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# Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As usual, let us engage in our regular meditation practice.

*[meditation]*

We can now generate the motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines: 'For the sake of all mother sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will engage in, and listen to the teachings and put them into practice well'. This is very meaningful.

I understand that the seminar on Sunday went very well, so I am very glad about that. It seems that there were quite a few participants, including some who might have been quite new to the topic. So it was good on two levels: for those who hear about it for the first time, and for others to refresh and deepen their understanding.

I consider that sharing our knowledge and benefitting others in this practical way is real Dharma. Indeed, the optimum purpose of our studies is to put them into practice to benefit others. It's not that we are lacking the ability to benefit others. We do have the ability, so to actually utilise that ability to benefit others would be very meaningful.

As Geshe Chengawa presented, the Dharma comes down to two main points: benefitting others and not harming others. Last year these points were presented as part of practising patience as a way to benefit others. We need to incorporate the practice of patience into our practice of not harming others, and particularly when benefitting others. There might be occasions where others may not appreciate our attempts to benefit them, or they might retaliate with some sort of harm. When this happens patience is indispensable so that we don't become daunted and give up the intention to benefit others. So we definitely need to practise patience. The entire teachings of the Buddha, either when combined into the Three Baskets - vinaya, sutra and abhidharma - or sutra and tantra, come down to these two essential points: benefitting others and not harming others.

It is essential that we make every effort, to the best of our ability, to benefit others and not harm others, and to incorporate this into our daily lives. Familiarising ourselves with these sentiments, and reminding ourselves of them again and again is essential. We become familiar with this practice by actually putting it into practice in whatever way we can. It is through the familiarity with benefitting others in accordance with our capacity and ability that we are actually able to put it into practice. Right now many of us have the ability and potential to benefit others, but our lack of familiarity with that attitude prevents us from actually benefitting others. Likewise, we have the ability to refrain from harming others, but because we are not familiar with that, we find ourselves engaging in harming others. We will be able to utilise our abilities to benefit others, to the best of our

capacity, and refrain from harming others when we familiarise ourselves again and again with this practice. We really need to pay attention to this point.

As I mentioned earlier, in essence benefitting others and not harming others is Dharma practice. I really feel that ultimately all Dharma can be combined into these two aspects, and thus we need to ensure that every practice we do is integrated with these two essential points. In the Vinaya sutra, the Buddha mentioned that the person who harms others is not a person who practises virtue. So we need to keep that in mind. If one considers oneself to be someone who practises virtue, then one needs to refrain from harming others at all costs. We need to remind ourselves of these passages from the sutras again and again.

In Shantideva's very meticulously presented text that we have been studying, you will recall that there are passages where Shantideva quotes the Buddha as saying: "Benefiting sentient beings is in turn benefitting me; harming sentient beings is in turn harming me". This is essential advice from the Buddha. If we respect the Buddha then the best way to honour him, as the Buddha himself mentioned, is to benefit other sentient beings. The best way to refrain from showing disrespect to the Buddha is by refraining from harming and not respecting other sentient beings. This is really profound and practical advice for us to put into practice, which is the best way to remember the kindness of the Buddha.

These sentiments, which were presented by the Buddha himself, illustrate the great compassion that the Buddha has for all beings. He does not discriminate between sentient beings - indeed his only intention is to benefit them all. The Buddha reached this state of infinite compassion for all beings as a result of having familiarised himself with these attitudes prior to actually reaching the state of buddhahood. These are the attitudes that he familiarised himself with as a trainee on the path, and achieving buddhahood is a result of having perfected these positive attitudes of wishing to benefit all beings and not harm any living being. Reaching the state of having infinite compassion for all beings is a result of the practices that the Buddha engaged in as a trainee on the path.

What we need to learn from this is that it is exactly the same for ourselves. If we now, to the best of our ability, really develop these attitudes (wishing to benefit other sentient beings and not harm any sentient being even in the slightest way) and put them into practice, then, as we perfect these attitudes, and as they become more and more a part of our way of thinking, it will be possible to reach the state where that is our sole intention. Then we will be able to confidently say: "if you harm others, then that is equivalent to harming me" and "if you benefit others, then that is equivalent to benefitting me". These are actual states of mind that can be developed.

