātasanti Gāthā* by an Arahāt named Silavanta. Since recital from memory was the Burmese tradition, and modern lay persons are finding it difficult to commit these rather long scriptures to memory, these powerful texts have gone into disuse.

4 Ledi Sayadaw, n.d. (1904): 62–63. This is a slightly modified version of Hla Maung's translation.

(That is why we have recommended to hold [scriptural] examinations especially for protective *suttas*, which would bring into vogue again those time-honoured scriptures.)

LEDI SAYADAW, n.d.: 28⁵

Evidence of this apotropaic outlook in connection with textual learning is particularly noteworthy because it provides an alternative to mainstream religious studies interpretations of the Ledi Sayadaw's textual project, which posit his work as primarily doctrinal or ethical in nature (Braun 2013; Houtman 1990). If the Ledi Sayadaw's religion-making (Dressler and Mandair 2011) project was not primarily doctrinal or ethical, but instead these aspects of the tradition were foundationally constructed by more cosmological, metaphysical, and apotropaic orientations, scholars may need to reassess the broader contours of the *Vipassanā* meditation movement in order to better incorporate these aspects of the Burmese tradition into historiographical accounts.

Another component of the ritual-healing models presented by the Ledi Sayadaw should be emphasized: the material component of his ritual economy. We have already seen how performed text is conceptualized as a material force that can enter into a patient's body. But the material aspect of ritual healing also has a more concrete component. We find in the *Rogantaratīpanī* a number of healing spells that involve the ingestion of text in written, yantric form. The instructions for how to utilize the *Bodhipakkhiya-yantra* (Figure 3), a powerful talismanic emblem encapsulating the force of the Abhidhamma, run as follows:

In writing the words in each diagram begin from the Sunday's House, i.e. the top left corner, and proceed after the *Myin-nthwar* method. In the center put the number indicative of your birthday. Write those words neatly on local bamboo-pulp paper. Burn them and take the ashes with water daily. After taking them as many number of times as one's age, it gives protection against evil spirits. The more the number of times taken, the greater one will become.

In case of danger, prepare those diagrams (on a sheet of tin or brass), tie it with red thread consecrated with seven repetitions of the *Twenty-eight Buddhas Charm* and the *Invocation of the Powers of the Seven*

5 Ledi Sayadaw 1909: 79–80; 1955: 51. This is a slightly modified version of U Tin U (Myaung)'s translation.

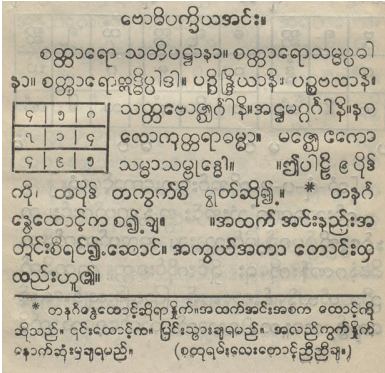


FIGURE 3
Image of the *Bodhipakkhiya-yantra*
(*bodhipakkhiya 'aṇi'*) from the 1909 edition
of the *Rogantaradīpanī*

Buddhas and put them with consecrated threads around children's neck and wrists. Gold or silver sheets may also be used.

LEDI SAYADAW, n.d.: 34⁶

While many scholars of Buddhist (modernism) studies have characterized the Ledi Sayadaw's religious program as a project of colonial-inspired “mind-science” (Braun 2013; Crosby 2020), the practices and performances found here trouble such a characterization. While an intellectual history of the Ledi Sayadaw's works takes the Abhidhamma as its doctrinal center point, here we instead see the Abhidhamma as potent for its apotropaic qualities. And indeed, to the present day, Abhidhamma recitations are considered in Myanmar to be some of the most cosmologically potent performances available to the Buddhist community. This idea is also well-attested throughout the *Rogantaradīpanī*, where Abhidhamma texts are frequently included in the many lists of ritually powerful healing texts that the Ledi Sayadaw prescribes.

An additional set of ritual incantations is prescribed specifically as efficacious for warding off danger more generally. Verses invoking the twenty-eight Buddhas and seven Buddhas of the past are common recitations. However, these texts as presented by the Ledi Sayadaw in the *Rogantaradīpanī* become important in the history of Burmese *Vipassanā* meditation because a variant of these verses gets redeployed by U Ba Khin as a powerful protective tool and initiatory device at the International Meditation Centre in Rangoon during the 1950s and 1960s. The invocation of the seven Buddhas of the past in the *Rogantaradīpanī* runs as follows:

6 Ledi Sayadaw 1909: 89–90. This is a slightly modified version of U Tin U (Myaung)'s translation.

The Blessed One Vipassī, the Arahant, the fully self-awakened Buddha, has infinite merit, infinite knowledge, infinite good qualities, infinite potency, infinite power, and infinite splendor.

The Blessed One[s] Sikhi ... Vessabhū ... Kakusandha ... Koṇāgamaṇa ... Kassapa ...

Our Blessed One [Gotama], the Arahant, the fully self-awakened Buddha, has infinite merit, infinite knowledge, infinite good qualities, infinite potency, infinite power, and infinite splendor.

These seven Buddhas, Blessed Ones, Arahants, fully self-awakened Buddhas – with their infinite merit, infinite knowledge, infinite good qualities, infinite potency, infinite power, and infinite splendor – are my protectors, my support, my safety, my shelter, my refuge.

STUART, forthcoming: Appendix 1.2b⁷

The incantation invoking the twenty-eight Buddhas of the past presented in the *Rogantaradīpanī* provides some additional information as to how the text might be understood in relationship to both its embodied performance and its effects:

Taṇhaṅkara, Medhaṅkara ... Kassapa, and our Blessed One [Gotama].

I pay sincere homage to these twenty-eight Buddhas.

May they ever reside at [the top of] my head, powerful and splendorous.

By their power and splendor, may all my impediments be pacified.

May all fiends, [menacing] spirits, and demons be banished.

STUART, forthcoming: Appendix 1.2c⁸

Noteworthy here is the imperative that the incantation materializes the Buddhas – by way of text – at the top of the head of its reciter.⁹ We find similar language in a Myanmar-language translation of the seven-Buddhas incantation (Ledi Sayadaw 1992: 10–11; Stuart, forthcoming: Appendix 1.2a), and such language is also mirrored in the commentarial glosses on the twenty-eight-Buddhas incantation of the *Rogantaradīpanī* (Ledi Sayadaw 1909: 85–87 [1955: 54–55]; Stuart, forthcoming: Appendix 1.2d). Most importantly for the historiographical trajectory of this article, it is Myanmar-language iterations of these two

7 Ledi Sayadaw 1909: 87–88; 1955: 55–57.

8 Ledi Sayadaw 1909: 84; 1955: 53.

9 On a similar practice of materializing the Buddha, his teachings, and the object of meditation in the form of a book at the top of the head of a meditation initiate in contemporary lay meditation among the Tai Nuea, see Wharton 2019: 8, 11–12.

incantations that appear to serve as textual referents for an important text that became a fundamental teaching tool for the renowned *Vipassanā* meditation teacher and first Accountant General of independent Burma, Sayagyi U Ba Khin. And as has been demonstrated above, it is S. N. Goenka's Hindi iteration of this text of U Ba Khin's that serves to initiate thousands upon thousands of modern *Vipassanā* practitioners into the path of the Buddha's teachings into the twenty-first century at hundreds of meditation centers around the globe.

