Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions:
A Survey of Reviews

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Abstract

This article surveys selected observations offered in several reviews of my monograph *Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions: A Historical Perspective*.

Introduction

When getting *Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions* ready for the printer, my editor at Wisdom Publications wrote:[1] "I imagine that the book will indeed ruffle some feathers, but I also imagine it will do a lot of good." This prediction appears to have largely come true, as there has been a lot of positive feedback and some translations are under way, but there have also been some negative reactions, although fewer than we expected.

In what follows, I survey criticism of which I am aware that has been articulated in reviews published in academic journals—which are Heim (2021), Shirley (2021), Gangodawila (2022), Bajetta (2023), and Calobrisi (2023)—together with an online review by Mike Slott.[2] The review is meant to identify areas where my presentation could be improved and, whenever opportune, to clarify misunderstandings. My presentation mainly follows the order of topics in my original publication, in the hope that this will facilitate consultation alongside reading the book itself.[3] The three main topics to be taken up are Buddhist androcentrism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, and secular Buddhism, after which I turn to the notion of "early Buddhism," which is of relevance throughout.

Buddhist Androcentrism

The main topic of the first chapter of *Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions* is "the impact of the conceit of androcentrism in the Buddhist traditions, leading to various forms of discrimination against women" (p. 5). Heim (2021: 245f) offers the following comment:

> 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 *bhikkhuni*s 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.

I agree with this comment. In fact, my presentation was not meant to propose a mono-causal perspective in which conceit functions as the sole relevant factor. I think conceit is an important factor, and this particular factor can conveniently be problematized from a perspective grounded in early Buddhist doctrine and practice, which is what informs my book.[4] There are indeed a range of other conditions that deserve attention as well, but the development of a comprehensive perspective is a task I must leave to others who are better equipped for this purpose. I realize I could have been clearer in this respect in my introduction and appreciate that the above comment clarifies this limitation of my presentation.

In the course of exploring various aspects of Buddhist androcentrism, I refer to depictions of the Buddha's physical appearance (p. 32), reasoning that, whereas "a comparison of the Buddha's torso and teeth to a lion express a sense of masculinity, the description of the softness of his hands and feet, together with comparisons of his legs to those of an antelope, his eyelashes to those of a cow, and his voice to that of a cuckoo are decidedly not masculine." Shirley (2021: 210) queries "by which standards of masculinity and femininity, for example, can certain descriptions of the Buddha's body be called 'decidedly not masculine'?"

I agree that my presentation could have benefitted, as suggested by Shirley (2021: 209f), from "a more extended engagement with feminist and gender theory." As with the previous criticism, here, too, my focus has been on providing a Buddhist or ancient Indian perspective, in this case on notions of masculinity and femininity.[5] Once again, I could have been clearer in this respect, and I welcome the above query revealing this shortcoming of my study.

Mahāyāna Buddhism

In relation to the second chapter of *Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions*, Bajetta (2023: 110) reports that the name Tripiṭakamāla, which I had mentioned (p. 67) following Lopez (1996: 90), should according to recent research be corrected to Trivikrama. Another welcome update concerns my reference to the research conclusion by Nattier (1992), supported by Attwood (2018), that the Heart *sūtra* was apparently composed in Chinese (p. 69). Bajetta (2023: 110) notes that this assessment has in the meantime been challenged by Harimoto (2021).

One of the topics taken up in the second chapter of my book is "the polemical need to authenticate Mahāyāna scriptures, in the sense of asserting that these texts originated with the historical Buddha" (p. 41f). Calobrisi (2023: 56) expresses the following assessment:

> 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* … 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.

This proposal can best be evaluated by surveying relevant observations by other scholars.[6] In what is probably the standard work for introducing Mahāyāna Buddhism to university students, Williams (1989/2009: 39) explains that "[m]ost Mahāyānists consider that the Mahāyāna sūtras were preached in one way or another by Śākyamuni Buddha, the 'historical' Buddha." In an article on authority and orality in Mahāyāna, Lopez (1995: 22) speaks of

> one of the most persistent choruses in Indian Mahāyāna literature, the defense of the Mahāyāna sūtras as the word of the Buddha. We find "proofs" of the authenticity of the Mahāyāna in the works of major and minor śāstra authors, as early as Nāgārjuna in the second century in his *Ratnāvalī* and as late as Abhayākaragupta in the twelfth century in probably the last major Buddhist śāstra composed in India, the *Munimatālaṃkāra*.

In an article dedicated to the topic of the *dharmakāya*, Harrison (1992: 70) offers the following observation regarding the *Saddharmapuṇḍarika* (commonly referred to as the "Lotus Sutra"):

> there is only one occurrence of the term *dharma-kāya* in the entire Sanskrit text, in v. 82 near the end of Chap. 5 (Vaidya's edition, p. 96), which clearly has the sense of 'body of *dharmas*,' 'totality of *dharmas*,' 'all *dharmas*.' The context places this beyond any doubt. Therefore, while it is certainly true that the SP [*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*] teaches a developed Mahāyāna buddhology, it does not explicitly invoke the concept of *dharma-kāya* to support it.

