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Book Review

Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions: A Historical Perspective

By Bhikkhu Anālayo. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2021, xiv + 162 pages, ISBN: 978614297192 (hardcover), $24.95 USD.

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Bhikkhu Anālayo has made a name for himself as a scholar and teacher. His renown is warranted, as he has published dozens of studies in academic journals and Buddhist publishing houses, from the United Kingdom and Germany to Taiwan and Singapore, over the last twenty years. His studies largely focus on what he refers to as "early Buddhism," that is, the perspectives and positions of Buddhists from the fifth to third centuries before the common era (21). *Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions* can be seen a digest of sorts. It takes the substance of those prior studies and puts them to work against the "superiority conceits" found among contemporary Buddhists, particularly in Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Secular Buddhist contexts. Anālayo identifies four conceits as the objects of his concern:

1. The conceit of males, manifesting as opposition to full ordination for women, as well as in the refusal to acknowledge women as advanced bodhisattvas. (1)
2. The conceit of those who aspire to Buddhahood, which manifests in Mahāyāna Buddhist claims that the bodhisattva path is superior to that of the arhat. (1)
3. The conceit of Theravāda Buddhists, present in their claims that their tradition conserves the original teachings of the Buddha. (1)
4. The conceit of Secular Buddhists, embodied in claims by Stephen Batchelor, that they understand the Buddha's teachings better than traditional Buddhists. (1–2)

Anālayo's concern in his book is "not to keep identifying instances where conceit manifests, but rather to explore the network of conditions that appear to underpin the four forms of superiority conceit taken up for study." (1) Each chapter of the book is focused on a single conceit, and "involves a survey of historical developments, compared with relevant teachings in the early discourses." (1) Anālayo realizes that what he presents may rub some readers the wrong way, but he assures us that it is not his intention simply to provoke or be dismissive. He approaches the subject as an insider to the tradition and as one who is working on his own conceit. In providing us with a historical analysis, he wants to give us a perspective that might mitigate our own conceits. Anālayo observes that the chapters of his book all follow the same pattern: they examine the conceits by searching for evidence of them in the "early" Buddhist texts extant in Pāli, Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese, invariably finding that the conceits hold no water since there is no such textual evidence.

Chapter one, on the conceit of males, is devoted primarily to debunking misogynist claims from Buddhists about the spiritual inferiority of women and concomitant male opposition to full female ordination. Anālayo shows in this chapter that the "early" Buddhist texts provide a very different picture of the Buddha than those which justify the conceit of males. In the "early" texts, the Buddha intends to establish a *bhikkhunī* sangha and unequivocally asserts the spiritual equality of women; it is only after the Buddha's demise, according to Anālayo, that we find androcentric and misogynic interpolations in the texts. Alongside this, Anālayo dives into the historical and legal circumstances surrounding *bhikkhunī* ordination, showing that it is indeed possible according to monastic code to re-establish a *bhikkhunī* sangha once one has died out.

Chapter two focuses on the concepts which Anālayo takes to be the conditions for the conceit of aspiring to Buddhahood: the Buddha's auspicious marks; the superiority of the bodhisattva to the arhat, particularly in terms of the compassion of the former (as the bodhisattva postpones Buddhahood indefinitely); the Buddha's compassion as the impetus for his search for awakening; the inherent luminescence of the mind; the prophecy of future Buddhas by current Buddhas; and the rhetoric of "Hīnayāna." The takeaway from this chapter is that the superiority conceit of Mahāyāna Buddhists, or the position that the bodhisattva path is superior to the path of the arhat, rests on concepts of the Buddha and his search for awakening which are not attested to by the "early" texts. Importantly, Anālayo observes how the polemical language of "Hīnayāna" was euphemized and smuggled into the academic study of Buddhism at the turn of the twentieth century. While the term has largely fallen out of favor among scholars, he is right to show such pejorative epithets can still be uncritically adopted as neutral, "scientific" terminology in the field of Buddhist studies. According to Anālayo, the absence of evidence for the superiority conceits of Mahāyāna Buddhists necessitates that they rethink how their texts are authenticated. Anālayo states that, "Besides the need to set aside the term 'Hīnayāna' in clear recognition of its polemical origins, historical unreality, and discriminatory nature...there is also a need to leave behind the underlying attempt to authenticate scripture through untenable attributions to the historical Buddha." (72)

