

***Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions: A Historical Perspective.* By Anālayo Bhikkhu. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2021. 184 pages. \$24.95 (hardcover). ISBN 9781614297192.**

Bruno M. Shirley
Cornell University

Superiority Conceit is a lucid and accessible introduction to Ven. Anālayo’s vast body of work, primarily aimed at non-academics but with a robust set of citations for further reading. The titular “Superiority Conceit” effectively draws together what might otherwise have appeared disparate arguments—all supported, of course, by the rigorous philology typical of Anālayo’s approach.

This methodology entails a detailed comparison of parallel texts in various extant languages to deduce the original word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*) from later amendments, elaborations, translation errors, and so on. By its very nature this work focuses on the minutiae, and it can be rather difficult to piece together a grander vision of “early Buddhism” from multiple disparate research papers. But Anālayo’s great strength as a scholar is that he has never shied away from articulating such grander visions, or from the lessons that we today might learn from philological rigour. This is an ambitious task, and the work rises to it admirably.

The first chapter takes aim at the rather broad target of “Buddhist androcentrism,” a superiority conceit (sadly) vast and manifold. Anālayo’s critique focuses on androcentrism in three distinct forms:

1. the belief that nuns are, or ought to be, subordinate to monks,
2. the belief that the revived Theravāda female monastic orders are inauthentic, and
3. the belief that women have an inferior soteriological capacity.

These beliefs may seem disparate, and there are certainly points at which we might want a more extended engagement with feminist and

gender theory: by which standards of masculinity and femininity, for example, can certain descriptions of the Buddha's body be called "decidedly not masculine" (p. 32)?¹ Overall, however, Anālayo's critiques are woven deftly together, and the necessary brevity of the current work is more than compensated for by his extensive earlier writings.²

The second chapter has a more specific target: the Mahāyāna, or more precisely, those among the Mahāyāna who believe that their bodhisattva path is inherently superior to the listener (*śrāvaka*) path. This manifests most clearly, for Anālayo, in the use of the pejorative term *Hīnayāna* ("lesser vehicle"), which is in fact "merely a dogmatic construct stemming from polemical discourse" (p. 64) intended to legitimize Mahāyāna texts as not only *an authentic*, but *the superior* interpretation of the Buddha's teachings. Anālayo's response is "to show that [this] underlying sense of superiority lacks a historical foundation" (p. 42) and that Mahāyāna practices instead were instead a later development.³ If this is the case, Anālayo argues, then so too did the conceit of

1. Compare "Depictions of the Buddha in the early texts do not present him as a paragon of masculinity" in *Superiority Conceit* (p. 38) with "In Indian Buddhist literature... the Buddha is described as the paragon of masculinity" in John Powers, *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1. Anālayo is certainly aware of Powers, and has criticized his translations (if not his most central arguments) elsewhere: Anālayo Bhikkhu, "Karma and Female Birth," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 21 (2014): 111, 114–115. See more generally the argument that "images of masculinity are not universal" in Stephen C. Berkwitz, "Strong Men and Sensual Women in Sinhala Buddhist Poetry," in *Religious Boundaries for Sex, Gender, and Corporeality*, ed. Alexandra Cuffel, Ana Echevarria, and Georgios Halkias (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 68.

2. Anālayo has already provided two full monographs on point two alone: *The Foundation History of the Nuns' Order* (Bochum: Projekt Verlag, 2016); *Bhikkhunī Ordination from Ancient India to Contemporary Sri Lanka* (New Taipei City: Āgama Research Group, 2018).

3. As an example: the miracles attributed to the newly-born Buddha in the Pāli *Acchariyabbhuta[dhamma]-sutta* but not in the Chinese parallel are, in Anālayo's view, a sign of later interpolation in the Pāli, possibly in order to glorify the Buddha; this was then generalized into a pattern followed by all past buddhas; finally it was attributed to all *future* buddhas as well, shifting the temporal focus of buddhahood from the final life of a buddha (now understood to be riven with miracles) onto many previous lives, or in other words the

Mahāyāna superiority emerge over time; it cannot be attributed to the Buddha himself.