At a stage in development earlier than that reflected by the *Saddharmapuṇḍarika*, a concern with attributing teachings to the historical Buddha is quite palpably present in the *Prajñāpāramitā* text whose translation into Chinese was completed by Lokakṣema and his team in the year 179 of the Common Era. This takes us to a period in the evolution of Mahāyāna thought, to the extent to which this is attested by a datable and completely extant text, that is about as early as possible within the confines of our present state of knowledge.[7] The relevant passage threatens rebirth in hell for those who, on hearing this *Prajñāpāramitā* being recited or taught, should think and say: "It has not been taught by the Tathāgata," and then warn others against training in this teaching.[8] The same text concludes by locating the delivery of this *Prajñāpāramitā* text at Mount Vulture Peak and in the thirtieth year after the Buddha's awakening.[9] This confirms that the passage about rebirth in hell concerns attribution of this text to the Buddha Śākyamuni, referred to as the Tathāgata, as a person who lived in ancient India. In other words, already at this time "efforts were made to connect Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings with the … 'historical Buddha'," rather than such attempts being merely the result of the influence of nineteenth-century Western scholarship on Japanese scholars. The situation in Japanese scholarship can in turn be assessed based on the following report by Sasaki (1997: 79f):[10]

> As early as the mid-Edo period, Tominaga Nakamoto 富永仲基 (1715–1746) set forth a theory of historical accretion (*kajō* 加上) which claimed that Mahāyāna Buddhism was not established by the Buddha. This view was denounced so strongly by scholars of the time that no one paid heed to it … since the Meiji period … [w]ith the introduction from the West of the modern text critical approach … the view that Mahāyāna Buddhism was not established by the Buddha became the dominant one.

In other words, the impact of Western scholarship appears to have been to add weight to a position that had already been debated earlier, and

this debate also concerns the Buddha as a historical person. The claim that the introduction of Western scholarship to Japan was responsible for introducing the very concept of the historical Buddha could be an instance of what I have elsewhere referred to as the "Myth of Western Origins."[11] This takes the form of the belief that significant developments in Asian Buddhist traditions have as their origin some contact with, or influence from, Western culture. The upholding of this myth tends to ignore Asian antecedents (and agency).[12]

In sum, attempts to authenticate Mahāyāna teachings by attributing them to the historical Buddha appear to have been an ongoing concern for nearly two millennia.[13] It follows that it is indeed a meaningful procedure to present a text-historical perspective to counter such authentication strategies.[14]

Secular Buddhism

Whereas my discussion of Theravāda Buddhism does not seem to have provoked critical reactions that could be taken up here, my fourth chapter is probably the one that has received the main share of criticism. The first of these to appear soon after the book was available in print is an online review by Mike Slott.[15] Although in general my procedure in the present article is to respond to reviews published in academic journals, it seems opportune to make an exception in this case. Mike Slott offers the following comment:

> But if, like Stephen and many other secular Buddhists, you … see Gotama's teachings as an ethical, pragmatic guide to life, the key question is whether a particular interpretation of the text is helpful in facilitating human flourishing at an individual level as well as within the social sphere. The latter, secular approach does not denigrate traditional views or interpretations; it does not claim that a secular approach is superior. Far from it.

Stephen Batchelor's "Buddhism 2.0" involves a claim to superiority over other forms of Buddhism reckoned to be "1.0," and it is this claim that my criticism intends to question. At the same time, I have no objections to anyone promoting an interpretation that "is helpful in facilitating human flourishing," providing such promotion combines with the honesty of disclosing personal views for what they are. My objections are concerned with Stephen Batchelor's pretensions that his ideas are an accurate reflection of the early Buddhist source material. An attempt to foster human flourishing, as long as it wishes to rely on early Buddhist teachings to present an ethical, pragmatic guide to life, needs to be based

on providing accurate information about these teachings. It follows that, when such information is inaccurate and misleading, there is a need to clarify this precisely for the sake of clearing the path to any genuine human flourishing. In other words, I am certainly not against a secular approach to Buddhism as such. Instead, the target of my criticism is the attempt to pass off such an approach as a return to the early teachings. It is this authentication strategy that my discussion has put into question.

Mike Slott also criticizes me for limiting my discussion of secular Buddhism to Stephen Batchelor, and more specifically to the latter's interpretation of the early Buddhist teachings, thereby ignoring the ideas and practices of other contemporary secular Buddhists. In the introduction to the relevant chapter of my book, I offer the following explanation (p. 105):

> Just as in the last chapter I focused on Buddhaghosa and his work at exemplifying trends in Theravāda exegesis, in the present chapter I focus on Stephen Batchelor as the foundational proponent of Secular Buddhism. In both cases such focus is simply an expedient for exploring the respective topic.