2 The Performances of Sayagyi U Ba Khin: Healing Modalities and Meditative Protection

Sayagyi U Ba Khin was born in 1899 in Rangoon (now Yangon) and grew up and came of age during the height of British colonial influence. He was educated mostly at English-medium schools and was a capable communicator across language barriers. This set him apart from his predecessors in his *Vipassanā*-teaching lineage, the Ledi Sayadaw and Sayā Thetgyi, who were bound to Burmese-speaking contexts or had to make use of translators to communicate beyond them. As his parents had passed away before he completed high school, he did not go on to higher studies and instead entered the workforce, first working for a local newspaper and then as a clerk in the office of the Accountant General in 1917.¹⁰ Being the only Burmese in an office primarily made up of Indian civil servants, U Ba Khin was promoted to the position of special supervisor when Burma established its own Accountancy Department, and at the beginning of 1941 he received another promotion, becoming an accountant officer for the Railways' Board.¹¹ Finally, on the day of Burma's independence in 1948, U Ba Khin became the first Accountant General of an independent Burma.¹²

U Ba Khin was initiated into the practice of *Vipassanā* in 1937 by the lay meditation teacher Maung Po Thet (Sayā Thetgyi), and began teaching meditation to his employees in the office of the Accountant General in the late 1940s. In 1951 he established a small meditation center in the heart of Rangoon, where he taught meditation until his death in 1971. U Ba Khin's spiritual identity and teaching methods were distinctive among the various *Vipassanā* meditation teachers in mid-century Burma. Here I would like to focus on a number of his teaching practices – most of them performative in some respect – that largely

10 Houtman 1997: 313 (Ko Lay 1980: 68); VRI (1991) 1994: 8; Chit Tin 1999: 27–28.

11 Houtman 1997: 314 (Ko Lay 1980: 68–72); VRI (1991) 1994: 8–9; Chit Tin 1999: 27–28.

12 Houtman 1997: 317 (Ko Lay 1980: 85); VRI (1991) 1994: 9; Chit Tin 1999: 27–28.

have been erased from the historical record. First, I explore the way in which U Ba Khin deployed incantation as a protective and initiatory device in his teaching model. I go on to show how U Ba Khin additionally enacted (public articulations of) charismatic healings and interpersonal therapeutic interventions in his teaching program at the International Meditation Centre. Finally, I will discuss how U Ba Khin publicly performed meditative mastery for a global audience, setting the stage for the launch of a global lay-oriented mindfulness tradition.

Perhaps the most important aspect of U Ba Khin's *Vipassanā* meditation-teaching model was the way in which it was premised on his identity as a special individual, a bodhisattva, with special access to the cosmic forces that support the Buddha's teachings (*sāsana*) (Stuart 2020: 52, 106, 115; forthcoming). In this connection, his model of *Vipassanā* practice heavily emphasized the role of the meditation teacher in the process of meditation. In an oral discourse during a meditation retreat in the early 1960s, U Ba Khin explained to his Burmese students his understanding of his particular role as a meditation teacher:

You will find out that meditation by yourself does not work. However you try to calm your mind, only the time will be gone, and your mind will not be calm. Yet, if you practice with teachers who have the ability to protect you, you will get *samādhi*. For this reason, the Buddha said: *yathābhūtañānāya satthā pariyesitabbo* – “For knowledge of things as they are, teachers should be approached.”

Without a teacher, there is no way. The guidance and protection from a teacher are very important. There are pulling forces (*'achvai dhāt' tve* အဆွဲခါဝ်းဝေဝေ) in the environment, and they disturb concentration. If a teacher protects [a meditator] from these forces and disturbances, a meditator who is working for *samādhi* can get concentration. After getting calmness of mind, there is *cittavisuddhi* (purity of mind), and the characteristic of *cittaekaggata* (one-pointedness of mind) appears. At that time only, *Vipassanā* meditation should be practiced.

BA KHIN, n.d. (1962?) 7.1: 19:30–20:47¹³

Here U Ba Khin makes clear that successful meditation, particularly in the beginning stages of concentration practice, necessitates the protection of a

13 Translation by Swe Mon, with the editorial assistance of Daniel M. Stuart, unless otherwise noted.

teacher who can ward off cosmic disturbances, or “pulling forces,” that disrupt progress in meditation. The use of the term *dhāt’* (Pāli: *dhātu*) here to connote a variety of types of “forces” – bodily forces, mental forces, and supernormal agentive forces of various material types – also demonstrates how U Ba Khin participated in a Burmese Buddhist metaphysics in which human experiential matrices are constructed by and thoroughly enmeshed in a set of interpenetrating cosmic relationalities. This perspective takes for granted a grand Buddhist cosmology of various realms of existence, large timescapes of cosmic decline and reemergence, and a theory of rebirth. Most importantly for our purposes here is that U Ba Khin’s teaching model was intimately concerned with the ways in which most meditators, at the beginning of their practice, must first deal with a range of obstructing forces that keep them from succeeding in gaining concentration. In U Ba Khin’s model, the indispensable work of a teacher involved the capacity to discern the influence of such forces and dispatch them by dint of his power over them.

But how did this work in practice? There is very little historical evidence to answer this question, but some written accounts, and accounts gathered through ethnographic research, provide some insights into U Ba Khin’s methods. The diary of John Hislop, who learned meditation from U Ba Khin in 1960, provides a striking account of U Ba Khin’s teaching approach:

Then, when I was directed to give my attention to the fontanel area of the skull, and the area was calmly held in the attention without interfering thought movements of any type, then that “door” in the top of the head so easily and quickly opening to the burning heat – the sensation of “Anicca,” and the quick awareness of Anicca in other parts of the body.

All this could not be my unaided doing. So I asked U Ba Khin this morning how come my mind suddenly became so tranquil, collected, and one-pointed, and if I had not had help. He said, yes, that the awakening to the sensation produced by the complete instability of matter could not occur without Samādhi of a high order, so he requested the devas and brahmās of this place who were liberated through the teachings of the Buddha and who gladly help by smoothing the circumstances if they can “tune in” – these sentient beings he asked to extend their beneficial influence to a man about to receive the Dhamma of the Buddha. Then I asked him about the easy opening of the fontanel “door” in the head, and he said, yes, this was by virtue of the same grace. The head area still burns strongly.

CHIT TIN 1985: 10–11

We see here how the top of the head of the meditation practitioner is a key point of entry for the practice of awareness of sensations – leading to an experiential understanding of the Buddhist principle of comprehensive impermanence (*anicca*). This mode of practice is the hallmark of U Ba Khin's technique. We might also recall here the embodied aspect of the Ledi Sayadaw's incantation invoking the twenty-eight Buddhas of the past. While Hislop does not mention it, it is clear from other records that when U Ba Khin speaks of requesting "the devas and brahmās of this place who were liberated through the teachings of the Buddha and who gladly help by smoothing the circumstances" to "tune in" and "extend their beneficial influence," he is in fact speaking of a supplication in the form of the performance of a text. That text is U Ba Khin's personal iteration of the Myanmar-language incantations discussed above from the *Rogantaradīpanī*. U Ba Khin would recite this text as an initiatory incantation when first teaching *Vipassanā* to a student, and at the beginning of many group meditation sessions that he oversaw at the International Meditation Center. Through this text, U Ba Khin would enact what is described in Hislop's diary account. The verses run as follows:

May the element (*dhāt'*) of the Dharma, the element of awakening, and the element of *nirvāṇa* of all the Buddhas – with their infinite merit, infinite good karma, infinite knowledge, and infinite power that can extend throughout and subdue the entire universe – come and be present in this place.

Let [these forces] be enshrined over the head of this disciple of the Buddha.

Let [these forces] encompass this disciple of the Buddha. ...

May the element of the Dharma the element of awakening, and the element of *nirvāṇa* of the ten [features] of the Buddha's teachings – the four paths, the four fruits, *nirvāṇa*, and the scriptures ...

May the element of the Dharma the element of awakening, and the element of *nirvāṇa* of the *saṅgha*, the eight types of true noble disciples – those established respectively in the four paths and the four fruits – come and be present in this place.

Let [these forces] be enshrined over the head of this disciple of the Buddha.

Let [these forces] encompass this disciple of the Buddha.

STUART, forthcoming: Appendix 1.114

14 International Meditation Centre 2019: 0:00–1:32.

We thus find the performative invocation of the literal substance of the Buddha's *sāsana* at the center of U Ba Khin's *Vipassanā* teaching/practice model. Through this performance, he draws supernormal beings to the space of the meditation center and brings their "force" or *dhāt* into the body of the meditation student by way of the "door" at the top of the practitioner's head. This should bring to mind the moment with which this article began. When S. N. Goenka writes that he felt himself "fortunate enough to have been chosen for this meritorious job, to work as your transformer to induct the powerful *nibbāna-dhātu* from your power house and shower it on the candidates in front of me," during the first *Vipassanā* meditation course he taught in India in 1969, he is referring to precisely such a process – precisely such a performance – and his own Hindi-language version of U Ba Khin's text, presented above.

S. N. Goenka would go on to recite this text to hundreds of thousands of students as an initiatory incantation on every single meditation course he taught during his lifetime. And the text continues to be used in the very same way in digital form on all ten-day *Vipassanā* courses taught at the hundreds of meditation centers that Goenka and his students established around the world. But most contemporary students coming to S. N. Goenka's *Vipassanā* courses in the twenty-first century have no knowledge, and may never gain any knowledge, of the ontological framework that undergirds the initiatory performances and daily protective recitations that are central to constructing the experience of these ten-day *Vipassanā* courses. Goenka did a very good job of effacing his ontological commitments through the rhetoric of science and Indian secular pluralism. He did this at times deliberately, at times unwittingly. It is all the more instructive, therefore, to recover the context of U Ba Khin's teachings, so that we might more fully comprehend Goenka's, which have been highly influential.