As Lama Tsong Khapa mentions in all of his texts on the stages of the path - the great treatise, and the middling and small treatises on the stages of the path to enlightenment - the practice for a beginner is to avoid one negativity at a time and engage in one virtuous deed at a time. They will accumulate to the point of completely abandoning all negativities and achieving all supreme

qualities. This indicates that setting a very high goal of wishing to achieve the state of enlightenment and focusing only on the end result, while neglecting to actually engage in these small practices now, is completely missing the point. If we wish to achieve that state of enlightenment in the future, then the only way for a beginner trainee is to engage in this practice of accumulating virtues one at a time, and abandoning negativities one at a time.

### **2.1.2.2.1.2.3.5. Refuting that the distinctive individual understanding of samsara and nirvana would be invalid**

Here the commentary reads:

The Madhyamika accept that there is no ultimate birth or death, that the lack of inherent existence is natural liberation, and that the birth, death and so forth established by karma and afflictions are cyclic existence.

This presents the **Madhyamika** view that the lack of inherent existence of all aspects of cyclic existence such as birth, sickness, aging and death is *natural liberation*. Thus, the term natural liberation refers to the *lack of inherent existence of birth, sickness, ageing and death*, and so forth. These conditions are *established by karma and afflictions* and this is what is referred to as *cyclic existence* or samsara.

In the text each of the other schools of Buddhist thought present their arguments to refute this assertion of the Madhyamika. Earlier the arguments of the Vaibhashika (Realists) were presented and refuted. Here, the objections of the Sautrantika (the followers of sutra) are being presented and refuted. Next the views of the Cittamatra (Mind Only) schools will be presented and refuted. As I have already covered the teachings on the tenets, it would be good for you to refer to those teachings as a way to understand the particular assertions of these proponents – the Realists, the followers of sutra, the Mind Only school and then the Madhyamika or Middle Way school, which has two sub-schools - the Autonomist or Svatantrika and the Consequentialist or Prasangika schools.

In relation to the Madhyamika assertion of natural nirvana and cyclic existence, the commentary then says: Regarding this a **Sautrantika** opponent argues ...

The argument is presented in the following lines of the root text:

*13cd. If nirvana is the ultimate,  
And samsara the illusory,*

*14. Then also the Buddha would circle,  
What would be the point of the bodhisattva's  
practice?*

Then the commentary explains the meaning of this verse, which is the argument of the Sautrantikas:

If the ultimate or natural liberation is actually liberation, then although the emptiness of inherent existence of cyclic existence is ultimate liberation, the continuity of circling, that is in an illusory way, through birth and death, is cyclic existence. In that case, there would be a common basis for cyclic existence and liberation, which would mean that even buddhas circle in cyclic existence. If that were the case, then it would be pointless for bodhisattvas to practise

the bodhisattva trainings in order to attain enlightenment.

What the **Madhyamika** propose is that the lack of true existence of samsara - which includes birth, sickness, ageing and death - is the natural abiding nirvana, or liberation. This means that from time immemorial samsara has always existed in the nature of the naturally abiding liberation. That is because samsara has always lacked true and inherent existence.

The **Sautrantika** argument is: *if the ultimate or natural liberation is actually liberation* – this is in relation to the Madhyamika's assertion that the lack of true or inherent existence of samsara is the naturally abiding liberation – *then although the emptiness of inherent existence of cyclic existence is ultimate liberation, the continuity of circling (in an illusory way) through birth and death, is cyclic existence*. Thus, *there would be a common basis for cyclic existence and liberation, which would mean that even buddhas circle in cyclic existence*. If that were the case then it would be pointless for bodhisattvas to practise the bodhisattva trainings in order to attain enlightenment. This is the argument presented by the Sautrantika.

The **Madhyamikas** explain that there is a difference between naturally abiding nirvana and the nirvana that is obtained as a way of abandoning the adventitious defilements.

The key point to be understood here is whether or not natural liberation is actual liberation. And what is being explained is that naturally abiding nirvana or liberation is not the actual liberation that is obtained through having practised the path and abandoned the defilements. Thus, the argument presented by the Sautrantika is not feasible.

As an answer to the Sautrantika the text says:

*Answer:* There is no such fault because ...

