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*Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions:  
A Historical Perspective*

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# A Review of *Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions: A Historical Perspective*

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*Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions: A Historical Perspective*. By Bhikkhu Anālayo. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2021, 184 pages. ISBN 978-1-61429-719-2 (hardback), \$24.95/978-1-61429-733-8 (e-book), \$12.99.

In this book, author Bhikkhu Anālayo examines Buddhist traditions and identifies long-standing “conceits” that lead various types of Buddhists to view themselves as superior to other types of Buddhists. Bringing to bear his formidable erudition and encyclopedic knowledge of early Buddhist textual traditions, Anālayo dismantles four widespread and pernicious conceits that are alive and well in Buddhist circles today: (1) the conceit of male superiority in Theravāda and Tibetan monastic establishments that support gender inequality and deny full ordination to women; (2) the conceit of some Mahāyāna Buddhists that membership in the “Great Vehicle” confers superiority over other Buddhists; (3) the conceit of some Theravādins that their tradition alone is the true heir of the Buddha’s original teachings; and (4) the modern conceit of secular Buddhists that

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their formulations of Buddhism uniquely recover the Buddha's original message.

Anālayo's careful historical and textual criticism has two aims. First, he shows that none of the early recensions of the Buddha's words support these conceits. The Buddha did not teach that men are superior to women, that Mahāyāna conceptions are "great" while other interpretations are "inferior," nor that the Theravāda version and interpretation of the scriptures are uniquely authentic. He also did not teach a Buddhism resembling the modernism championed by Stephen Batchelor among others. The second aim is to give a historical account of how these conceits developed over time. Understanding the contingencies and vicissitudes of history can help blow away the supposed verities that undergird these assumptions.

A chief merit of this book is that it draws together and explores the consequences of many of Anālayo's previous studies. This makes the results of those often-recondite studies accessible to a wide audience of both scholars and Buddhist practitioners. Anālayo's decades of scholarship focus on early Buddhist scriptures, comparing parallel recensions of the canonical texts in Pāli, Chinese, Tibetan, and fragments in Gāndhārī and Sanskrit. Often his contributions are published in academic journals and book chapters that are not always easy to find and that are addressed primarily to other scholars. Nonetheless, Anālayo's historical studies often concern matters highly consequential for contemporary Buddhist communities. This book makes the fruits of those studies available to a much broader audience with force and verve (and with a minimum of scholarly apparatus). Readers interested in the more technical studies supporting his conclusions will find these cited in the bibliography.

Anālayo argues that the androcentrism of Buddhist traditions that permits widespread and daily discrimination against women may be the superiority conceit "with the most detrimental repercussions for the Buddhist traditions as a whole," and that denying ordination to women and obstructing them from leadership roles is "a waste of human resources

and a cause of much unnecessary pain” (5). He takes on a range of issues related to misogyny and inequity in the tradition and shows how they are mainly attributable to later layers of tradition. However, he focuses on the issue of ordination, which many monks take to be simply a legal matter arising from the apparent *Vinaya* prohibition of the ordination of new nuns in lineages in which a quorum of nuns is no longer available.

The author supplies a straightforward solution to the problem: while it is true that one of the eight “weighty principles” imposed on the nuns requires ordination by both nuns and monks, the Pāli text also reports that the Buddha said that in this first instance when women were ordained (and presumably generally when a quorum of nuns is unavailable), *women may be ordained by monks alone* (13; referring to *Cullavagga* X.2.1). The view that a quorum of nuns is necessary derives from an early tradition in Sri Lanka that did not follow this instruction and so set a legal precedent for refusing women ordination without an existing quorum of nuns. Anālayo shows that the original Pāli text presents a legal remedy authorized by the Buddha and available in the *Vinaya* itself. Given the ways that a robust community of well-supported nuns would vitalize and strengthen Buddhism, to say nothing of the ways it would alleviate tremendous human suffering, it is hard to understand why this remedy is not widely embraced by people of good will who care about the strength of Buddhism and ending suffering for as many beings as possible.

Anālayo also looks closely at the Buddha’s apparent first refusal to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī when she first sought ordination and argues that he was not prohibiting her outright from becoming a nun (indeed, she and her followers presented themselves to him already wearing monastic robes and with heads shaven), but rather that he is refusing them permission to practice the life of *wandering* mendicants (given a context of social vulnerability of homeless women at the time). That is, Anālayo points out, he was not in principle denying women ordination, only urging them to practice monasticism at home, at least in that social context.