To discern the world of *Vipassanā* teaching and practice that S. N. Goenka was drawn into as a young Indo-Burmese man in a recently independent post-colonial Burma, it is instructive to consider a number of additional performative aspects of U Ba Khin's teaching practices at the International Meditation Centre in Rangoon. A central component of U Ba Khin's meditation retreats was the evening discourse, when U Ba Khin would present students with some of the theoretical, textual, and doctrinal underpinnings of the meditation practices they were undertaking. But an analysis of U Ba Khin's oral discourses in Burmese also indicates that he used such discourses to perform, and inform his students about, his own charismatic power.

Recently, an old man came here. I told him, “You did not come here to be comfortable. Here I teach [you] to realize *dukkhasacca*. By realizing *dukkhasacca*, you can see the true quality [of experience]” ... During his meditation, like Pho Htung, *dhāt’* inside of his body was aroused because these *dhāt’* could not stand [the power of] *anicca*. So, I carefully watched over him. At night, I got an idea that I should give *adhiṭṭhāna* early the next morning. After changing into *Vipassanā* meditation, we have *adhiṭṭhāna*. It is meditating without moving any part of the body for one hour. ... He sat in the front row during *adhiṭṭhāna*. ...

I told him, “Well, you should take a bowl in case you need it.” In the past, we had lots of bowls, as most of the meditators vomited during meditation practice. He said that in his lifetime he never vomited. But I took a bowl for him [anyway]. Then they meditated. And I spent the time talking with Sayāmā. At 8 am, I did not even announce the end of the *adhiṭṭhāna* session. Ko Chit Shein ran out of the room and called me. “What happened?” I asked. “I don’t know what’s wrong with him. A bowl is filled with his mucus and he breathes with a very loud sound like huuu ... huuu ...” ... I found that old man with a red face and his face moved like this. [Probably Sayagyi made a facial expression to the audience.] Well, I saw the facial expression of a *nāga* (*nagā* “နဂါး”) in him.

Avijjādhāt’ (forces/elements of ignorance) cannot exist in a body that *viññādhāt’* (forces/elements of knowledge) is going to occupy. They must leave. I said, “rejoice in my merits!” That person was like half human, half animal. ... Suddenly, he flipped his body over with his legs upright. In this manner, he crawled to me. Though I wanted to leave, I just stayed, quietly [contemplating] with *anicca*, *anicca*, *anicca*. Then, he rested his head on my thigh, shaking it and looking tired. I touched his back with my hand to comfort him by sharing *mettā* (*khyam* “sā ချမ်းသာ; lit. “peace” or “non-hostility”) and my merits with him. Finally, he asked for water. Sayāmā gave him a cup of water. After drinking two cups of water, he became normal. His face also returned to normal. When I asked him, “What happened to you?” he replied that he did not know. Then, I told him to continue his meditation. This animal [inside of him] gave him high blood pressure. Now, he is a very healthy man.

BA KHIN, n.d. (1962?) 3.2–4.1: 28:06–2:20

U Ba Khin’s performativity here points to two levels at which his teaching practices involve performance. On the one hand, the anecdote itself is a performance, designed to entertain as well as to inform his students about the kinds of anomalous experiences that can occur, and are even likely to occur,

during meditation. Embedded in this performance is a teaching on the nature of *dhāt'*, forces within the body of a meditation practitioner that are either invasive and need to be removed or those that should be brought into the body from outside – or are constitutive of the body itself – and cultivated or brought to awareness so as to remove the invasive ones.

On the other hand, the teaching practices U Ba Khin describes demonstrate another kind of performativity, an interpersonal therapeutic mode that was central to the way he taught meditation. Within U Ba Khin's theory of meditation, the process whereby his students came to a state of balance that would allow them to productively practice the *Vipassanā* modality often initially involved a reconfiguration of their health status. And such reconfigurations were generally understood as the direct result of the removal of *dhāt'* causing a disease or an illness. But in the above anecdote, we see an additional layer to how the process of removal works. This is not simply a process whereby the practice of meditation brings wisdom (*vijjā*) and removes ignorance (*avijjā*). Rather, U Ba Khin's role here is central. According to his performance, the upheaval brought about by the process of meditation had powerful physical and mental effects – such as vomiting and other anomalous physiological symptoms. U Ba Khin and his teaching assistant, Sayāmā, played an integral role in facilitating such transformations and bringing about a return to a normal state, which is also understood as a process of healing. Perhaps most importantly, we see U Ba Khin presenting himself as both a source of interpersonal support and a source of metaphysical power. His own *Vipassanā* practice, the awareness of *anicca*, created a force of its own that supported the purification process of his student. What is more, by sharing wishes for peace and calm as well as his karmic qualities with the student, the health breakthrough came to completion: the animal force within the student that had been causing an imbalance – associated with the karma of supernormal snake-beings, *nāgas* – was removed.

U Ba Khin's oral discourses, only a handful of which survive on the historical record, are replete with stories such as the one above. Remarkable in many of these accounts is U Ba Khin's candor about his own power as a teacher to catalyze various kinds of meditation experiences for his students, and to heal them of ailments. Perhaps the most famous of U Ba Khin's healings was S. N. Goenka's relief from chronic migraines (Stuart 2020: 49–57). I would note, however, that the anecdote above reveals that U Ba Khin did not always act alone as a teacher. From fairly early on, he worked together with his teaching assistant, Sayāmā, who was instrumental in supporting the candidates who came to meditate at the International Meditation Centre (Figure 4). According to interlocutors connected to the IMC, Sayāmā – known to her students as “Mother Sayāmā” – was considered to have the ability to see the students' past



FIGURE 4
U Ba Khin with Mother
Sayāmā at the International
Meditation Centre in Rangoon
(International Meditation
Centre, n.d.)

lives and assess their karmic promise. But she was also instrumental in the day-to-day running of the meditation center and in working directly with students during their meditation, as can be seen from the above anecdote.

Sayāmā was also not the only person to support U Ba Khin in his teaching. Another one of his students, the master of concentration meditation S. Venkataraman (Figure 5), was also conscripted as a helper at times. One anecdote from a now-deceased interlocutor, who visited the International Meditation Centre in the early 1960s and was one of U Ba Khin's "candidates," demonstrates an additional mode of performative practice – facilitated by S. Venkataraman – that U Ba Khin enjoined at his meditation center.

The story goes that about halfway through a ten-day course at the IMC, this candidate ran into some kind of obstruction in meditation.¹⁵ He described the experience as manifesting as a "blockage" in the free flow of energy that would move through his body from his head to his feet when he first began practicing *Vipassanā* under U Ba Khin's guidance. U Ba Khin told this candidate that he would need some additional help and sent him the next day at an appointed time to a small hut at the edge of the meditation center compound. S. Venkataraman – whom the candidate had not met previously – was waiting for him there, and they entered the hut together and sat down facing one another. There was just enough room in the small hut for the two of them.

Venkataraman looked at the candidate and told him that he saw a presence nearby with a visage like his own, describing in some detail the features of the being. The candidate was flustered because he took the description to be a description of his brother, who had committed suicide some years before. Venkataraman then gave the candidate a meditation instruction: he told him to focus on the sensation he was feeling at the small area of his body below

15 The story that follows is my rearticulation of an account told to me in the course of casual conversation.



FIGURE 5
Still of S. Venkataraman in the Trance
of Cessation under the guidance of Sayagyi U
Ba Khin in the BBC documentary *Men Seeking
God* (Mayhew 1954, in Puetter 2022: 11:07)

the nostrils and above the upper lip. He then enjoined him to state aloud that he shared all of his merits (*puñña*) with his brother, while also maintaining attention of that sensation. According to the candidate, upon carrying out this instruction, a great heat surged through his body and then dissipated, giving way to a flow of energy moving through his body from head to feet. After that, Venkataraman stood up, lit a cigarette, and walked out of the hut. He never saw him again.

Practices such as these were used by U Ba Khin to solve problems that arose in the course of meditation, many of which were understood to be caused by supernormal agents, sometimes figured as *dhāt* (“forces”), or in this case *peta* (a departed relative). We see in this story a very common lay Buddhist practice of sharing merit with a dead relative. However, in this case the performance takes on a different tenor than in its more common form due to its experiential framing within the context of the process of *Vipassanā* meditation. That the performance is mediated by a psychic who directly sees the dead relative also renders it distinct from typical practices of sharing merit with deceased relatives. But perhaps most importantly, the performance is structured by a relationship to sensations felt in the body, and a karmic framework that considers the experience of sensations as a process whereby latent karmic forces get burned off.