These lines from the root text are presented:

*14cd. If the continuity of the condition is not cut off,  
Then the illusion will also not be reversed.*

*15ab. If the continuity of the condition ceases  
Then it will not arise even conventionally.*

The commentary then explains the meaning of these lines:

...there is a difference between natural liberation and the liberation purified of the adventitious. The natural liberation does not depend on meditating on the path because it is the suchness of all, irrespective of whether one meditates on the path or not.

The liberation free from the adventitious stains needs to be attained by ceasing to take rebirth in cyclic existence through the continuity of birth and death. Although it lacks inherent existence, if one does not cease the continuity of the conditions, one cannot even reverse an illusion, not to mention cyclic existence. If one does cut the continuity of the conditions of ignorance and so forth, then cyclic existence will not even arise in an illusory way.

The answer begins with *there is a difference between* what is referred to as *natural liberation and the liberation that is purified of the adventitious* defilements.

That is followed by the explanation that *natural liberation does not depend on meditating on the path because it is the suchness or nature of all, irrespective of whether one meditates*

on the path or not. This implies that the natural liberation is something that has always abided. If there was a beginning to cyclic existence, then from the very beginning naturally abiding nirvana would be present at all times, because that is its very nature.

Then the text explains further that *the liberation that is free from the adventitious stains needs to be attained by cutting off the taking of rebirth in cyclic existence through the continuity of birth, ageing, sickness and death.*

The commentary further explains that *although it, meaning the continuity of birth and death and so forth, lacks inherent existence, if one does not cut, or stop, the continuity of the conditions, one cannot reverse even an illusion.*

What is being meticulously presented here is that although cyclic existence lacks inherent existence that does not nullify the fact that one will experience the sufferings of birth, sickness, ageing and death. Unless and until the continuity of those conditions of birth, sickness, ageing and death are completely stopped, one will have to continuously experience these sufferings. When it says that *one cannot reverse an illusion, not to mention cyclic existence* this means that for as long as the conditions for an illusion are there, the illusion will appear. The only way for an illusion to disappear is when the conditions for the illusion cease to exist. Cyclic existence is exactly the same: birth, sickness, ageing and death will remain for as long as the conditions for them to be regenerated remain. Lacking inherent existence doesn't mean that one will not experience the consequences of the conditions that were created earlier.

*Adventitious stains* refers to all the delusions; delusions are referred to as being adventitious because they are not one entity with the mind itself. This means that when the proper conditions are in place, they will cease to exist. The analogy that is given to portray adventitious delusions is clouds in an otherwise clear sky. With the conditions of strong wind, even dark and heavy clouds will be blown away, and the natural clear sky will become apparent again. Likewise, when the conditions for the delusions are abandoned, then the pure nature of the mind will become apparent. This is to be understood.

Next the text says: *if one does cut the continuity of the conditions of ignorance and so forth, then cyclic existence will not even arise in an illusory way.* This implies that, leaving aside 'ultimately', samsara will not be present even 'as illusory' or 'conventionally' when the conditions for samsara are eliminated.

Then the concluding statement reconfirms the refutation of the Sautrantika objections.

The earlier objection needs to be answered by making a distinction between ultimate liberation and liberation ...

Here *liberation* is the state of being free from the delusions through engaging in the path. That is actual liberation.

... rather than answering it in any other way because the opponent accepts that the buddhas do not circle and that sentient beings do.

#### 2.1.2.2.2. Refuting the Mind Only in particular<sup>1</sup>

This is presented in two sections:

1. Expressing the view
2. Refuting it

##### 1. EXPRESSING THE VIEW

This refers to the view of the **Mind Only**

*15cd. If even the mistaken is non-existent  
What takes the illusion as its object?*

Thus they are objecting:

*Mind Only:* If all phenomena lack inherent existence and even the mistaken consciousness apprehending the illusion does not exist, then what is the mind of which the illusion becomes the object of? As it does not exist, even the illusion becomes non-existent.

The **Madhyamika** answer is:

*Answer:* This again is the debate that if it exists, it has to exist inherently.