To the best of my knowledge the choice of Buddhaghosa has not met with any criticism, even though Theravāda Buddhism is of course not confined to him and his oeuvre. The same does not hold for my similar decision to focus on Stephen Batchelor and his writings, even though the intention of the above passage had been to clarify that I was not planning to provide a comprehensive coverage of all those who consider themselves (or are considered by others) to be secular Buddhists. In fact, such an undertaking would hardly be possible within the limits of a single chapter and would instead require a whole monograph. The same criticism, perhaps influenced by the earlier published review by Mike Slott, comes up again when Calobrisi (2023: 57) comments on my presentation that it

> 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.

The suggestion that I am struggling to veil my contempt is simply incorrect. There is no contempt toward Stephen Batchelor on my side, but there is a clear perception that he is misrepresenting the early Buddhist sources to authenticate his personal ideas. This is the target of my criticism, which in fact was motivated by requests from others that I clarify whether his assertions are accurate reflections of early Buddhist thought.

The reference to my supposed objection to a portrayal of the Buddha as a human teacher is unexpected, since I have not addressed this topic at all. In fact, other reviewers provide an assessment of my criticism of Stephen Batchelor without any reference to this topic, and instead cover the main points I raised. The adequate coverage given in this way also does not give the impression that my writing was being experienced as obtuse. For example, Bajetta (2023: 111) presents the following assessment:

> Anālayo reflects on the colonial heritage that has influenced Western perceptions of Buddhism …The author then proceeds by refuting several misconceptions found in Batchelor's works, ranging from the "belief that monasticism is a later development" and that "the Buddha envisioned an egalitarian community" (115–16), to ones of greater doctrinal relevance concerning the nature of awakening and Nirvāṇa (121–23), the role of rebirth (123–26), the four noble truths, and the notion of truth as such (126–31).

Shirley (2021: 211f) comments on my fourth chapter: "Anālayo's target is Batchelor's claim that … Asian Buddhisms have simply got the Buddha's teaching wrong. Anālayo is quite right, I think, to place such claims into a longer genealogy of colonial-Christian missionary work." Shirley (2021: 212) continues by noting that, "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." Shirley (2021: 213) concludes that my discussion "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." Just to provide yet another assessment, Heim (2021: 244) presents the following survey of my fourth chapter:

> 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.

I particularly appreciate the clear recognition that my discussion of Christian missionary activity is meant to explain the historical conditions for certain claims. My point is that certain misunderstandings of Buddhist teachings, such as the supposed contrast between karma and not-self, emerged as debating tools among Christian missionaries and from there gained traction in the West, to the extent of influencing Stephen Batchelor to rehearse the same mistaken arguments. As Heim (2021: 242) correctly observes, my 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." Nothing at all can be found in these academic reviews about the portrayal of the Buddha as a human, and quite correctly so, because this is not a topic taken up for examination in my book. Calobrisi (2023: 57), however, continues as follows:

> 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, … 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"?

The reference to inculcating a materialistic worldview is part of the following assessment in *Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions* (p. 134):

> Stephen Batchelor's writings inadvertently continue on the track set by Christian missionaries. They do so by rejecting the Buddha's claim to have reached awakening, discarding the transformative nature of Nirvana, alleging that the rebirth doctrine is incoherent, and dismissing the three refuges. A chief difference seems to be that, instead of serving as a means to convert Buddhists to Christianity, the thrust is rather to inculcate a materialistic worldview.

The points listed in this summary, which already came up in one way or another in the extracts from the other academic reviews quoted above, are quite different from merely promoting human flourishing and stress-reduction. I am not aware of Jon Kabat-Zinn having made any of the claims listed above.

Nevertheless, there is an issue on which I disagree with him, as I see Mindfulness-Based Interventions—such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction—as falling short of fulfilling the four *satipaṭṭhāna*s. I have expressed my assessment in this respect in an article dedicated to this topic (Anālayo 2019) and published in the journal *Mindfulness*. This journal is currently the leading venue for those involved in clinical research on mindfulness and thus can safely be expected to have an outreach in particular among those who may be influenced by the views of Jon Kabat-Zinn. Perhaps this suffices to show that I am not sparing one author at the expense of another, instead of which the reason for my sustained criticism of Stephen Batchelor is his sustained tendency to misrepresent the teachings found in the early Buddhist discourses.

