

Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions: A Historical Perspective, by Bhikkhu Anālayo. Wisdom Publications, 2021. 184pp. Hb. \$24.95, ISBN-13: 9781614297192; Ebook \$12.99, ISBN-10:1614297193.

Reviewed by Chandima Gangodawila, Ronin Institute, New Jersey, USA.
chandima.gangodawila@ronininstitute.org

Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions: A Historical Perspective is a book written by respected scholar and Buddhist monk Bhikkhu Anālayo, best known for his comparative studies of early Buddhist texts. The book focuses on four distinct types of superiority conceit: 1) the male-centered superiority conceit resulting in discrimination against women and their exclusion from religious institutions and holy sites; 2) the superiority conceit held by some Mahāyāna Buddhists over those who allegedly do not aspire to Buddhahood; 3) the superiority conceit held by some Theravāda Buddhists regarding the claim that their tradition inherited an earlier and more authentic form of Buddhism; and 4) the superiority conceit of some Secular Buddhists, who promote a form of practice supposedly free of superstition and religious content deemed unnecessary.

In critiquing these forms of conceit, the author urges adherents of various Buddhist traditions to find a higher sense of community and shared values. He also suggests that overcoming such divisive views could help Buddhists face the many challenges of the contemporary world, from consumerism to unmindful behaviour and even the unfolding environmental crisis. The author informs the reader that his arguments are primarily based on “early Buddhist teachings,” which he identifies with the first four *nikāyas* of the Theravāda canon and their parallels as preserved in other Buddhist canons. Despite Anālayo being a world-renowned scholar of early Pāli *nikāyas* and Chinese *āgama* texts, his stated aim on this occasion is to make information more accessible to the average reader, by providing translations of key primary passages and presenting selected secondary literature.

The book is organized into four sections, each exploring one type of superiority conceit. The first section discusses androcentrism in Buddhism, which results in women being excluded from various roles. Anālayo examines the plight of women who aspire to be ordained monastics, but are prevented from doing so due to the disappearance of the *bhikkhunī* order. He also touches upon the theme on gender-based exclusion, especially from visiting certain holy sites and other venues. As is well known, the Buddha is said to have at first rejected the establishment of a nuns’ order (*bhikkhunī sāsaṇa*). A prediction about a faster decline of Buddhism is adduced as reason in the traditional story. Anālayo points out that this narrative should be understood within its historical and narrative contexts before

Keywords: Superiority Conceit, Buddhism, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Secular Buddhism

moving on to make more pragmatic suggestions. By resorting to *vinaya* passages, he points out that the order of *bhikkhunīs* could and should have been revived by male monastics. He claims that the failure to revive the *bhikkhunī* order was due to misinterpretations of some of the Buddha's teachings and his attitudes towards women, and to the patriarchal bias of early South Asian society at large (44). The failure to do so has resulted in increased discrimination against women, who now find themselves caught between the lay and monastic worlds (16).

As for the issue of gender-based accessibility, he recalls a signboard from a well-known Thai temple that reads "This place is forbidden for women" (24). Similarly, I can recall an undocumented practice in Sri Lankan Theravāda tradition that forbids women from visiting the chamber of the Śrī Mahābodhi and Tooth Relic temple in Sri Lanka. While politically prominent women attend the chambers of these two sites regularly, we may assume that this is a form of privilege. The Buddha's supportive attitude toward women can be seen in several passages, including when he allowed Mahāpajāpati and her followers to shave their heads and wear robes (30-32). Women's capabilities are evident in early Buddhist texts, such as an exchange between the celestial Māra and the experienced *bhikkhunī* Somā about women's ability to achieve awakening (*Somā Sutta*, SN 5.2). Anālayo goes on to say that there are ten more encounters between Māra and enlightened *bhikkhunīs* during which they defeat him by highlighting the truth that gender is unimportant when it comes to the fruition of insight (94). As Anālayo points out, Māra's sexual enticement was intended primarily for male monastics, not *bhikkhunīs* (36). This implies that Māra continues to trouble all unenlightened monastics, regardless of gender. Thus, Anālayo convincingly uses examples from early Buddhist texts to convey the idea that women should be treated equally in all elements of Buddhist society and should never be excluded.

The author continues with the second section, which focuses on the superiority conceit of some Mahāyāna Buddhists, who may see other Buddhist traditions as inferior, particularly those that do not place sufficient emphasis on Buddhahood as the ultimate goal of practice. In this section, Anālayo also quotes from a range of Mahāyāna scriptural sources—including the *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*, the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, and the *Śrīmāladevīsīṃhanāda Sūtra*. An important point concerns the misconception that those aiming to Buddhahood possess the same body marks as the Buddha (51-63), such as the circle beneath one's feet. This, however, was merely a pictorial projection that Mahāyānists took literally, elevating the bodhisattvas' particular body motifs and emphasizing that their path to Buddhahood had roots in previous lives (56). Some of the narratives relating to Buddha Maitreya are discussed and problematized with regard to such bodily motifs. Anālayo then engages with various analogies that illustrate superiority conceit, including that of a donkey that cannot carry an elephant's load—with the elephant of course symbolizing bodhisattvas (69).