The association with a traumatic memory, a memory of the suicide of a sibling, also stands out here. Might we conceptualize this particular performance through the lens of trauma theory and see it as the interpersonal therapeutic processing of trauma by way of embodied experience? Might some of the more interpersonal and interactive modes of meditation teaching, such as those engaged by U Ba Khin, involve important social relationalities that have

been largely overlooked in modern Western analyses of these traditions?¹⁶ Or should we remain within the onto-epistemic framework of the tradition and allow that this anecdote straightforwardly presents us a case in which a dead relative finds relief through the process of karmic enactment, thereby ceasing to obstruct the process of meditation? I leave this question open here, but my sense is that to get at the kinds of practices and experiences that were being engaged at the International Meditation Centre in the 1950s and 1960s, a thorough reckoning with such questions is necessary. Such questions are all the more important because many meditation experiences of the type described in this anecdote occur for people practicing *Vipassanā* in different cultural contexts in contemporary times, and such experiences can be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on one's interpretive framework and cultural and onto-epistemic commitments.

Two additional kinds of performance in U Ba Khin's repertoire are worthy of note. First, U Ba Khin was keen to demonstrate his mastery of meditation to both Burmese and international audiences. There are a number of instances of this, but perhaps the most striking is the performance of S. Venkataraman entering the meditative trance of cessation under the guidance of U Ba Khin in the BBC documentary film *Men Seeking God* (see Figure 5).¹⁷ We might call this a case of the performance of Buddhist awakening or enlightenment, since one of the standard doctrinal positions within the Theravāda Buddhist tradition is that only those who have accomplished the initial stages of Buddhist awakening can enter states of nibbānic cessation at will. For U Ba Khin, this particular performance demonstrated that he was capable of teaching the entire range of deep states of calming and concentration (*jhāna*) while also bringing his students to states of awakened wisdom (*paññā*) (see Ba Khin [1952] 1962: 42–43).

Second, U Ba Khin was known to spend much of his time as a teacher reciting protective texts, and we have seen that he composed his own verses to facilitate his meditation teachings. A number of recordings of chantings of long protective texts survive. Historically most important among them is U Ba Khin's recitation of the *Vibhaṅgavāra of the Pañhāvāra* section of the *Kusalattika* section of the *Tikaṇṭhāna* (Rhys Davids [1921] 1988: 153–180), a text drawn from the final book of the canonical Abhidhamma, the *Paṭṭhāna*.

16 A good example of a study that obliterates entirely these emic (collective and interpersonal) aspects of U Ba Khin's teaching lineage is Pagis 2019.

17 The most striking example of this in the Burmese context was the publication of U Ba Khin's *Pariyatti 'akhekham nhai' paṭipatti 'aphre mhan'* (*The Right Answers to Practice with a Basis of Textual Theory*) in 1952 (Ba Khin [1952] 1962). On this important treatise and what it tells us about U Ba Khin's theoretical and practical outlook, see Stuart, forthcoming: 11.2.

This text is important for a number of reasons. First, the Abhidhamma is considered to encapsulate all of the Buddha's teachings, and it has been particularly important in Burma/Myanmar. So, many Abhidhamma texts – even short sections of them – are thought to be particularly powerful because they contain the whole of the teachings in condensed form (Kyaw 2014: 130–133). Additionally, in the context of Buddhist theories of decline, the disappearance of the *Paṭṭhāna* is expected to herald the disappearance of the teachings in their entirety (Kyaw 2014: 110–119; Turner 2014: 28–40). So, to recite any part of the *Paṭṭhāna* is to ensure that the teachings are still extant. Finally, because the canonical Abhidhamma is understood by tradition to be a set of teachings delivered by the historical Buddha to a group of deities in the realm of the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, any text of this corpus is considered apotropically powerful because it draws deities supportive of the Buddha's teachings to the vicinity so that they might hear the teachings (see Kyaw 2014: 130–133). For all of these reasons, U Ba Khin was keen to recite the *Tikapāṭṭhāna* at his meditation center. What is more, an audio recording of U Ba Khin's recitation of the *Tikapāṭṭhāna* was produced at some point, and – unbeknownst to most students coming to S. N. Goenka's meditation courses today – that recording gets played into the present as a protective incantation on the first day of every ten-day *Vipassanā* course at the meditation centers that Goenka and his students established around the globe (see Goenka 2016b).

U Ba Khin surely recited many other protective texts as a regular practice at his meditation center, but only a few of these recitations survive in recorded form and are available to the public (see, for example, Kumar 2020). Another important performance that was preserved for posterity was U Ba Khin's recitation of the *Mahāsamayasutta* (Pariyatti, n.d.). This long Sutta is among those texts that the Ledi Sayadaw recommends for recitation in the *Rogantaradīpanī* because they “have the specific effect of warding off evil.” And it, along with the *Āṭānāṭṭiyasutta*, is also central to S. N. Goenka's repertoire of protective incantations that up to the present get played in digital form on his long *Vipassanā* meditation retreats (Goenka 2016d, 2016e).¹⁸ Indeed, it is clear from the way that Goenka's students deploy these incantations that even in the global secularized contexts in which Goenka's *Vipassanā* is now taught, these performances serve precisely the purpose for which the Ledi Sayadaw enjoined them in his *Rogantaradīpanī* – to ward off evil supernormal forces and invite

18 I would note here that these texts have been preserved and classed as protective devices for millennia across traditions. On the *Mahāsamayasutta* and the *Āṭānāṭṭiyasutta* and their parallels being included in ancient groupings of protective texts, see Skilling 1992, 1997.

beneficial supernormal forces, to purify the space of the meditation center of obstructive forces, and to remove unwanted forces from the bodies of meditation practitioners so that they might come to a state of physical and mental health. As with the context of U Ba Khin's teaching modalities, there is also an additional emphasis on the soteriological ends of such performances.

I shift back to an emphasis on S. N. Goenka here because it is precisely through his large-scale institution-building during the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first that U Ba Khin's teachings found their way into the global neoliberal mainstream. But the ways in which Goenka carried forward his teacher's mission have been effaced in various ways. By bringing to light the various modes of performance that U Ba Khin carried out in his career as a *Vipassanā* teacher in colonial and postcolonial Burma – most of which have been effaced or ignored by scholars – we come to discern the ways in which Goenka's own performances have more in common with those of his teacher than most might assume. The evidence of such performances presented above suggests that both Goenka and his teacher were fully ensconced in a mode of existence that is better represented by the conceptual categories of the Ledi Sayadaw's *Rogantaratīpanī* than many of the conceptual categories that they themselves put forward in their rhetorical moves aimed at drawing in a global audience. Such moves often involved equating experiences of *Vipassanā* meditation with a scientific empiricism and psychologizing meditative states to fit current trends in psychological literature. However, I argue that if we want to come to terms with the actual realities of teachers like U Ba Khin and S. N. Goenka – and the kinds of effects that the practices they taught might have on practitioners coming to learn their meditation techniques today – it is imperative that we look below the surface of their rhetorical articulations and discern the ontological frameworks in which they lived and functioned. Analyzing their various performances is one way into their world-making processes.

3 Leon E. Wright (1912–1996): A Case of Erasure in the Historiography of Modern North-American Mindfulness

One possible way to better understand U Ba Khin and Goenka, and how the idiosyncrasies of their lay *Vipassanā* teachings and practices might be rendered better legible to our modern gaze, is to turn our attention to another important but overlooked figure in the history of Burmese *Vipassanā* and its global spread. Leon E. Wright was one of six non-Burmese students of U Ba Khin deputed to teach *Vipassanā* in April of 1969 (Ba Khin 1969). The other

five were Mr. Robert H. Hover (USA), Mrs. Ruth Denison (to teach women only, USA), Mrs. Forella Landie (to teach women only, Canada), Mr. John Earl Coleman (UK), and Mr. J. Van Amersfoort (the Netherlands).