The argument of the **Mind Only** school is that *if all phenomena lack inherent existence and even the mistaken consciousness apprehending the illusion does not exist, then what is the mind of which the illusion becomes the object?* Because the Madhyamika assert the lack of inherent existence and true existence, the Mind Only school says that *if all phenomena lack inherent existence* as you propose, *then even the mistaken consciousness apprehending the illusion does not exist.*

What one needs to understand from this objection is that the Mind Only school assert that the mind exists inherently and that there is no external existence. Because the Madhyamika assertion that all phenomena lack inherent existence harms the their own assertion that the mind exists inherently, the Mind Only argue that if all phenomena lack inherent existence, as the Madhyamika claim, *then the mistaken consciousness apprehending the illusion also does not exist.* If that is the case, they say *then what is the mind of which the illusion becomes the object of?*

For the Mind Only school, if the mind apprehending the illusion does not exist inherently, then that is the same as saying that it doesn't exist. Thus they say, according to the Madhyamika, if the apprehending mind *does not exist*, then *even the illusion* would have to be *non-existent*.

The commentary presents a brief answer from the Madhyamikas pointing out that the reason for the Mind Only School objection *again comes down to the argument that if it exists*, i.e. if things exist, *it has to exist inherently.* The Mind Only argue that if all phenomena doesn't exist inherently, then that would mean that the mind (which they in fact believe exists inherently) also doesn't exist. If the mind that apprehends the illusion does not exist inherently, then by default one would have to say that what has been apprehended (the illusion itself) also does not exist. That is the absurdity that the Mind Only school presents.

##### 2. REFUTING IT

This refers to refuting the previous argument of the Mind Only school that if the mind apprehending the illusion

<sup>1</sup> This explanation contains many subdivisions so to simplify things the numbering restarts here. It will return to the overall numbering structure at verse 30, which is the beginning of the next major heading.

does not exist inherently, then that would imply that the illusion itself does not exist. The refutation is presented in these two subdivisions:

2.1. Similar counter argument

2.2. Refuting the answer

### 2.1. Similar argument

The counter argument by the **Madhyamikas** uses a similar argument to the one presented earlier by the Mind Only:

*16ab. When for you the illusion is non-existent,  
At that time, what becomes the object?*

The commentary explains:

If the object held by you, the Mind Only, existed in the way it appears when it is held, i.e., as an outer object, then it would exist externally. In that case, that is similar to an illusion and the mind taking it as its object, become non-existent. If it does not exist in the way it appears, it does not exist inherently, and in that case, according to you, it would have to be non-existent. If there is no apprehended illusory object appearing as an external object, at that time what is taken as an object at that time? Even the apprehenders of the five objects of forms, sounds and so forth become non-existent.

The counter argument begins with the Mind Only assertion that there is no outer or external object: The Madhyamika argue - *If the object held by you, the Mind Only, existed in the way it appears when it is held as an outer object, then it would exist externally. In that case, it is similar to an illusion and a mind taking it as its object being non-existent.*

The **Mind Only** argument is that if the mind didn't exist inherently then the illusion itself would not exist.

So, the **Madhyamikas** present a similar counter argument: In saying that things do not exist externally, you would also be implying that they don't exist.

The commentary further explains: *If it does not exist in the way it appears, it does not exist inherently, and in that case, according to you, it would have to be non-existent.* This is the point. *If there is no apprehended illusory object appearing as an external object, at that time what is taken as an object at that time? Even the apprehenders of the five objects of forms, sounds and so forth become non-existent.*

So the counter argument turns on the **Mind Only** argument asserting that if things were to lack inherent existence, and if the mind apprehending an illusion lacks inherent existence, then the illusion itself would be non-existent.

Similarly, the **Madhyamika** say, if you say there's no external existence, then the mind apprehending these external objects such as sounds, forms and so forth, would also be non-existent; you say that they do not exist externally, yet they are perceived as being external objects.

### 2.2. Refuting the answer

This is subdivided into two:

2.2.1. Expressing the view

2.2.2. Refuting it

#### 2.2.1. Expressing the view

*16cd. In case: "It exists in another way.*

*The aspect is mind itself."*

The **Mind Only** say:

*Mind Only:* Although it does not exist in the very way it appears, as an external object, it exists in a different way, because the aspects of form and the like are the substance of mind itself.