It is thus clearly not the case that I take "his presentation of the Buddha as a pragmatic teacher of an existential ethics to task," as assumed by Calobrisi (2023: 55). Instead, I take him to task for pretending, for example, that his dismissal of the Buddha having successfully reached awakening accurately reflects the implications of early Buddhist depictions of the Buddha's encounters with Māra, simply because this involves a substantial misunderstanding of the function of Māra (and of the conception of the Buddha) in early Buddhist texts. Stephen Batchelor is of course free to hold the personal belief that the Buddha was not awakened and that freedom from defilements is in principle impossible. But when he pretends that such views are an accurate reflection of the textual evidence that we have for early Buddhist thought, then he and his followers need to allow for criticism to point out if that is incorrect. When such criticism then manifests, those who wish to defend Stephen Batchelor's position would need to engage with the actual details of this criticism rather than shifting to some other topic, such as human flourishing or the Buddha as a pragmatic teacher of an existential ethics.

Early Buddhism

My methodological approach in exploring the selected types of superiority conceit taken up for discussion is based on a comparative study of the early Buddhist discourses. Gangodawila (2022: 162)

criticizes this approach in the following form:

> 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.

This assessment can be compared to what Gangodawila (2022: 158) himself writes just a few pages earlier: "The author informs the reader that his arguments are primarily based on 'early Buddhist teachings,' which he identifies with the first four *nikāya*s of the Theravāda canon and their parallels as preserved in other Buddhist canons," followed by adding that "his stated aim on this occasion is to make information more accessible to the average reader." This shows that there is a frame of reference for the usage of the expression "early discourses." Given that this is an introductory book meant for the general public, there is hardly room to go further and provide a detailed discussion of the term. For the same reason, there is also no viable alternative to providing references to my more detailed discussions elsewhere, a significant portion of which is available freely on the web. This is not a lack of transparency but standard procedure, in the sense of referring to more detailed discussions already published elsewhere rather than rehearsing all the details every time a particular topic comes up.

In fact, Heim (2021: 242) considers this procedure an advantage: "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," adding that "[r]eaders interested in the more technical studies supporting his conclusions will find these cited in the bibliography." In the same vein, Bajetta (2023: 109) notes that "ample reference to more detailed studies is given in the bibliography."

Overall, the review by Gangodawila (2022) appears to be based on a less than careful reading, which I document in an appendix below in the anticipation that the details of this pattern will be of less interest to the general reader. In as far as an assessment of *Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions* is concerned, this review has little to offer either way, simply because considerable parts of it fall short of accurately reflecting its content.

An apparent problem with my referencing of early Buddhism emerges also with Calobrisi (2023: 56), who states: "I am skeptical of the coherence of the notion of 'early Buddhism'." On the next page of his review, he refers to "those interested in the very contemporary phenomenon of 'early Buddhism'" (p. 57). The implications of this statement are not clear to me, given that Calobrisi (2023: 54) correctly reports my usage of the term early Buddhism to refer to "the perspectives and positions of Buddhists from the fifth to third centuries before the common era," that is, the pre-Aśokan period.[16] This is of course not contemporary.

Perhaps behind the skepticism stands the assumption already discussed above that Asian historical thought results from the influence of Western scholarship in the nineteenth century. That is, it may be an instance of the type of reasoning described (and then criticized) by Nattier (1991: 7) in the following way:

> The Buddhist religious tradition—indeed, Indian religious thought in general—is often described as lacking a true sense of history. Because the Indian view of time is cyclic rather than linear, so it is argued … the Buddhists, like the Hindus, simply have no interest in history.

Calobrisi (2023: 56) only refers to the situation in Japan in this respect. Since he does not provide clear indications what problem he sees with "early Buddhism," it remains uncertain whether what follows addresses his concerns. Be that as it may, the question if the type of chronological perspective that underlies the qualification "early" does justice to early Buddhist thought is anyway worth exploring.

The term "early" or "earlier" as such has a Pāli and Sanskrit equivalent in *pubba*/*pūrva*, which can also convey such senses as "former" or "previous," etc. An example illustrating the usage of the term would be a description of a servant who gets up "earlier" and goes to bed later than the master.[17] Another example depicts a monastic going to beg alms in the "early" part of the day, that is, in the morning.[18] These two examples conveniently exemplify that the qualification "early" or "earlier" need not carry any implicit evaluation. Although the servant is perhaps worse off due to having to get up *early*, the master would be better off due to being able to go to bed *early*. Again, the morning is not somehow intrinsically better or worse than any other time of the day, instead of which it is simply the proper time for monastics to go begging since they must partake of food before noon.

In other words, be it in Indic languages or in English, the qualification of being "early" appears to be value-neutral. Although at times what is earlier can be better, at other times it can be worse; it depends on the context whether it carries an evaluation. An example for "early" being of lower value would be a usage of the same term in a standard phrase with which the Buddha reportedly refers to the period of his life before his awakening.[19] Clearly, in this case what is early or earlier is inferior, because at that time he had not yet awakened.