It is often argued that Buddhists who do not aspire to full awakening (*sammā sambuddhatta*) may not be sufficiently compassionate towards others, and may also lack the characteristic fearlessness of bodhisattvas. The author demonstrates that

this superiority conceit is misguided by emphasizing that even the Buddha Gotama aspired towards liberation. Practitioners should also focus on the many outstanding disciples as role models, not just the Buddha himself (57). These figures, highly revered in Theravāda, exemplify a range of ideal qualities, including compassion and fearlessness.

The author suggests embracing a more complex and nuanced view of the goals of Theravāda practice, which turn out to be particularly diverse. The idea that Theravāda only supports arhathood is incorrect, for the tradition promotes all three kinds of awakening— including full awakening (*sammā sambuddha*), individual awakening (*pacceka buddha*), and arhathood (*arahant*) itself. This discussion extends into a critique of the derogatory term *hīnayāna* (lesser vehicle). While today the term is widely avoided, Anālayo encourages Theravāda practitioners and scholars to challenge such misguided perception more actively.

In the third part of the book, Anālayo moves onto the superiority conceit held by some Theravādins, who claim to be the inheritors of early—and hence more authentic—Buddhist teachings. The author challenges this perception by pointing out that it is only due to historical coincidence that the Buddha’s teachings were preserved in Pāli (28, 102). According to the author, the Theravāda idea of Pāli as the “root language” contradicts both history and early Buddhist teachings (79). Furthermore, when laymen are asked to recite the three refuges (*tisaraṇa*) in both *makāraṇta* (*buddham*) and *niggahita* (*buddhang*) forms, they are following a method based on Vedic recitation, rather than the Buddha’s own teachings on language. Anālayo explains this by referring to earlier observations by Oskar von Hinüber (80).

The author then points out that some Theravāda teachings do not mirror those of the *nikāyas*. The author supports this claim by referring to Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* (79, 84), which has influenced the majority of Theravāda meditation techniques. In the *Visuddhimagga*, the Buddha is said to be omniscient (*sabbaññū*), which in turn has implications for the development of Abhidhamma thought. Anālayo points out that there is no early *sutta* in which the Buddha stated his omniscience (83). According to early Buddhist writings, the Buddha claimed to have only acquired the three higher knowledges (*tivijjā*). As Anālayo points out, it is not only the summaries of *dhammas* (known as *mātikās*), that were important in establishing the Theravādin concept of omniscience, but also how the Abhidhamma was presented to the public by emphasising the preciseness of descriptions of reality.

Furthermore, Theravādin Abhidhamma philosophy differs from that found in early Buddhist texts. A striking example is Abhidhamma’s explanation of the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*) and mindfulness. Early discourses refer only to a sense of self as a clinging to the five aggregates (*pañcupādānakkhandha*) and explain the fourth aggregate (*saṅkhāra*) as volition or will power. Abhidhamma philosophy supplements the fourth aggregate with a plethora of additional connotations. The fourth aggregate, as per the *Visuddhimagga*, is also defined as possessing mindfulness (86). Anālayo believes that early Buddhist teachings did not include such connotations.

Anālayo lists a number of differences between the Buddha's early teachings (i.e. the first four *nikāya* texts) and Theravāda teachings, discussing several fundamental concepts such as the forms of divine conduct (*brahmavihāras*), the theory of momentariness (*khaṇikavāda*), dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), non-self (*anatta*), and the seven purification stages (*satta visuddhi*). Within this compelling discussion, "insight meditation" and "absorption" stand out. Mindfulness is defined loosely in Theravāda teachings as the ability to plunge into its objects (see Buddhaghosa's explanation of the numerous "mind objects" in the *Visuddhimagga*). The author illustrates this concept with a quote from a modern Burmese monk, U Pandita (98). Contemporary Burmese meditation masters have included momentariness in the practice of meditation, inviting meditators to intimately experience the dissolution of mind and matter (99). Anālayo agrees with the contemporary meditation methods advocated by Burmese Theravāda masters, such as slow-motion walking, repetitive body scanning, and the facilitation of experience fragmentation based on momentariness. However, the author believes that regardless of the approach adopted, the final result according to earlier discourse should be the "insight knowledge of dissolution" (*bhaṅga-nāṇa*). Another divergence is the current emphasis on "insight absorption" (*vipassanā jhāna*), which is not an early Buddhist concept. This fascinating concept was introduced by Mahāsi Sayādaw and his students as a component of *jhāna* practice (100-101). As can be seen from the above, the claim that Theravāda Buddhists possess the Buddha's original teachings requires several qualifications and one should be mindful of the tradition's complex and highly enriching historical trajectories.