In the third chapter Anālayo critiques Theravāda⁴ claims to be “the true heir to the Buddha’s teaching” (p. 73). Anālayo wisely focuses on a single, sustained example—Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga*—to undermine these claims, showing that Buddhaghosa’s approach to meditation in particular is distinct from that of early Buddhist texts. In contrast to Theravāda’s much-vaunted “conservatism,” Anālayo argues that “Pali discourses are just as prone to reflect later ideas as are discourses of other transmission lineages” (p. 101). The detailed study of Theravāda meditation and *abhidhamma* outlined in this chapter, alongside the work of Kate Crosby,⁵ suggests exciting possibilities for those of us interested in intellectual histories of the post-Buddhaghosan Theravāda. It also has significant pedagogical potential: too many of us have struggled to help undergraduate students who, having learned about “early Buddhism” *through* Pali texts in translation, then find it difficult to disaggregate early Buddhism from the later tradition. By laying out so clearly what was *innovative* in Buddhaghosa’s work, Anālayo has provided us with a supremely valuable resource for the classroom.

The final chapter takes aim at “Secular Buddhism,” primarily as manifested in the writings of Stephen Batchelor. Here Anālayo’s target is Batchelor’s claim that “many of the traditional forms of Buddhism inherited from Asia appear to be stagnating” (quoted at p. 134); or, to put it more bluntly, that these Asian Buddhisms have simply got the

bodhisattva path (pp. 56–59); see further Anālayo Bhikkhu, *The Genesis of the Bodhisattva Ideal* (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2010), chap. 1.

4. Anālayo’s arguments for the use of the term “Theravāda” (pp. 74–76) are implicitly, but without citation, directed against the essays in Peter Skilling et al., eds., *How Theravāda Is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012). He addresses these essays more directly in Anālayo Bhikkhu, *Ekottarika-Āgama Studies* (Taiwan: Dharma Drum Publishing Corporation, 2016), Appendix 3, 508–522, which is cited at this point of the present work.

5. Kate Crosby, *Esoteric Theravada: The Story of the Forgotten Meditation Tradition of Southeast Asia* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2020). See also the review in this journal: Richard Payne, “Review of Kate Crosby, *Esoteric Theravāda: The Story of the Forgotten Meditation Tradition of Southeast Asia* (Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2020),” *Pacific World*, 4th ser., no. 2 (October 2021).

Buddha's teaching wrong. Anālayo is quite right, I think, to place such claims into a longer genealogy of colonial-Christian missionary work (pp. 106–108, 134, 137). It is suggestive of recent work on certain racist and right-wing convert communities, which similarly maintain the “inferiority” of “traditional” Asian Buddhism(s).⁶ We might also wonder about the power that earlier articulations of “secular Buddhism” made *within* Asia may have to disrupt such Anglo-centric narratives.⁷ But again due to the constraints of length, Anālayo maintains a tight focus on refuting *historical* claims made by Batchelor et al., claims to perceive more clearly what the Buddha actually taught than traditions (or modern historians of Buddhism) would have it. As Anālayo shows (particularly pp. 134–137), these claims are methodologically rather suspect, and in Batchelor's case they seem to rely rather heavily on a grave misunderstanding that “non-Secular” Buddhism maintains a mind-body dualism (p. 132).

The arguments in these latter three chapters—that Mahāyāna, Theravāda, and Secular Buddhisms are later developments, not as reflective of early Buddhism as they claim to be—might be taken by those within the traditions themselves as somewhat adversarial. After all, Anālayo's argument—familiar to all historians of religion—is that some of their essential claims are entirely untrue, that the words they believe to have been spoken by the historical Buddha were, in fact, invented later. Some scholars might turn here to McCutcheon's argument that we should remain neutral observers, not “in the business of

6. Ann Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism beyond Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Ann Gleig and Brenna Artinger, “The #BuddhistCultureWars: BuddhaBros, Alt-Right Dharma, and Snowflake Sanghas,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 22, no. 1 (2021): 19–48; Wakoh Shannon Hickey, “Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism,” in *Buddhism beyond Borders: New Perspectives on Buddhism in the United States*, ed. Scott A. Mitchell and Natalie E. F. Quli (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015).