The importance of a chronological type of thinking in turn emerges in the *Mahāpadāna-sutta*, which in agreement with its parallels depicts a lineage of former Buddhas, clearly distinguishing between those who lived earlier and those who lived later.[20] A basic parameter in *Vinaya* legislation relies on the distinction between what happened earlier and what later, so as to differentiate between a rule and its amendments, which often come embedded in a narrative setting that purports to record what led to the respective legislations. The same distinction continues with the notion of a first *saṅgīti* that was followed by a second *saṅgīti*.[21] The Pāli commentaries clearly distinguish between texts believed to have been included in the first *saṅgīti* and those held to have been added only with the second *saṅgīti*.[22] This reflects recognition of a chronological perspective in relation to textual transmission.

In this way, a chronological type of thinking is already evident in "early Buddhist" thought, and the designation "early" as such is not a foreign imposition. Nevertheless, the exact term "early Buddhism" has no direct Pāli or Sanskrit equivalent among the early discourses. This is hardly surprising. Early generations of disciples of the Buddha could not have referred to themselves as "early" (or "pre-Aśokan" for that matter), simply because such a designation will only arise retrospectively from the viewpoint of later times.[23] As long as the two individual terms "early" and "Buddhism" have antecedents,[24] however, the absence of a usage that combines the two should not be a major problem. After all, it can hardly be expected that any concept in use must be just as old as the phenomenon it describes. If that were the case, we would be unable to say anything about the evolution of species on this planet, for example, because at that time no human language was in existence. This exemplifies that there is nothing inherently problematic in using concepts coined perhaps a century ago to refer to what took place even a billion years ago. In sum, the usage of the term "early Buddhism" as such could hardly be the source of misgivings regarding its coherence.

Another attempt to try to understand what might be motivating the skepticism expressed by Calobrisi (2023: 56f) would be to assume that the issue is perhaps not so much the notion of early Buddhism but rather the usage of the term in scholarly writings. This can be explored by surveying its employment in book and article titles by various scholars: The term "early Buddhism" occurs in the titles of a book by T. W. Rhys Davids originally published in 1880 and another book by Bimala Churn Law published in 1932, followed by featuring in titles of articles by I. B. Horner, A. K. Warder, Jan Willem de Jong, and Lambert Schmithausen in 1945, 1956, 1964, and 1981 respectively.[25] Henry Cruise announces a discussion of "recent" misconceptions regarding early Buddhism in the title of an article published in 1983, and Tilmann Vetter uses the same term for the title of a book published in 1988. Further usage of the same term in titles involves Collett Cox in 1992, K. R. Norman in 1993, and Peter Harvey in 1995. The same continues with Rupert Gethin in 2004, Peter Skilling in 2011, and Jens Braarvig in 2014.

The above is just a random selection of publications that mention the term in their title; a more thorough search would probably unearth many more examples. For the present purposes this much already suffices to show that employment of the term "early Buddhism" has quite some history in Buddhist studies and several leading scholars are among its users; its employment can hardly be qualified as being "very contemporary."

Needless to say, the implications of the term will of course vary from usage to usage. Nevertheless, as far as a precedent for my usage of the term is concerned, an example for a scholar employing the corresponding adjectival form would be none other than Gregory Schopen, who is beyond any suspicion of naïvely continuing a trend set by T. W. Rhys Davids. In an article originally published in 1983 and republished in 2005, Gregory Schopen uses the expression "early Buddhist *sūtra* literature" or else just "early Buddhist literature" as an equivalent to the alternative phrase "*Nikāya*/*Āgama* literature."[26] I am not aware of anyone problematizing his usage, which corresponds to the way I use the terms "early Buddhist" or "early Buddhism," namely as a reference to the type of thought that comparative study shows to be similar in the four main Pāli *Nikāya*s and their Chinese *Āgama* parallels (together with relevant Gāndhārī, Sanskrit, and Tibetan texts). We differ on the dating of these texts, however, and in an article published in 2012 under the title "the historical value of the Pāli discourses" I have criticized his arguments in

this respect in detail. I am not aware of any reply to that, and the dating as such is also not a novelty, as early Buddhism has already been allocated to the pre-Aśokan time, for example, by Paul Griffiths in 1983.[27]

Now, with all that has been said above, the term "early Buddhism" of course still remains open to problematization, as do various other term in usage in Buddhist studies. However, this requires in some way identifying the nature of the supposed problem. Once a term has been used for many decades, it would be difficult to understand why it should suddenly have become so problematic that it can be disqualified without giving any concrete reason or argument. In the present context, the only additional information provided takes the form of qualifying early Buddhism as a "very contemporary phenomenon," which fails to make sense both for the period in question and for the usage of the expression to designate that period. For this reason, the articulation of skepticism regarding the coherence of such usage risks giving the impression of merely reflecting a lack of clarity.