It appears that this development emerged from a strong sense of urgency that U Ba Khin came to feel during the last years of the 1960s, a sense that the fate of humanity was in imminent danger. In his letter authorizing these non-Burmese students to teach meditation globally, U Ba Khin wrote the following:

The time clock of Vipassana was struck as early as February 1968 when the conflict of forces began. The Burmese year 1330 beginning from 16/4/68 was a year of great upheaval for me. In fact I was hospitalized for 50 days from 19/4/68 and again for 25 days from 18/12/68 on account of prostate trouble. I was virtually an invalid till my last birthday on 13/3/69. The experience during the days of illness has made me to understand the nature of forces and the forces of Nature more vividly. Hence my ability now to radiate to reach my disciples in any part of the world if only they take the necessary precaution to keep the doors of reception open with the awareness of Anicca.

BA KHIN 1969: 2

U Ba Khin understood his own experiences of ill health as a sign of a broader “conflict of forces” at work in the world. He was convinced that “the atmosphere throughout the world is at this time permeated with the forces of Evil which stem from Tanha [greed], Mana [conceit], and Ditthi [wrong view] of the highest order,” and that experiences of “disturbances and resistances” for those teaching and practicing meditation were indications of the evil forces pushing back against the good work of spreading the Buddha’s liberatory teachings around the world (Ba Khin 1969: 1). We also see here an important idea that came to structure the way U Ba Khin and his students taught from 1969 onward: he would radiate his meditative power to his students wherever they were in the world and thereby extend the “forces” of the Buddha-Dhamma at his disposal to his students abroad. This was a fundamental aspect of U Ba Khin’s global teaching model.¹⁹

It was also in 1969 that U Ba Khin formally authorized S. N. Goenka to teach “Buddhist meditation abroad” on his behalf, and Goenka eventually teamed up with Robert Hover, Ruth Denison, and John Coleman in a loosely affiliated

19 For a more developed discussion of this teaching model, see Stuart 2020: 70–76, 121–125; forthcoming: III.1.

team of teachers representing U Ba Khin in India, North America, and Western Europe (Stuart 2017; 2020: 73, 98–112). As far as I am aware, there is nothing on the historical record that suggests that Forella Landie or J. Van Amersfoort ever took up U Ba Khin's call. While some accounting of the activities of Goenka, Robert Hover, Ruth Denison, and John Coleman has been carried out in modern scholarship, the histories of their teaching missions remain poorly documented (Sharf 1995; McMahan 2008, 2017; Cheah 2011; Braun 2013; Wilson 2014; Schedneck 2015; Stuart 2017; Gleig 2019). Still, they have at least been documented to some extent (Boucher 2005; Coleman [1971] 2000; Stuart 2020).²⁰

But a glaring omission in these historiographical accounts of modern Burmese-derived lay mindfulness and insight meditation is the virtual erasure of Leon E. Wright (Figure 6) from the historical record.²¹ This is all the more striking considering that Wright was the first of any of U Ba Khin's students to teach his meditation methods in a serious and consistent manner beyond the borders of Burma. Already in 1958, Wright noted in a letter to U Ba Khin:

Upon arriving in America in December, we ran into a hurricane – the kind of extreme physical disturbance you predicted I would meet. From that point on, it has been a matter of an almost constant succession of reverses, conflicts, disappointments; the evil forces have sought to break me.

The result: I am spiritually stronger and more lucid than I've ever been in my life. I have been constantly engaged in gathering little groups – teaching and meditating with them.

WRIGHT 1958

So, Wright had been charged to carry U Ba Khin's teachings with him to the United States and initiate others into the practice of lay Buddhist meditation more than a decade before U Ba Khin's 1969 call to action. Wright had also been formally authorized to teach, and provided a certificate of authorization to do so, in February of 1963 (*Washington Post, Times-Herald* 1963).²² What is more, Wright was an influential theologian and scholar of religion, teaching U Ba

20 I am currently at work on an extensive piece profiling Robert H. Hover and a more comprehensive piece on Leon E. Wright.

21 I would draw attention here to a talk given by the *Vipassanā* practitioner Aishah Shahidah Simmons on Wright's erasure from the history of the Insight Meditation traditions. Simmons argues for a need to recover Wright in order to do justice to U Ba Khin's legacy; AfroLez 2023. See also Ayo Yetunde et al. 2023.

22 See also Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1964: 76.



FIGURE 6 Leon E. Wright in 1952 as a
Guggenheim Fellow (John Simon
Guggenheim Foundation, n.d.)

Khin's meditation technique in his Christian theology courses at an important institution of higher learning in the vicinity of Washington, DC. So why has Wright been erased from the historical record?

Once some of the details of his identity get fleshed out, this erasure may appear less surprising. First, Wright was a Black man, a professor of theology at one of the premier institutions of Black learning in the United States, Howard University. So, he was marginalized within the landscape of North American culture by dint of his race.²³ Second, Wright taught meditation largely in the context of Christian theological training. Scholars of Buddhist studies, therefore – even those studying the secularization of Buddhist meditation teachings – have perhaps considered Wright's teaching mission irrelevant to their scope of study. Third, Wright's identity as a Christian charismatic and psychic, and an avowed practitioner of the occult sciences, renders him illegible to Buddhist (modernism) studies scholars, since he does not fit the normative paradigm of a Buddhist modernist on a variety of counts.²⁴

Wright's historiographical erasure can thus be understood as part of a larger problem in Buddhist (modernism) studies, the problem of oversimplified scholarly narratives – most of them embedded in historical sociological interpretive frameworks – leading to the historiographical obliteration of the acts and experiences of consequential figures that do not fit neatly within such scholarly narratives. In this respect, I would suggest that it is not just Wright who has been erased in the historiography of *Vipassanā* meditation and mindfulness meditation, though his erasure is perhaps particularly disturbing. U Ba Khin and S. N. Goenka too, though acknowledged in passing by

23 More and more, scholars paying attention to marginalized groups in the history of the United States are demonstrating how such groups have had important overlooked roles in the development of cultural flows. See, for example, Roane 2023.

24 See McMahan 2008 for a depiction of the normative scholarly paradigm of Buddhist modernism or "modern Buddhism."

some historians and scholars, have been largely obliterated – or very badly misrepresented – in historical accounts of modern Buddhist meditation because they do not fit the paradigm of Buddhist modernism. The situation gets further complicated when we look at the most common sources used to characterize these figures. The sources drawn on are often their English language talks and publications, many of which demonstrate that they themselves self-censored in certain contexts, thereby at times participating in their own erasure (see, for example, Hart 1988; VRI [1991] 1994; Ba Khin 2012).

This problem comes into stark relief when we assess arguments advanced by Joseph Cheah in his 2011 book *Race and Religion in American Buddhism: White Supremacy and Immigrant Adaptation*. Conflating the approaches to *Vipassanā* teaching and practice of the Burmese monastic meditation teacher and scholiast, the Mahāsi Sayadaw, with those of U Ba Khin, Cheah argues that “the presentation of Buddhism by Ledi Sayadaw, Mahasi Sayadaw, and U Ba Khin transcends the concerns and boundaries of locale and sect, which is one of the main characteristics of Buddhist modernism” (48) He goes on to mischaracterize some aspects of U Ba Khin’s teaching approach:

U Ba Khin’s impetus to simplify and rationalize Burmese Buddhist practices to the point of relying only on a particular form of meditation, one that was divested of devotional practices and many doctrinal underpinnings, is that it allowed for the introduction of *Vipassanā* meditation to Westerners, or how this type of meditation could be reinscribed for individualistic ideologies that surrounded the Western context.

CHEAH 2011: 48

There is perhaps an argument to be made that U Ba Khin’s approach to teaching *Vipassanā* to foreigners allowed for his practices to “be reinscribed for individualistic ideologies.” I would suggest, however, that this possibility did not come about for the reasons Cheah suggests. U Ba Khin did not “simplify and rationalize Buddhist practices,” he did not rely only on one “particular form of meditation,” and his practices were not “divested of devotional practices and many doctrinal underpinnings.” Rather, U Ba Khin’s teachings and practices were embedded in a highly elaborate mythological and millennial timescape structured around traditional Theravāda cosmology, within which U Ba Khin and his close disciples were on a cosmic mission to re-enliven the teachings of the Buddha in a degraded colonial and postcolonial age. Their goal was to bring karmically ripe individuals to states of enlightenment as quickly as possible or to set karmic intentions for future rebirths such that they might be reborn at the time of the future Buddha, Metteyya. Because the small cult that

formed around U Ba Khin considered him to be a special bodhisattva – the being destined to become the future Buddha Metteyya – the various forms of meditation that he tailored to suit individual students were all considered to have an equivalent force based primarily on U Ba Khin's own charisma and his karmic connection to powerful nonhuman awakened beings who protected his students and his meditation center. Finally, precisely because U Ba Khin was considered to have special karmic prowess as a teacher, there was among his disciples a strong devotionism to him as a guru figure, a devotionism tied explicitly to locale and sect. In some contexts, U Ba Khin himself becomes an object of devotion for his students, a wholesome object or *ārammaṇa* that can be brought to mind at the time of death as a supportive aid toward a wholesome rebirth.