The Mind Only are saying that *it does not exist in the way that it appears.* Just as the Madhyamika would say that things appear as existing inherently but do not exist in that way, the Mind Only are saying that *it does not exist in the very way that it appears, as external objects.* While things like forms, sounds and so forth appear as being external objects, they do not exist in that way. They *exist in a different way, because the aspects of form and the like are the substance of the mind itself.* So the Mind Only assertion is that form does not exist externally, rather it is a partial substance of the mind itself. Thus the Mind Only School, unlike the Madhyamika, would not say that the consciousness apprehending form arises in relation to form, but rather the consciousness apprehending form arises from seeing another partial imprint of the mind itself appearing as form. Therefore what appears as being form or sounds and so forth (the external five sense objects) are actually a similar substance to the mind, arising from the same imprint, and one partial aspect of that substance appears as these five sense objects, so that is how it appears.

In essence the Mind Only school asserts that forms and so forth do not exist externally, but rather they are a substance of the mind itself.

#### 2.2.2. Refuting it

The refutation of the Mind Only position is subdivided into two sections.

2.2.2.1. The non-dual mind is not seen by anything

2.2.2.2. Refuting a self-knower through the answer to the question

##### 2.2.2.1. THE NON-DUAL MIND IS NOT SEEN BY ANYTHING

The non-dual mind refers to the **Mind Only** assertion that there's no duality in what is being apprehended and the apprehender, basically the subject and object. They say that there is a non-duality of subject and object because both are aspects of the mind itself.

The **Madhyamika** response is that if a non-dual mind were to exist it would have to be seen by a consciousness, but it is not seen by any consciousness.

*17ab. When the mere mind is an illusion,  
At that time what is seen by what?*

The commentary reads:

If at a time when the mere mind appears like an illusion, and it does not exist as an external object, what prime cognition sees the mind that lacks external existence? There is nothing that sees it.

As clearly presented here, *if at a time when the mere mind appears like an illusion, and it does not exist as an external object then what prime cognition sees the mind that lacks external existence?* The answer to this rhetorical question, by default, also refutes the self-knower.

## 2.2.2.2. REFUTING THE SELF-KNOWER THROUGH THE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION

The argument of the **Mind Only**:

*The Mind Only argue:* Consciousness can be of two types: In the aspect of being directed outwards and in the aspect of only being directed inwards. The latter is the self-knowing direct perception. All consciousnesses are the object of that self-knower.

Following on from the earlier question, *what prime cognition sees the mind that lacks external existence?*, the Mind Only School present their position that *consciousness can be of two types: a consciousness in the aspect of being directed outwards* and perceiving things that appear as external phenomena, and a consciousness in *the aspect of only being directed inwards*.

Of these two types of consciousnesses, *the latter is the self-knowing direct perception*. This assertion of a self-knowing consciousness – a consciousness that knows itself – is one of the unique presentations of the Mind Only school. For them, *all consciousnesses are the object of the self-knower*.

What has to be clarified is that it is not as if two separate consciousnesses are posited by the Mind Only. Rather it's the same consciousness that has two aspects: one aspect that focuses externally or outwardly, and one aspect that focuses inwardly. In other words, one aspect of the consciousness apprehends objects and the other aspect apprehends the subject, or the mind itself.

Saying that there are *two types* of consciousness may sound like there are two different consciousnesses, but in fact one consciousness is posited as functioning in two different ways. *The latter*, the consciousness in *the aspect of only being directed inwards is the self-knowing direct perception* and all consciousnesses appear to that.

This is refuted by the **Madhyamika** under the following four headings:

2.2.2.2.1. Refuting this with quotation

2.2.2.2.2. Refuting this with logic

2.2.2.2.3. Refuting the arguments for the existence of a self-knower

2.2.2.2.4. Refuting that imputed objects are based on truly existent functionalities

### 2.2.2.2.1. Refuting this with a quotation

This section starts with the statement by the **Madhyamika**:

It is not feasible for this very mind to experience and know itself in a non-dual manner.

Then these lines are presented:

*17cd. Even the protector of the worlds said  
That mind does not see mind.*

*18ab. The edge of a knife does not cut itself  
It is the same for mind.*

The commentary explains that:

Even the protector of the worlds stated this in the *Sutra of the Precious Crown Ornament*, with examples such as the edge of the knife cannot cut that very knife itself, and that mind does not see mind.