Appendix

In this appendix I survey instances from the review by Gangodawila (2022) that demonstrate that he did not closely read the reviewed book. One of the summaries of parts of *Superiority Conceit in Buddhist Traditions* offered by Gangodawila (2022: 159) takes the following form: "As Anālayo points out, Māra's sexual enticement was intended primarily for male monastics, not *bhikkhunī*s (36)." Besides giving an incorrect page reference, as the discussion of sexual enticement is rather found on p. 29, the idea of such enticement by Māra having male monastics as its target is not discussed at all in the reviewed book. On the same page of his review, Gangodawila (2022: 159) also presents the following summary:

> 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.

The referenced page range "51–63" does not cover the bodily marks, except for a reference on p. 58 to a previous discussion of this topic on p. 45; the discussion on p. 56 is also not about previous lives. These

instances are part of a general pattern of providing incorrect page references: Some 89% of the references given in the first half of the review are incorrect.[28] This fortunately changes with the second half of the review, whereas the tendency to fall short of adequately representing the content of the reviewed book persists.

When the marks are indeed being discussed elsewhere in the book, the point at issue is never any supposed misconception regarding those wishing to become Buddhas, but rather the Buddha's own possession of these. The discussion of taking pictorial presentations literally contains nothing specifically related to literalism among Mahāyānists. The same holds for the idea of "emphasizing that their path to Buddhahood had roots in previous lives." Finally, the exploration of the origins of the notion that Maitreya will be the next Buddha is not about the bodily marks (or "motifs"), the point rather being that "[c]omparative study of the parallel versions of this discourse makes it highly likely that the idea of the future Buddha Maitreya is a later addition" (p. 48). The marks only come up in relation to the present Buddha, in particular the prediction, during his infancy, of his attainment of Buddhahood by brahmins skilled in the lore of the thirty-two bodily marks (p. 49).[29]

Another statement by Gangodawila (2022: 160) begins as follows: "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." This conflates two distinct themes. One of these is the assumption by other scholars that such summaries had a significant influence on the arising of Abhidharma, an assumption I have shown to be unconvincing. The other is that the conception of the Buddha's omniscience, something shared by all Buddhist traditions and thus not peculiar to Theravādins, appears to have provided a precedent for attempts in Abhidharma thought to provide as comprehensive a survey of dharmas (Pāli *dhamma*s) as possible. Neither the first nor the second point entails that these summaries "were important in establishing the Theravādin concept of omniscience." Another reference in Gangodawila (2022: 161) takes the following form: "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." The relevant part of my discussion only summarizes the practice of contemporary insight meditation traditions, without expressing approval (p. 98f).

In relation to the fourth chapter on secular Buddhism, according to Gangodawila (2022: 161) in my discussion I assert "that Batchelor's concept of monasticism contradicts various early sources, including the *Khaggavisāna* Sutta in the *Sutta Nipāta*." The relevant remark by me takes this form (p. 115): "The belief that Buddhist monasticism is a later development is an outdated opinion, originating in part from a misinterpretation of the solitary life depicted in the Discourse on the Rhinoceros as normative for Indian Buddhist monastics in general." In other words, it is not that the Discourse on the Rhinoceros contradicts Batchelor's concept of monasticism. Instead, this type of concept appears to be much rather the outcome of the assumption that this discourse should be considered normative for the Buddhist monastic tradition at an early stage.

Throughout, reviewing, criticizing, or summarizing other scholars requires attentive reading of their work and reasonably accurate referencing. This is admittedly more of a challenge than ever in this digital age with its ever-increasing quantities of available information and concurrent decrease of available time, and none of us is beyond making at least a few errors. Still, an attempt to be reasonably accurate in both respects remains an important asset for undertaking academic research.

Abbreviations

DĀ	*Dīrgha-āgama* (T 1)
DN	*Dīgha-nikāya*
MĀ	*Madhyama-āgama* (T 26)
MN	*Majjhima-nikāya*
PTS	Pali Text Society
SĀ	*Saṃyukta-āgama* (T 26)
T	Taishō edition
Th	*Theragāthā*
Th-a	*Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā*
Thī	*Therīgāthā*

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Notes

1 Email of 15th February 2020, Laura Cunningham; an elision mark has been replaced by a comma.

2 See below note 15.

3 I take the occasion to note a typo on p. 91 in the second line of the first paragraph: the reference to "two characteristics" needs to be corrected to read "three characteristics."

4 On p. 8 I refer to another publication of mine for a discussion of the problem that Theravāda nuns "can at times be rather suspicious of feminist agendas, often perceived as foreign intrusions into a traditional religious world"; see Anālayo 2017b: 350–353. This is an additional reason why I did not take up feminist analysis more explicitly, as my attempt has been to present a perspective rooted in early Buddhist teachings and values, in the anticipation that this will less easily be dismissed as a foreign intrusion.