Though he maintained his Christian identity to the end of his life, Leon E. Wright also participated in such modes of devotionality in his relationship with U Ba Khin:

I make haste to write to you realising just how thoughtless my silence has been. The simple fact remains, however, that I have failed to experience any separation from my Gurugyi and those closest to the Meditation Centre since I have been almost continuously with Anicca and as often as I have such an experience, I feel instinctively in your midst. ... It has been most strange: whether walking or privately meditating I call readily into being the purifying flux and warmth of change – of Anicca. Gurugyi, I owe this all to you. I am grateful to you as often as I command the state. I would have hoped that you have all felt my presence as strongly as I feel yours.

Gurugyi, I am firmly convinced that you were destined to show me the intimacies of Buddhist meditation at its very best. If I brought something to the encounter in terms of Pāramī you gave it direction and most meaningful engagement in your inspirationally challenging and genuinely productive method. I shall be with Anicca as long as I live and, as often as I do, my spirit shall gratefully acknowledge the Gurugyi who made it possible. You are that Gurugyi and you have always my deepest respect and my purest love.

WRIGHT 1958

This account of the culture of practice and devotion at U Ba Khin's meditation center demonstrates just how far wrong Buddhist modernism scholars can go when they wrap their analyses of specific historical actors into reductive sociological narratives without comprehensively assessing the historical record. The

erasure of Wright in a book explicitly about Burmese Buddhism, meditation, and race in the United States – and in which U Ba Khin is invoked consequentially in a number of places – is particularly egregious.²⁵ More broadly, I would suggest that in instances such as these, Buddhist modernism scholars – by dint of their scholarly procedures – are complicit in underwriting the very programs of coloniality and white supremacy on which they hope to shed light (Stuart, forthcoming). Most troublingly, Cheah (among others) appears in his analysis to put the onus for key historical transformations on actors such as U Ba Khin and S. N. Goenka – and other Burmese teachers – without properly accounting for their anticolonial and anti-Western politics (Cheah 2011: 36–58). He also ignores the ways in which such actors retained their traditional religious commitments and explicitly pushed back against Western teachers who sought to appropriate their teachings.²⁶

Recovering Leon E. Wright and restoring him to the historical record of *Vipassanā* meditation and mindfulness may be one way to begin to rectify the various distortions of Buddhist modernist narratives. In what follows, I briefly introduce Wright, touch on how he taught U Ba Khin's meditation method, and explore one example of how he performed his Burmese teacher's healing practices. In doing so, I argue that Wright's story and identity may provide resources for the development of a redemptive historiography of modern insight meditation and mindfulness.

4 The Healing Spirit and Visionary Experience: Leon E. Wright's Meditation Teachings and his Spiritual Path to Buddhist Awakening

Wright was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1912 and was orphaned at the age of 12. I have learned little of his childhood to date, but he received a first-class education and graduated from Boston University with honors. He went on to

25 See also Gleig 2019, in which Gleig attempts to address issues of race and racism within traditions of insight meditation in the United States while at the same time removing from view – with her Western critical gaze – the complex contexts, identities, and politics of the brown teachers who were the primary sources of the meditation traditions she studies. A similar problem can be discerned, perhaps even more acutely, in a recent article, Gajaweera 2022: 18.

26 For an account of how S. N. Goenka and Mother Sayāmā explicitly disavowed a number of their white Western students at the time of the founding of the Insight Meditation Society, because they felt that these students did not conform to their traditional models of teaching, see Stuart 2020: 98–107.

obtain an MA in the history and philosophy of religion from Boston University as well. Boston University was ahead of its time in those days in supporting the education of Black scholars, and Wright was able to continue his education at Harvard University. He went on to obtain a sacred theology degree from Harvard Divinity School in 1943 and a PhD in the history and philosophy of religion from Harvard University in 1945. He was ordained as a Congregationalist minister in Roxbury, Massachusetts in June of 1945, and from 1945 onward was a professor of New Testament literature at Howard University, where he taught a range of courses on Biblical criticism, world religions, and the occult (The Executive Committee of the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches 1945: 290). He received a Guggenheim fellowship in 1952 and was a fellow of the National Council on Religion in Higher Education from 1942 onward (John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, n.d.; National Council on Religion in Higher Education 1955: 63). He also held a number of visiting positions at various institutions of higher learning. After ten years of teaching at Howard and making himself available to various Christian communities in the DC area, Wright got the opportunity to travel to Burma and serve as a cultural attaché to the United States Embassy in Rangoon. It was during this consequential and formative period of his life and education that Wright came in contact with U Ba Khin. Based on what we know of his work and teaching after his encounter with his guru, it appears that U Ba Khin's meditation teachings came to dominate Wright's approach to spiritual practice, teaching, and theological perspectives.

The available historical resources do not allow me to fully reconstruct Wright's outlook on spiritual practice before he went to Burma in 1955. But it is clear from his dissertation and his 1952 Guggenheim-funded project on "historical studies of the healing miracles of the New Testament and their value of modern life" that Wright was deeply immersed in a conceptualization of Christian practice that took visionary experience and healing as fundamental facets of the spiritual life (*Washington Post* 1952).²⁷ While it is known that Wright visited a number of meditation centers in Rangoon, some of them with monastic leadership, it is not surprising that he ended up under the tutelage of U Ba Khin, a lay teacher who was known for teaching non-Buddhists "without interfering with their religious faith" (Stuart 2020: 49; forthcoming: 11.4).

But it seems likely that Wright was drawn to U Ba Khin's teachings for reasons beyond those of religious identity. First, U Ba Khin's anticolonial politics

27 Later in life, Wright became even more explicit about his understanding of visionary experience as a central facet of early Christian life. See Andrews 1975: 11.

fit well with Wright's political outlook, and U Ba Khin, like Wright, believed that the practice of a pure spiritual life in community might serve as a religious and spiritual corrective to the excesses of imperialism and modernity (Wright 1944: 104–105). Second, U Ba Khin's healing practices, some of which have been described above among the repertoire of his performative teaching activities, would surely have drawn in the theologian interested in Jesus's healing miracles. Finally, it appears that a series of visionary experiences – and U Ba Khin and Sayāmā's affirmation of Wright's accomplishment as a meditation adept – also contributed to Wright committing himself to the ultimate spiritual care of U Ba Khin. In what follows, I briefly touch on some of the historical evidence currently available to me that accounts for Wright's experiences in Burma and his mode of teaching meditation when he returned to the United States.

Wright wrote little about his experiences in Burma, as far as I am aware, but there are bits of evidence here and there that provide insight into his encounter with U Ba Khin. First, in a *Washington Post, Times-Herald* article from February of 1963, titled “Minister Learns Buddhist Meditation,” Wright informed the newspaper that under U Ba Khin's guidance, he “progressed so rapidly that his guru, or teacher, told him he had reached a state of reflection achieved by only one in 10,000 Buddhists” (*Washington Post, Times-Herald* 1963). Though this is a somewhat enigmatic statement, it is likely that such an affirmation of Wright's progress by his teachers was in fact confirmation – on their terms – of his entry into the first stage of Buddhist awakening, the stage of stream-entry (*sotāpatti*). In any case, his was considered a rare accomplishment, and he was understood to be uniquely talented in matters of karma and spiritual development.

On Wright's experiential terms, a number of other indicators led him to a sense of certainty about the validity of his meditation practice under U Ba Khin. A North American student who learned meditation under Wright shared several of his accounts of visionary experience while meditating in Burma:

Near the end of his time there, he [Wright] had a meditation where, when he opened his eyes, there was fire coming out of his feet. And another occasion very near the end, in his meditation, a hand appeared to him and handed him a yellow rose, and he knew it was the blessings of the Christ.