The second chapter on the highly inflated and sometimes condescending rhetoric of Mahāyāna polemics against the so-called “Hīnayāna” is a long overdue historical corrective to a conceit that is not only found in Mahāyāna texts but is often uncritically echoed in scholarly studies, teaching materials, and by contemporary practitioners. Here Anālayo meticulously documents the textual evidence showing a gradual historical development of Mahāyāna ideas—the bodhisattva ideal, the prominence of compassion and self-sacrifice, and the notion of a pure, luminous mind—which were not present in the earliest sources. He reminds us too that the term “Hīnayāna” was only ever a dogmatic and polemical construct.

His chapter on the Theravāda superiority conceit that claims for the Theravāda the only direct and authentic line to the Buddha’s original teachings proceeds by showing the ways that the chief Theravāda commentator and systematizer, fifth century C.E. Buddhaghosa, departs in several points of doctrine from what is available to us in the early recensions of the Buddha’s words. Chief among these is the commentarial insistence on the Buddha’s omniscience, the authentication of the Abhidhamma, the doctrine of momentariness of phenomena, and certain particulars of Buddhaghosa’s meditation program.

Finally, Anālayo takes on modernist, or secular Buddhism, largely, but not exclusively, with a focus on Stephen Batchelor’s articulation of that movement. Here he draws our attention to the impact of Western colonialism, Christian missionary activity, and modernizing discourses on this current strand of Buddhism, naming these in the hope of showing how historical conditions produce claims that lack support in the earliest texts. He then dismantles Batchelor’s various formulations to the effect that monasticism was not central to the earliest community, that the Buddha did not entirely eradicate the roots of greed, anger, and delusion at a single point in time, that *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are teachings easily dispensed with, that the ordering of the Four Noble Truths is wrong, and so

on. He also raises questions about Batchelor's methodologies, among which is an alleged imperviousness to scholarly correction.

The framing of the book in terms of superiority conceit allows for a Buddhist critique of some of Buddhism's entrenched views and practices. The translation of *māna* as "conceit" makes use of both senses of the word "conceit"—excessive pride and a fanciful notion. The rhetorical force of the book as being about conceit—a pathology Buddhists would presumably want to avoid—is that once Anālayo's historical study has dismantled the assumptions underlying these views it would seem that those still clinging to them can only be doing so out of a conceited sense of superiority. For all that, the book does not plunge into Buddhist moral psychology. Anālayo does not discuss the nature and types of conceit (several commentarial traditions posit seven types of conceit, for example) or exactly how conceit insinuates itself into the broad doctrinal and institutional processes he criticizes. Nor does he concern himself with the ways Buddhist doctrine sees conceit as entangled with other pathologies, such as greed, hatred, and delusion, how it operates as an impediment, how it is often amplified by vanity and intoxication (*mada*), and how it proliferates through obsession with the self, that is, through the relentless assertion of "I am."

Anālayo assumes that people tenaciously hold on to historically unsupported and self-serving views principally out of arrogance, pride, and self-assertion. Perhaps he is correct that exposing such conceit will create the impetus for Buddhists to reexamine their history and adjust their views. It is certainly plausible that conceit is a major driver of the range of phenomena that Anālayo describes. And yet, these phenomena are historically quite different one from the other, and it may be that the roots and entrenched institutional forms of patriarchy, misogyny, and gender inequity differ from the workings of, say, Mahāyāna polemics or modernist conceits about superior knowing. The brutal misogyny that targets *bhikkhunis* in Thailand with arson, beatings, and death threats, for example, might have to do more with fear and hatred than conceit. Many

decades of feminist analysis of the pervasive and enduring nature of patriarchy in the world's major traditions and civilizations might be profitably consulted for more systematic analysis of the psychology and sociology at work, as well as the precise ways that individual psychology and wrong view are mutually conditioned by group dynamics, social hierarchy, and institutional interests.

Nonetheless, Anālayo's is an accessible and spirited Buddhist voice that calls Buddhists to a greater sense of humility about their cherished positions and practices. This book should be widely read by scholars, practitioners, and anyone interested in the history of Buddhism. One of our most serious and astute scholars of early Buddhist scripture has presented us with a most welcome gift indeed.