5 Of relevance to a perspective limited to the cultural setting of early Buddhism in ancient India is a cross-reference on the same p. 32 to another publication of mine, Anālayo 2017a: 133, where in note 97 I report: "The antelope, for example, occurs repeatedly in depictions of female charms in Indic texts, cf. the survey in Wojtilla 2006: 32. A description of the beauty of the courtesan Ambapālī in Thī 261 employs the motif of a cuckoo (*kokila*) to illustrate the attractiveness of her voice. Similarly, as noted by Milewska 2015: 119, the voice of a beautiful courtesan is compared to that of a cuckoo (*puṃskokila*) in *Mahābhārata* III.112.7; cf. Sukthankar 1942: 375,6. These instances make it indubitably clear that such comparisons were not meant to convey masculinity."

6 In the part elided in the above quotation, Calobrisi 2023: 56 references two publications in the following form: "Micah Auerbach [sic] (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." Faure 2022: 4 introduces the part of his study relevant to East Asia by indicating that, unlike the previous parts of this study, "[t]he fourth part radically shifts the center of gravity: spatially, from India to East Asia, and temporally, from antiquity to the medieval and modern worlds. In this decentering, Japan, as both the farthest place from India geographically and culturally and the culmination of the Mahāyāna tradition in Asia, seemed to me to be the place of greatest interest. In this part, I focus mainly on Japanese narratives." In other words, the part relevant to "East Asian Buddhist cultures" is mainly about Japan. Despite the indubitable significance of Japanese Buddhist traditions, these are hardly representative of "East Asian Buddhist cultures" in general. In fact, Auerback 2016: 2 introduces his study, which is in its entirety concerned with Japanese Buddhist traditions, by explicitly contrasting the role of the Buddha in Japan to his role in Chinese and Korean Buddhism. More importantly, Auerback 2016: 131 reports that "Tominaga Nakamoto … (1715–1746) … wrote a brilliant historicist critique of the formation of the Buddhist canon … [t]hrough critical philological inquiry, Nakamoto showed in this treatise that the various texts in the canon did not all represent the words of the Buddha, but had been created by different parties, at different historical moments, to different ends … From the twentieth century onward, Nakamoto's writing earned him positive comparisons to the likes of Voltaire and Lessing, and he was regarded as a herald of 'scientific scholarship'." Tominaga Nakamoto of course lived and wrote well before the nineteenth-century arrival of European scholarship, on which Auerback 2016: 183 reports that "[c]onventional scholarship dates the introduction of the techniques of European Buddhist studies to Japan to 1884. In that year, the True Pure Land scholar-cleric Nanjō Bun'yū (1849–1927) returned to Japan, having completed his studies at Oxford under a pioneering scholar of 'Oriental' religions, Freidrich [sic] Max Müller (1823–1900)." Tominaga Nakamoto also features in Faure 2022: 214: "We owe to a young prodigy, Tominaga Nakamoto (1715–1746), the first proper historical and philological criticism of Buddhism and specifically of the accounts of its founder's life … In particular, he demonstrates that the first Buddhist texts are very much later than the

Buddha, and that their content does not necessarily reflect the Buddha's thought (or his life), but is rather the result of struggles for influence within the new religion."

7 A version extant as a Gāndhārī fragment, which radiocarbon dating allocates to about a century earlier (see Falk 2011: 20), has not preserved the two passages taken up in the two notes below.

8 Karashima 2011: 169,1 (= T 224 at T VIII 441b15): 念是言: 非怛薩阿竭所說. 止他人言: 莫得學是!

9 Karashima 2011: 540,6 (= T 224 at T VIII 478b9): 佛說是般若波羅蜜時, 在羅閱祇耆闍崛山中, 在眾弟子中央坐. 佛年三十得佛, 十二月十五日過食後說經.

10 I have rearranged the sequence of the quoted parts to fit the present context, which does not affect their overall meaning.

11 Anālayo 2023b: 14–22.

12 A not taking fully into account antecedents does appear to be relevant to the present case, as above note 6 shows that both publications quoted by Calobrisi 2023: 56 in support of his argument contain information on an Asian antecedent that decisively undermines his claim.

13 For a survey of arguments made throughout the course of history to defend the authenticity of Mahāyāna texts, which clearly intend to posit the historical Buddha as their source, see also Lamotte 1954: 381–385.

14 On this topic in relation to early Buddhist texts see also the conclusion in Anālayo 2023a: 203 that their "comparative study can help to dismantle the claims made on behalf of … Buddhist textual fundamentalism, showing what kind of teachings can definitely not be attributed to the Buddha. At the same time, comparative study also undermines the alternative of propounding an early Buddhist fundamentalism, due to the inability to reconstruct the precise and authentic original of the Buddha's words. All such claims collapse in the face of the very means that have preserved the teachings at all: centuries of oral transmission."