ASHLEY-FARRAND 2013a: 156–215

According to this account, these signs appearing in meditation (Pāli: *nimitta*) – which U Ba Khin and Sayāmā often used to judge the progress and

karmic capacities of their students – led Wright to strong convictions about his Buddhist meditation experiences being forms of Christian visionary revelation.²⁸

When we look at what Wright practiced and taught later in life, it is also difficult not to see the imprint of U Ba Khin's teachings on every aspect of his ministry. It appears that Wright stayed true to his devotional commitment to his Buddhist teacher and carried out a mission to spread his practices well into his later years. Wright called his technique the “cleaning out technique,” in line with U Ba Khin's characterization of the process of meditative purification. One of Wright's students, Thomas Ashley-Farrand, guides students through the technique as follows:

Sit with a spine straight and steady, with the head resting comfortably on the top of the spine. Assume a closed [posture] or a position with the hands and the feet, either touching or crossed. With the inner gaze extend up above the horizon to 30 degrees above the horizon and begin your bellows breathing. Now eyes closed. We're going to start by cleaning out the head, clean out the head. There is the left hemisphere, the right hemisphere, the connecting tissue, clean it all out, clean out. We have the nerves leading from the eyes, the bones and nerves leading from the ear back into the brain. Clean it all out, clean it out now. ... Now down into the feet, the tops of the feet, the bottoms of the feet ... Now the entire musculoskeletal system all the muscles and all the bones in the body, clean them out as a group, clean them out now. ... Now the entire body, from the tips of the toes to the top of the head, clean out the whole body: physical body, subtle body, astral body, lower mental body. Clean out all of your bodies now, clean them out, clean out. Now take a deep breath, go to the heart center and relax and receive, relax and receive, relax and receive.

ASHLEY-FARRAND 2013b: 00:00–33:15

We see here a technique of meditative practice that very closely mirrors U Ba Khin's teaching of *Vipassanā* as emergent from *ānāpāna*, or meditation on the in and out breath (“bellows breathing” in Wright's and Ashley-Farrand's language).²⁹ The unique characteristic of U Ba Khin's *Vipassanā* was the

28 For a few aspects of how U Ba Khin used visionary signs (*nimitta*) that appeared to his students in meditation to assess their karmic background, see Stuart, forthcoming: II.4.

29 For a description of S. N. Goenka's version of a similar mode of *Vipassanā* as emergent from *ānāpāna* practice, see Goenka 2016c: 25:30 onward.

systematic movement of attention throughout the body in order to discern impermanence and thereby “clean out” and remove current-life karmic impurities that would manifest in bodily tensions and blockages throughout the body, emerging as various types of sensations experienced at various levels of subtlety within the bodily frame. Once the bodily frame had been thoroughly “cleaned out,” a practitioner would bring focused attention to the heart-base (Pāli: *hadayavatthu*) or “heart center” – the physical seat of the mind described physiologically as the solar plexus or the xiphoid process of the sternum – and allow for karmic influences from past lives to be released from the subconscious mind or discerned in visions as marks of spiritual or karmic progress.

So, Wright was a devoted and loyal student of U Ba Khin, and while he framed his teachings as the essence of Christian spirituality, he was clear that his access to deep spiritual silence – and to what he came to refer to as a “psychologically peeled down awareness” (Wright 1978) – came to him from a traditional Burmese Buddhist method of spiritual practice. He also hewed closely to U Ba Khin’s technical approach to Buddhist meditation in his teaching.³⁰ What seems to be less present in Wright’s teaching approach are the uniquely performative aspects of U Ba Khin’s Buddhist protective practices, the kinds of practices discussed earlier in this article. It might seem, in fact, that we have moved away a bit from the central focus of our earlier discussion.

It is here that we might revisit an aspect of Wright’s spiritual interests that were at the center of his early intellectual formation. I noted above that Wright had a central interest in Jesus’s visionary life, and that much of his early research focused on Jesus’s healing ministry as an aspect of his teachings that could be made relevant to modern concerns. U Ba Khin’s charismatic healing practices and performances, too, were an integral part of his *Vipassanā* meditation teachings and redeployments of performative healing practices advocated by the Ledi Sayadaw. The integral role of charismatic healing in Wright’s meditation teaching and practice demonstrates how his rearticulation of *Vipassanā* among Black Christians – and others – in the United States in the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s shares many aspects of the performative healing repertoire of Burmese Theravāda Buddhist ritual-healing traditions. Wright’s student,

30 Gustaaaf Houtman has documented how Leon E. Wright was responsible for inspiring U Ko Lay – U Ba Khin’s close confidant and biographer, eventual Pali scholar, and founder and Vice Chancellor of Mandalay University – to seek out U Ba Khin and to study meditation. U Ko Lay went to learn meditation from U Ba Khin after hearing Wright give a public talk on the practical relevance of Buddhist meditation at a government event in Washington, DC; Houtman 1990: 221–223.

Thomas Ashley-Farrand (Namadeva), discussed this aspect of Wright's teaching as follows: "He would visit hospitals and teach people this technique and lead them through it. And sometimes there were spontaneous healings, and they would like to credit Dr. Wright with healing them. And he adamantly refused and would say: 'the healing occurred out of the overflow of your spirit'" (Ashley-Farrand 2013a: 01:22–01:40).

Both U Ba Khin and S. N. Goenka also deployed the rhetorical tactic of not taking personal responsibility for miraculous healings, while at the same time attributing such healings to agencies or forces accessed through meditation and through the work of the meditation teacher. At times all three of these teachers spoke about healing as a "byproduct" of meditation. Yet it is clear that all of them also at times acknowledged a more active role in such healings, as we have seen above in the case of U Ba Khin. A striking account of a healing carried out by Wright on one of his graduate students at Howard University, Yvonne Seon – who is perhaps most famous today for being the mother of the influential comedian Dave Chapelle – brings out how Wright would use the laying on of hands, in conjunction with the teaching of meditation, to perform healing miracles:

Meanwhile, the minister that funeralized my grandmother introduced me to reverend Dr. Leon Edward Wright. Dr. Wright was a New Testament scholar and mystic who helped me move forward with this "call," recognizing me as a "channel for the flow-through of the love of God." ...

While in Divinity school, I was invited to a spiritual retreat led by Dr. Wright. He talked about the healing ministry of Jesus and we were encouraged to "follow" rather than to "imitate" Jesus. He taught us to meditate daily as part of the process of staying attuned to God's will for our lives. ... On the last day, I mentioned to Dr. Wright a car accident following which my peripheral vision had gradually diminished to the point that I had less than 10 percent sight. He assured me that I would need my eyesight for the work ahead. He invited me to sit near him at lunch to discuss intercessory prayer in ministry. At the table, he spoke of the energy that comes from attunement to God, and suggested that Jesus used the overflow of this energy to heal. Impulsively, he asked if he could lay hands on my eyes to target them for the overflow of energy he was feeling. I agreed. He reached across the table, and when he removed his hands, I could see again. This experience and the message of the retreat became the core of my own ministry.

MORRISON-REED 2011: 251

We also find accounts of group healing practices that took place at Wright's Saturday morning services, which primarily involved Wright sermonizing on the process of meditation whereby seekers were encouraged to struggle through challenges to find their "cosmic blueprint":

He tells his congregation of the risk involved in searching out one's cosmic blueprint: "Of course, there is certain risk, but the universe guarantees protection for the pure in heart. Cosmos insures that fire won't burn you, nor will water drown you, despite the obvious discomforts."

After the lecture, the congregation offers names of people for whom prayers are said aloud. Also, those who feel the need to be "touched" by the healing hands of the "gifted" come forward to Dr. Wright. Those with the healing hands grasp each other at the shoulder and form a ring around the person to be touched. Then in unison they recite a prayer for healing.

ANDREWS 1975: 11

It is not clear what form these prayer recitations might have taken in Wright's time, but the legacy of these practices has been carried on and can be observed today in the Covenant Christian Community (Figure 7), a community founded by several of Wright's students and pastored in its early years by Lola Johnson Singletary (Covenant Christian Community, n.d.; 2022: 2:18:30–2:28:45).³¹ Yvonne Seon, whose account of having her impaired vision restored by Wright was presented above, also pastored this community for some time (2022: 1:34:00). The Buddhist background of Wright's meditation teachings have all but disappeared in these contexts, though there is explicit mention of Jesus as one among many enlightened beings (54:57, 2:09:27).

In reflecting on the aspects of Wright's performative healing practices, we might recall U Ba Khin's account, presented above, of his healing work with the old man with high blood pressure. In that instance, U Ba Khin's sharing of merit, and his exuding of protective good wishes of *mettā* or nonhostility (*khyam"sā* ချမ်းသာ) – understood as a protective flow of energy imbued with feelings of goodwill – was accompanied by a laying on of hands. This combination of interpersonal contact and goal-directed recitation effectuated a process of healing. More in line with the collective nature of the above account of Wright's congregation, interlocutors at S. N. Goenka's main meditation center in Maharashtra provided me accounts from the early years of his mission in

31 For a short overview of the founding and history of Covenant Christian Community, see Covenant Christian Community 2022: 1:28:26–1:35:20.