Chapter three demonstrates how a number of doctrines and practices central to the Theravāda tradition—such as momentariness, the Buddha's omniscience, dependent arising, conventional and ultimate truths, the divine abodes, mindfulness of the breath, *vipassanā* meditation, and not-self—are conceits that show significant development between the "early" texts and later texts on which Theravāda traditions rely. As Anālayo writes,

> the conservatism characteristic of Theravādins may be the result of specific historical circumstances and does not justify a claim to being the sole nonschismatic Buddhist tradition and the only representative of original Buddhism. Comparative study shows that Pāli discourses are just as prone to reflect later ideas as are discourses from other transmission lineages. (101)

On this basis, Anālayo concludes that the vaunted status of the Pāli canon is unwarranted.

In chapter four, on Secular Buddhists, Stephen Batchelor serves as a synecdoche for Secular Buddhism as a whole. The chapter begins with the brief postcolonial observation that the status of "Buddhism" as a "religion" and the portrayal of the Buddha as a human being have their provenance in the nineteenth century —and with Christian missionaries, in the case of the latter. The rest of the chapter explores Batchelor's *oeuvre*, taking his presentation of the Buddha as a pragmatic teacher of an existential ethics to task both in terms of its content and its methodological presumptions. Anālayo concludes that "Stephen Batchelor's 'Secular Buddhism' turns out to be his secular beliefs without Buddhism. Instead of being an innocent questioning of outdated dogmas, his writings inadvertently continue Christian missionary strategies originally developed to undermine Buddhism." (137) Anālayo believes that the appeal of Batchelor's Secular Buddhism lies in its iconoclastic approach to traditional dogmas, something only warranted by the relative newness of Buddhism

to the West. He proposes that "the time has come for Western Buddhists to enter into a more mature relationship with the teachings and with other Buddhist traditions, letting go of superiority conceit and finding a middle path aloof from the two extremes of blind acceptance and equally blind rejection." (138)

For Anālayo, cutting Buddhists' superiority conceits off at the knees is not simply a matter of intra- or inter-sectarian concern; in fact, it has world-epochal ramifications. "The need to give up superiority conceit in its various Buddhist manifestations is required not only from the viewpoint of Buddhist doctrine but also in light of the current crisis faced on this planet by humanity." (140) The crisis here is of course climate change, and only when Buddhists set aside their quarrels and band together does Anālayo believe they can effectively combat it. Then, "the historical Buddha's teachings on ethics of mind can be relied on to counter the irresponsibility of materialism and its rampant greed, together with employing the practices of Buddhist mental culture to find a middle path between the extremes of denial and despair." (140)

Note that Anālayo has written (2019a, 2019b) on how to "mindfully face" climate change. I find his stance lamentably counterproductive, as he lays responsibility for combating capitalism's systemic role in the climate crisis on the individual. He adds insult to injury by claiming we should not be angry at those responsible for this crisis. Anālayo claims the crisis and denial of it by politicians and business executives originates from defilements of the mind, yet he does not seem to realize that those people would not be in a position to confuse, disempower, and frustrate the public into apathy if the production of energy were socialized and decisions about shifting to renewable energies were democratized. The conditions driving us toward climate crisis are not defilements of the mind, but the privatized production of energy for profit. All of this said, I will forego a deeper dive into Anālayo's perspective on climate change (which deserves an essay all to itself) and turn back to the book.

Chapter one speaks with commendable moral force and scholarly acumen. Anālayo's advocacy for *bhikkhunī* ordination is much needed across the Buddhist world. While I am skeptical of the coherence of the notion of "early Buddhism," chapter three similarly displays Anālayo's erudition. However, chapters two and four fail to convince.