This relates to the **Mind Only** assertion of self-knowing mind. Their definition of the self-knowing mind is an initial, infallible cogniser that is free from conceptuality, bears the aspect of an apprehender and only looks

inward. So it is a cogniser that only looks inward which means it only apprehends the mind itself; free from conceptuality means it apprehends the mind in a non-dualistic manner. So, they posit the self-knower that is neither a primary consciousness nor a mental factor. It exists like a separate entity from the mind, whose only function is to be merely aware of the mind.

The Mind Only assert that the self-knower experiences the mind in a non-dual manner. We covered the Mind Only view when I taught the tenets, so you can refer to earlier notes and transcripts.

As I have explained previously, the self-knower is asserted as a cogniser that apprehends itself in a non-dual manner, however it is not a mind that perceives non-duality, for the only mind that can perceive non-duality is the wisdom realising emptiness. As the self-knower is not a mind realising emptiness or suchness, it therefore cannot actually perceive or realise non-duality.

As explained in the commentary, *even the protector of the worlds stated this in the Sutra of the Precious Crown Ornament with examples such as the edge of the knife cannot cut the very knife itself*, and similarly, *the mind does not see mind*.

The commentary then further explains the meaning of this analogy:

For example, just like the edge of the blade no matter how sharp, cannot cut itself in any way, and similarly the mind cannot see the mind.

Those who accept a self-knower accept that the very apprehending aspect knows itself. As there is not even one atom of difference in the arising aspect of the knower and that known, they need to accept them as one without any extra other part.

If that is the case, the **Madhyamika** say:

If one accepts such a self-knower, then one needs to accept examples such as that the blade of the knife cutting itself, or that prime cognition comprehends the object of comprehension independently of such an object.

This quotation from the *Sutra of the Precious Crown Ornament* refutes the Mind Only position.

### 2.2.2.2.2. Refuting this with logic

This is subdivided into two:

2.2.2.2.2.1. Refuting the example

2.2.2.2.2.2. Refuting the meaning

#### 2.2.2.2.2.1. Refuting the example

Here there are two examples, the first of which is the example of candlelight.

The lines of verse relating to this are:

*18cd. If, 'It is like a candle  
Perfectly illuminating itself.'*

*19. The candle light is nothing to be illuminated  
Because darkness does not obscure.*

After these lines, the **Mind Only** argument is presented:

*Argument:* Just as the candlelight perfectly illuminates itself and other objects, in the same way does the consciousness know itself and others.

The **Madhyamika's** answer to that is:

*Answer:* The example is not established because the candlelight is not illuminated by itself. It does not

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need to and cannot illuminate itself. Otherwise, darkness should also obscure itself and others, which is not valid. If darkness obscured darkness, then one could not see darkness, just as one cannot see the vase covered by a cloth. One should try to extensively understand these arguments, in the way they are outlined in the *Root Wisdom*.

Although it is not in fact the case, the **Mind Only** say that *just as the candlelight perfectly illuminates itself and other objects, in the same way consciousness knows itself as well as others*. They use the analogy of candlelight to assert that the consciousness knows itself as well as others.

Then the **Madhyamika** refute that, by saying: *The example is not established*. The example you use cannot be established, *because the candlelight is not illuminated by itself*. So the very example that you present is not valid or established, because candlelight does not illuminate itself. It does not need to and it cannot illuminate itself.

If a candle could illuminate itself, then by default you would have to say that *darkness should also obscure itself*, which is absurd. *If darkness obscured darkness, then one could not see darkness, just as one cannot see the vase covered by a cloth*. Indeed, if a vase is covered by a cloth, then you cannot see it because it is obscured by the cloth. So if darkness obscured itself that would imply one could not see darkness because it is obscured. That is absurd.

The commentary concludes with: *one should try to extensively understand these arguments in the way they are outlined in the Root Wisdom*. The seventh chapter of this text contains a few verses that explain these analogies.

The second example is the example of the crystal, which we can cover in our next session.

If you pay attention, and read up on this topic and try to understand the views of the proponents, then it becomes a bit clearer. Otherwise at first glance it might seem hard to understand.

This will become clearer as we go further into the text.

Extracts from *Entrance for the Child of the Conquerors* used with the kind permission of Ven. Fedor Stracke

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