FIGURE 7 Web page of the Covenant Christian Community, a Christian congregation founded in 1978 under the inspiration of the healing ministry of Leon Edward Wright

which groups of meditators would encircle a sick individual and direct their *mettā* toward that individual with the particular aim of healing. While such practices were discontinued fairly early on in Goenka's mission, over concerns that such public displays were sending the wrong message about the nature of *Vipassanā* practice, the ideas behind such practices remain central into the present within the practice communities that Goenka built. I would suggest that the affinities between Wright's charismatic healing practices and those of U Ba Khin and Goenka allow us to see all three of them in a new light. Charismatic healing was at the very center of all of these traditions, as was the idea that special individuals with occult knowledge were particularly effective in performing such healings and facilitating collective spiritual practices to effectuate such healings.

We might extend this discussion of affinities to Wright's explicit advocacy for the necessity of occult knowledge in understanding the mechanics of disease, illness, and healing. I noted above that the Ledi Sayadaw emphatically suggested that "European doctors in the East should give serious consideration to evil spirits as the source of epidemics and explore the ways and means of countering the evil spirits along the lines described above [in this manual]." Wright makes a similar, if more refined, move in his 1961 article, "Are Demons Outmoded: Demonology and the Modern Temper," written not long after he returned from Burma. Analyzing references to Jesus' casting out of "unclean spirits" in his healing ministry, Wright pushed back against the various normative interpretive modalities of his time:

As is readily conceded, only a warped perspective on the dynamics of interpersonal relations could fail to ascribe highest therapeutic potential to the quality of a personality from whose contact, on the record, followed such consistently positive results. May there not be additionally operative in such circumstances, however, influences incalculably beyond the scope of even this personality, an appreciation of which, however dim, could serve as means to far more practically appropriate cues from Jesus' healing ministry than are presently available to remote psychological or theological analysis?

WRIGHT 1961: 12

Wright goes on to assert his own experiential understanding of the efficacy of Jesus's healing techniques:

The equally unequivocal and consistent testimony of the early and later church that Jesus' unique therapeutic potency was communicated "in his name" allows logically a conclusion which contemporary hermeneutics has seemed singularly reluctant to draw: *the possessing entities mentioned in Jesus' encounters with mental aberration were in all probability spiritual agencies wholly amenable to the moral and spiritual ascendancy consequent upon Jesus' peculiarly effective attunement of spirit with rarefied levels of God-consciousness and power.* In conspicuous instances this moral ascendancy effected favorable response in these deterrent entities by the mere invocation of the name. This opinion does not purport to rest upon the usual buttress of either Messianic or divine identity argued by dogmatic and credal protagonists. The present writer suggests that for the enlightenment of both psychiatrist and exegete it will not be seen to be incompatible with the finest tradition of twentieth-century inquiry to "look for the possessing entity" in many a nervous disorder which now in the absence of a more broadly-gauged – and open-minded – investigation into *all* the relevant facts involved merely bears a ponderous psychological label.

WRIGHT 1961: 20

Wright's invocation of "possessing entities," "spiritual agencies," and "deterrent entities" fits well with U Ba Khin's conception of agentive *dhāt'*. His critique of the limitations of "ponderous psychological label[s]" likewise suggests – like the early twentieth-century critique of the Ledi Sayadaw of Western medical knowledge – that he considered his experiential knowledge of the occult to offer avenues that might inform a benighted modern psychiatry and psychology.

Wright's explicit engagement with spirits in his healing modalities is also well documented. One intriguing account provides details about how he worked with spirits in healing contexts:

Dr. Wright was told of a young woman who had been virtually immobile in the hospital for six weeks after two brain operations. He was urged by a former student, now a bishop, to see the woman and give "a spiritual diagnosis."

"When I entered the hospital room, I could feel the spiritual pulse," Dr. Wright said. "The spirit was there but was living outside the woman's body because of the severe pain she was having. I began to talk to her spirit by asking if she wanted to finish her life's work."

The Bishop and the woman's husband entered the room and talked to the spirit in similar terms. This method of having more than one person in on prayers is what Dr. Wright calls "causal nexus" or "the chain."

"The doctors were baffled when this woman rallied that afternoon after so many weeks of unconsciousness," he said.

ANDREWS 1975: 11

These modes of collective and performative healing share additional affinities with U Ba Khin's methodologies. It is likewise telling that Wright in large part attributed his own occult capacities to the practices he learned from U Ba Khin in Burma, even if in many of his writings and teachings that fact is out of view.

Reflecting on Wright's unique ministry is one way to bring his Asian teacher and the Theravāda performatives of his Asian teacher's meditation lineage into high relief, rendering the teachers of that lineage legible as occultists and healers, overflowing the mold of the Buddhist modernist stories that Western scholars have written for them. Perhaps more importantly, I have taken an initial step to give Leon Edward Wright more prominence in the historical record, and to demonstrate his historiographical relevance for the story of modern mindfulness practices.

5 Conclusion

To briefly conclude this reflection on some of the performative modes of Buddhist practice in a unique constellation of Theravadic meditative traditions that draw their inspiration from the great monastic exegete, the Ledi Sayadaw, we might end by returning to the Sayadaw's own emphasis on occult knowledge as the fountainhead of religion. In his *Rogantaradīpanī*, the Ledi Sayadaw argues stridently that "religion" (*bhāsā*) is the purpose of life:

There are people who are skeptical of religious treatises (*bhāsā kyaṃ“ myā”*). They believe only what they have experienced for themselves. They are ignorant of the truth of the afterlife. They forget that when it comes to capacities for knowledge and wisdom, there are an infinite number of things in the world that are not able to be known or seen, that is, by the average person (*pakati so sū tui*). So, religion (*bhāsā*) is not something to be thrown overboard. The quest for true religion (*hut’ mhan’ so bhāsā*) is the purpose [of a life]. This is because future well-being (i.e., in the here-after) outweighs present well-being. Once you are misdirected now, thousands of future existences will be at stake. Beware!

LEDI SAYADAW, n.d.: 112–11332

We see in this emphatic statement a strong emphasis on defining religion by way of the Buddhist notion of rebirth, and the possibility that extraordinary knowledge – often revealed by traditional religious texts and meditative experience – allows one to comprehend hidden aspects of the universe. The performative therapeutics of the *Rogantaradīpanī* are efficacious because they draw on this repertoire of extraordinary knowledge that was the purview of the historical Buddha.

Leon Wright, who received the “invaluable instrument for acquiring ... psychologically peeled-down awareness” from U Ba Khin – a disciple in the practice lineage of the Ledi Sayadaw – also constructed his therapeutic theology on the idea that understanding the “cosmic blueprint” of beings was the primary goal of the religious life:

“Thousands of scientifically-oriented individuals have given the plausibility to survival after death too long ignored by theologians and scientists alike” he insists.

To further explore “life after death,” Dr. Wright turns to the philosophies and funerary habits of Africa and China. In particular, he mentions the voodoo rituals of Haiti, where the loa, a Haitian Voodoo cult diety [*sic*] of African origin, is invited to possess its hungans and hunsis for very serious religious purposes.

On his feelings about reincarnation, he says, “Each individual has a history and future and sometimes it can be helpful to know what you were before.” This is possible only with deep spiritual reflection, he explains.

32 Ledi Sayadaw 1955: 72. This is a slightly modified version of U Tin U (Myaung)’s translation.

Always, Dr. Wright returns to the roots of his philosophy: “Man must realize that he is part of the cosmic experience. We are spirits first, with the temporary loan of a physical body.”

ANDREWS 1975: 11

At the center of the performative practices discussed in these pages is the idea that all beings are enmeshed in a cosmic flow of energy, conditioned by actions, past experiences, and subtle interactions of elemental forces of the universe. When one learns to discern the contours of that energy through scriptural and meditative understanding, one can intervene in the flow to help guide and heal others who are seeking to understand these deeper aspects of reality. Whether prostrating oneself to the Buddhas to invoke their presence, sharing merits by ritual formula in order to remove invasive forces, showering students with “the element of *nirvāṇa*” in a resounding chant, or laying on hands to catalyze the overflow of spirit, the performative practices of the meditation teachers in the lineage of the Ledi Sayadaw have been central to the construction of their meditation teachings since the inception of that lineage. More attention to these aspects of globalized and secularized *Vipassanā* practice will help scholars better understand modern insight and mindfulness practices in their broadest contours.

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