7. See, on the secular Buddhisms of Martin Wickramasinghe and B. D. Ambedkar respectively, Crystal Baines, “In Search of Middle Paths: Buddhism and Literary Secularisations in Twentieth-Century South Asia” (PhD thesis, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, forthcoming); Ajay Skaria, “Ambedkar, Marx and the Buddhist Question,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2015): 450–465.

nurturing, enhancing, or... criticising the communities we study,”⁸ and so divest ourselves of any guilt. But Anālayo is, explicitly, in that business of enhancement; his philological rigour is motivated by a belief that accurate reconstructions of authentic early Buddhism can help Buddhists become better Buddhists. And so, he reassures us that, despite the ahistoricism of their claims, we need not abandon these texts altogether—so long as we “free the appreciation and religious use of a particular text from such [historicising] tactics” (p. 70).

This appreciation of texts on their own merits, Anālayo hopes, will encourage all Buddhists to abandon their respective conceits—the superiority of their gender, their path, their conservatism, their rejection of superstition – and their belief that such conceits were mandated by the historical Buddha and by early Buddhists. Instead, Anālayo presents us with an alternative vision of Buddhism, one characterized by what he calls the “central discovery of the historical Buddha: emptiness, or not self” (p. 139). Only by setting aside our various superiority conceits and engaging more dialogically with others, he argues, can we become both better Buddhists and better humans.

These arguments may—and I hope *will*—resonate well with Anālayo’s contemporary interlocutors. He systematically shows that the interpretations of “early Buddhism” or “what the Buddha intended” of both Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (pp. 14, 16–17) and Batchelor (chap. 4 *passim*) are incorrect on the hermeneutic grounds they themselves profess to tread. But such hermeneutic grounds would have meant little to Buddhaghosa, who was “guided by the teachings of the dwellers in the Mahāvihāra”⁹ rather than by modern, cutting-edge philology,¹⁰ and even less to the early Mahāyāna, who were more than

8. Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 239.

9. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *The Visuddhimagga of Buddhaghosa* (London: Pali Text Society, 1975), 2. In the spirit of Anālayo’s citing translations for greater accessibility (p. 2), see also Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga): The Classic Manual of Buddhist Doctrine and Meditation* (Colombo: Buddhist Publication Society, 2010), <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nanamoli/PathofPurification2011.pdf>.

10. On Buddhaghosa’s hermeneutic practices see Maria Heim, *Voice of the Buddha: Buddhaghosa on the Immeasurable Words* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

comfortable with direct revelation.¹¹ Indeed, not all modern scholars necessarily agree with Anālayo's philological approach!¹² But this may be the conundrum that all scholar-practitioners ultimately face: how can we convince our critics that we are not ourselves subject to our own "superiority conceit," and that our arguments may therefore add value across sectarian or ideological lines? Anālayo's arguments, so accessibly framed in *Superiority Conceit*, promise to add such value. I hope that they are well attended-to as they clearly merit.

11. On revelation in the early Mahāyāna see Daniel Boucher, *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna: A Study and Translation of the Rāṣṭrapālapariṣcchā-Sūtra* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

12. Gregory Schopen, "Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Layman/Monk Distinction and the Doctrines of the Transference of Merit," *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 10 (1985): 9–47; Eviatar Shulman, *Visions of the Buddha: Creative Dimensions of Early Buddhist Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). Anālayo offers a sustained critique of Schopen in "The Historical Value of the Pāli Discourses," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 55 (2012): 223–253, which is cited in the reviewed work, and of Shulman in the forthcoming "Visions of the Buddha: A Critical Reply," *Journal of Buddhist Studies* 18 (2022): n.p., which will be published after the reviewed work.