15 Found at https://secularbuddhistnetwork.org/what-bhikkhu-analayo-got-wrong-a-review-of-superiority-conceit-in-buddhist-traditions/, published on the 13th of March 2021, which I accessed on 13th October 2023. One of the points made in this online review by Mike Slott concerns the two truths, in that "[o]nly the monastics and religious leaders of the various lineages had supposedly privileged access to absolute knowledge of an ultimate reality," wherefore another type of superiority conceit should be recognized, namely "the view that monastic leaders and monks have a privileged access to the ultimate truths of human beings and reality." For this proposal to be taken seriously, it would be necessary to point to some evidence that access to ultimate truth was indeed restricted to monastics and religious leaders.

16 For a more detailed discussion of the period of early Buddhism see Anālayo 2023c: 1–12.

17 See, e.g., MN 84 at MN II 84,19: *pubbuṭṭhāyī pacchānipātī*, with a counterpart in SĀ 548 at T II 142b11: 先起後臥.

18 See, e.g., MN 66 at MN I 447,12: *pubbaṇhasamayaṃ* (the PTS edition reads *pubbanha-samayaṃ*), with a parallel in MĀ 192 at T I 740c18: 平旦.

19 For a survey of occurrences see Anālayo 2010: 15–19.

20 The parallel versions of this discourse agree in reporting that the Buddha had been informed of various details regarding these previous Buddhas by their former disciples, whom he encountered when paying a visit to the Pure Abodes in which they had been reborn; see DN 14 at DN II 50,18, Waldschmidt 1956, 162 (11.7) or Fukita 2003, 160, DĀ 1 at T I 10b14, and T 3 at T I 158b11. This implies that, from the emic viewpoint, various details related to former Buddhas should be read as historical reports of what was believed to have actually happened.

21 For the different accounts of these two *saṅgīti*s see Anuruddha, Fung, and Siu 2008.

22 For an example see Anālayo 2023a: 218n102.

23 Perhaps a relevant example in this respect would be when according to Th 1036 Ānanda refers to "ancients," *purāṇā*, who according to the commentary Th-a III 120,8 are Sāriputta and other elders, set in contrast to the more recent generation of monks. This usage of

course does not require that Sāriputta and the other elders, who in the meantime had passed away, previously considered themselves to be ancient in some way. It is adequate from the perspective of Ānanda, who was still alive when a "new" generation of monks took over with whom he did not feel in concord, *navehi na sameti me*, and therefore kept to himself.

24 On precedents for the term "Buddhism" see Anālayo 2021: 108–115.

25 Throughout, the dates refer to the original publication rather than the reprint date.

26 Schopen 1983/2005: 190 and 213; for a critical reply to the main thesis proposed in this article see Anālayo 2024.

27 Griffiths 1983: 56: "By 'early Buddhism' we mean, broadly speaking, pre-Aśokan Indian Buddhism."

28 In addition to the mistaken references already mentioned, Gangodawila 2022: 159 refers to p. 44 for reasons behind the failure to revive the *bhikkhunī* order, which are rather discussed on p. 10f; to p. 16 for (ordained) women in a position between the lay and monastic worlds, which is rather taken up on p. 7f; to p. 24 for a signboard forbidding women to enter a temple, which is discussed on p. 15, with the image found on p. 16; to p. 30–32 for Mahāpajāpatī and her followers shaving their heads and wearing robes, which is rather taken up on p. 22f; to p. 94 for *bhikkhunī*s defeating Māra, which is rather discussed on p. 28f; to p. 69 for the simile of the donkey, which is rather mentioned on p. 65. Turning to the next page of the same review, Gangodawila 2022: 160 refers to p. 57 on disciples as role models, which is rather taken up on p. 30f; to p. 28 and 102 for textual preservation in Pāli, which is rather taken up on p. 20; to p. 79 on Pāli as the supposed root language, which is rather mentioned on p. 76; to p. 80 for the formulation employed when taking refuge, which is rather discussed on p. 77f; to p. 83 on omniscience, which is taken up on p. 80–82 (p. 83 has figure 8 and a discussion related to that); and to p. 86 on mindfulness as part of the fourth aggregate, which is rather mentioned on p. 84. On the next page of the review, Gangodawila 2022: 161, has references that are correct or nearly correct (in the sense of just being off by a single page). The same holds for Gangodawila 2022: 162, except for a reference to p. 135 on avoidance of the extremes of blind acceptance and rejection, which is instead mentioned on p. 138.

29 The prediction of Maitreya, extant in MĀ 66 at T I 511a14, does not mention the marks at all. This is preceded by the monk Maitreya having formulated an aspiration corresponding to this prediction; the motif of recognition of physical marks is neither mentioned nor relevant.

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