The author then moves on to the final chapter, where he calls our attention to yet another superiority conceit linked to what has been labelled "Secular Buddhism." In this section, Anālayo primarily engages with books by Stephen Batchelor (105). Secular Buddhism approaches Buddhist teachings through scientific and humanistic views in order to dismantle superstitions and religiosity. Batchelor's aim is to unearth the Buddha's priceless lessons that are relevant to modern life. This approach emphasises personal transformation and awakening during this lifetime, without a focus on future rebirth, or even nirvana.

Anālayo challenges Batchelor on a number of key points, which I list below in loose order. The first point concerns Batchelor's very definition of "Buddhism." Batchelor contends that the term "Buddhism" lacks emic equivalents. However, this does not take into account expressions such as the Pāli *buddhasāsana*. This very term is still used interchangeably with Buddhism in several Buddhist countries (107-109). Anālayo also disagrees with Batchelor's assertion that the Buddha first and foremost taught dharma practice, rather than another "-ism" for people to believe in. However, faith (*saddhā*) is a vital component of Buddhism and should be fully valued (112-113). Batchelor also argues that the current monastic community is far less egalitarian and less effective in preserving the dharma than the early one was. Anālayo responds by asserting that Batchelor's concept of monasticism contradicts various early sources, including the *Khaggavisāna Sutta* in the *Sutta Nipāta* (115).

Similarly, Batchelor views Māra as a source of inner uncertainty rather than a threat to the Buddha's Awakening. He places emphasis on instincts and neurological functions that must be methodically cut off (118-119). Anālayo claims that there is no relevant material to support Batchelor's argument that defilements are simply evolutionary dynamics (118). According to Batchelor, the Buddha's full Awakening did not occur in a single instance, but rather occurred multiple times. He defines Awakening as a complex chain of several accomplishments acquired via rearranging one's relationship with *dukkha*, or suffering (120). Anālayo refutes this by pointing to an early Buddhist *sutta* which claims that when full Awakening is attained, defilements are completely removed from the mind (121).

The presentation of the four noble truths (*ariyasacca*) in the context of the ancient Indian scheme of medical diagnosis—sickness (the first noble truth); the cause of sickness (the second noble truth); recovery from illness (the third noble truth); and a treatment plan for illness (the fourth noble truth)—leads Batchelor to the conclusion that the four noble truths were added at a later stage in the development of Buddhism (125). Here, Anālayo criticizes Batchelor for misinterpreting several of K. R Norman's claims concerning the noble truths. Finally, Batchelor believes that the eightfold noble path should be considered the final objective of a practitioner, which Anālayo claims is due to ignorance of two further components of the path, "right knowledge" (*sammā ñāṇa*) and "right liberation" (*sammā vimutti*) as explained in the *Mahācattārisaka Sutta* MN 117 (129).

Ultimately, Anālayo believes, Batchelor's *Buddhism without Beliefs* is based on various secular beliefs and assumptions, rather than on early Buddhist teachings. There is also the question of whether Batchelor's research employs some Christian missionary tactics designed to discredit early Buddhism. Anālayo recommends the Western world to approach Asian Buddhist teachings with caution, avoiding the extremes of blind acceptance or rejection (135).

Anālayo's work is in many ways outstanding and innovative. The audacity of questioning the superiority conceit of various Buddhist traditions is admirable and the discussions are intellectually challenging and informative. The majority of Anālayo's views are supported by primary and secondary sources, lending his work legitimacy and dependability. The book is well-organized and the four sections include summaries and various visual materials to ease memorization and understanding of the key points.

The book could also have benefited from some improvements. Given the author's references to early Buddhist texts, there is no coherent account of the "early discourses," allowing readers to have a clear frame of reference. This, and the fact that the author extensively quotes his own work, leads me to question whether the author is fully transparent about some unwarranted assumptions he himself may be promoting. Slott (2021), for example, has criticised parts of Anālayo's book, alleging misinterpretation or partial knowledge of some of the issues covered. He contends that the author misrepresents Stephen Batchelor's beliefs on early Buddhism and displays a limited understanding of Secular Buddhism.

Anālayo's *Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions: A Historical Perspective* is a must-read for both specialists of Asian religious history as well as practitioners looking to develop their practice. The book will surely benefit future research on understanding the religious and historical backgrounds that lead to various superiority conceits. It will also encourage greater unity among the many people who have been touched by the Buddha's teachings.

Bibliography

Slott, Mike. 2021. 'What Bhikkhu Anālayo Got Wrong: A Review of "Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions".' Secular Buddhist Network (blog). 13 March 2021. <https://secularbuddhistnetwork.org/what-bhikkhu-Anālayo-got-wrong-a-review-of-superiority-conceit-in-buddhist-traditions/>.