SN 44.1 — Khema Sutta: With Khema

English translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

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Completeness: ABBREVIATED. Every source-unit character is preserved, including introductions, notes and verse structure. Thanissaro's collection-level note explicitly states that repetitions were cut: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/about.html. This is evidence about the translation method, not an assertion that every individual unit contains an omission; no repetitions reconstructed.

Text

On one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Savatthi at Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's monastery. And on that occasion the bhikkhuni Khema, wandering on tour among the Kosalans, had taken up residence between Savatthi and Saketa at Toranavatthu. Then King Pasenadi Kosala, while traveling from Saketa to Savatthi, took up a one-night residence between Savatthia and Saketa at Toranavatthu. Then he addressed a certain man, "Come, now, my good man. Find out if in Toranavatthu there's the sort of brahman or contemplative I might visit today."

"As you say, sire," the man replied to the king, but having roamed all over Toranavatthu he did not see the sort of brahman or contemplative the king might visit. But he did see the bhikkhuni Khema residing in Toranavatthu. On seeing her, he went to King Pasenadi Kosala and on arrival said to him, "Sire, in Toranavatthu there is no brahman or contemplative of the sort your majesty might visit. But there is, however, a bhikkhuni named Khema, a disciple of the Blessed One, worthy and rightly self-awakened. And of this lady, this admirable report has spread about: 'She is wise, competent, intelligent, learned, a fluent speaker, admirable in her ingenuity.' Let your majesty visit her."

Then King Pasenadi Kosala went to the bhikkhuni Khema and, on arrival, having bowed down to her, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to her, "Now then, lady, does the Tathagata exist after death?"

"That, great king, has not been declared by the Blessed One: 'The Tathagata exists after death.'"

"Well then, lady, does the Tathagata not exist after death?"

"Great king, that too has not been declared by the Blessed One: 'The Tathagata does not exist after death.'"

"Then does the Tathagata both exist and not exist after death?"

"That has not been declared by the Blessed One: 'The Tathagata both exists and does not exist after death.'"

"Well then, does the Tathagata neither exist nor not exist after death?"

"That too has not been declared by the Blessed One: 'The Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist after death.'"

"Now, lady, when asked if the Tathagata exists after death, you say, 'That has not been declared by the Blessed One: "The Tathagata exists after death."' When asked if the Tathagata does not exist after death... both exists and does not exist after death... neither exists nor does not exist after death, you say, 'That too has not been declared by the Blessed One: "The Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist after death."' Now, what is the cause, what is the reason, why that has not been declared by the Blessed One?"

"Very well, then, great king, I will question you in return about this very same matter. Answer as you see fit. What do you think great king: Do you have an accountant or actuary or mathematician who can count the grains of sand in the river Ganges as 'so many grains of sand' or 'so many hundreds of grains of sand' or 'so many thousands of grains of sand' or 'so many hundreds of thousands of grains of sand'?"

"No, lady."

"Then do you have an accountant or calculator or mathematician who can count the water in the great ocean as 'so many buckets of water' or 'so many hundreds of buckets of water' or 'so many thousands of buckets of water' or 'so many hundreds of thousands of buckets of water'?"

"No, lady. Why is that? The great ocean is deep, boundless, hard to fathom."

"Even so, great king, any physical form by which one describing the Tathagata would describe him: That the Tathagata has abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra

stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of form, great king, the Tathagata is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the ocean. 'The Tathagata exists after death' doesn't apply. 'The Tathagata doesn't exist after death doesn't apply. 'The Tathagata both exists and doesn't exist after death' doesn't apply. 'The Tathagata neither exists nor doesn't exist after death' doesn't apply.

"Any feeling... Any perception... Any mental fabrication...

"Any consciousness by which one describing the Tathagata would describe him: That the Tathagata has abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of consciousness, great king, the Tathagata is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the ocean. 'The Tathagata exists after death' doesn't apply. 'The Tathagata doesn't exist after death doesn't apply. 'The Tathagata both exists and doesn't exist after death' doesn't apply. 'The Tathagata neither exists nor doesn't exist after death' doesn't apply." [1]

Then King Pasenadi Kosala, delighting in & approving of the bhikkhuni Khema's words, got up from his seat, bowed down to her and — keeping her to his right — departed.

Then at another time he went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there [he asked the Blessed One the same questions he had asked the bhikkhuni Khema, and received precisely the same responses and analogies. Then he exclaimed:]

"Amazing, lord! Astounding! How the meaning and phrasing of the teacher and disciple agree, coincide, and do not diverge from one another with regard to the supreme teaching! Recently, lord, I went to the bhikkhuni Khema and, on arrival, asked her about this matter, and she answered me with the same words, the same phrasing, as the Blessed One. Amazing, lord! Astounding! How the meaning and phrasing of the teacher and disciple agree, coincide, and do not diverge from one another with regard to the supreme teaching!

"Now, lord, we must go. Many are our duties, many our responsibilities."

"Then do, great king, what you think it is now time to do."

So King Pasenadi Kosala, delighting in and approving of the Blessed One's words, got up from his seat, bowed down to the Blessed One and — keeping him to his right — departed.

Note

1.

The Commentary and Sub-commentary are not satisfied to let this passage stand, and try to describe the Tathagata's indescribability. To paraphrase: He is freed from the

classification of form, etc., because for him there will be no arising of form, etc., in the future (i.e., after death). He is deep in the depth of his character and the depth of his qualities. As for any description in terms of 'a being' that might be used in relation to the Tathagata with such deep qualities, when one sees the non-existence of the description 'being,' owing to the (future) non-existence of the aggregates, one sees that the four statements with regard to the Tathagata after death are invalid.

This explanation, which borrows from Sister Vajira's verse in SN 5.10, misses an important point raised in SN 22.36 and SN 23.2. In SN 22.36 the Buddha states that one is measured and classified by what one is obsessed with. If one is not obsessed with anything, then one is not measured or classified by it in the here and now. In SN 23.2 the Buddha points out that the term "being" applies only where there is craving and passion. The Tathagata, freed from craving and passion, is thus indescribable in the present, even though he obviously still functions in the present. SN 22.86 elaborates on this point in great detail.

Another problem raised by the Commentary's explanation for this sutta is how it would define the Tathagata's qualities and character, for what are they composed of aside from aggregates?

See also: MN 63; MN 72; other suttas in the Avyakata Samyutta; the translator's Introduction to this samyutta; AN 4.42.