While Mahāyāna Buddhist texts certainly claim Śākyamuni Buddha as their source, the Buddha as portrayed in them is not the historical one. What I mean is that their authority rests not with Śākyamuni the *nirmāṇakāya,* but with Śākyamuni the *dharmakāya*, the eternal Buddha we find in the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Nirvana Sutra* and who proclaims a single path to Buddhahood for all, empowered by their Buddha-nature. Looking historically, Micah Auerbach (2016) and Bernard Faure (2022) have shown that while the story of the Buddha certainly had pride of place in East Asian Buddhist cultures, that pride did not derive from the Buddha's historicity, but his trans-historicity as a supermundane, eternal being. The narrative of the Buddha's life was literary putty in the hands of new generations who sought to shape and re-shape it for their own purposes without much concern for "history" as modern, Western minds conceive of it.

It was only in the nineteenth century, when Western scholarship on Buddhism began to influence Japanese scholarship in particular, that efforts were made to connect Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings with the newly introduced "historical Buddha." This is to say, it was only with the arrival of the philological approach which Anālayo champions that Mahāyāna Buddhists found themselves challenged to authenticate their teachings in this manner. I think Anālayo is right to call for the end of the attempt to authenticate scripture through attributions to the historical Buddha. But he is right for the wrong reason. Text-critical philology has shown that these authentication attempts are always textual fabrications, but this philology is the wrong tool to understand the reasons for and goals of those attempts in the first place. To use Pierre Hadot's phrasing, Buddhist texts of all stripes should not be approached as conveying *information* but rather as providing

an opportunity for *formation*; we must not miss the moon because we are too focused on the finger. This is not, of course, to say that philology is irrelevant—far from it. Philological research can, in the spirit of Charles Hallisey's (1995) "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism," help scholars and practitioners alike understand how and why which kinds of Buddhist *formation* remained compelling and institutionally sustained across time, space, and cultures.

Chapter four, as I mentioned, conflates Secular Buddhism as a whole with Batchelor's perspectives, which, central as they are, do not constitute Secular Buddhism in its entirety. In this chapter, Anālayo seems almost deliberately obtuse, struggling to veil his contempt for Batchelor as a thinker. This is most glaring in his accusation that Batchelor is undermining Buddhism in the West by unwittingly relying on the Christian missionary portrayal of the Buddha as merely human. While Batchelor does indeed see the Buddha as human, his portrayal is quite consciously postmodern and post-colonial (Batchelor 2017: 145–51). Moreover, the contemporary portrayal of the Buddha as a human teacher has done little to undermine Buddhism, rather it has arguably served to inspire admiration for Buddhists broadly; it is a positive portrayal rather than a negative one, which Buddhists have long embraced because they see how compelling it is to modern people. Anālayo's conflation of Batchelor with Secular Buddhism as a whole misses how other contemporary figures have made similar moves but are spared scrutiny. Jon Kabat-Zinn, for example, portrays the Buddha as a mind-scientist (e.g., Kabat-Zinn 2005: 25–26)—a spiritual counterpart of sorts to Galileo and Newton—and has done more than anyone to secularize Buddhist ideas and practices for the modern world, yet he is not mentioned even once by Anālayo. Batchelor and Kabat-Zinn each pass off an eclectic collage of Theravāda, Zen, and Tibetan teachings as "what the Buddha taught" and present that version of Buddhism as concerned with this-worldly pursuits such as "human flourishing" and "stress-reduction." Why is the latter off the hook while the former is accused of "[inculcating] a materialist worldview"? (134)

For those interested in the very contemporary phenomenon of "early Buddhism," Anālayo's book will surely prove interesting. Those looking for a defense of *bhikkhuni* ordination from that perspective will similarly get a lot of value from this book. However, the shortcomings of the book in chapters two and four prevent me from recommending the book more broadly. If this book achieves its stated goal to unite Buddhists and allow them to disseminate their mental culture to maximal effect, I would be rather surprised. I would be even more surprised if a united front of Buddhists under Anālayo's guidance had any meaningful impact in combating climate change.

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