

KHEMĀ THERĪ'S WISDOM



SN 44.1 TRANSLATED BY
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Khemā Therī's Wisdom

(Khemāsuttaṃ, SN 44.1)

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Khemā Therī's Wisdom

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Preface

According to the commentary on the foremost nun disciples of the Buddha,¹ it is through this discourse that the nun Khemā was appointed to the position of foremost amongst those who have great wisdom, making her the female equivalent of Ven. Sāriputta.

The discourse is indeed profound, and in one interesting aspect departs from other discourses that contain the same teaching. Normally in the commentaries in the question about the position of the *tathāgata* after death, the word is defined like this:

the *tathāgata* (here) means a being.

This would give the question: Does a being exist (not exist, both exist and not exist, neither exist nor not exist) after death?²

Here, however, the text makes it clear the question is being asked about the Realised One himself, and not about beings in general:

“Just so, Great King, through knowing whatever bodily form a Realised One can be known by, that form the Realised One has abandoned, cut off at the root, made a palm stump, made unviable, so that by nature it is unable to rise again in the future.

And the commentary concurs:

‘That form the *Tathāgata* has abandoned,’ means through abandoning the arising of that form said to be prepared, the omniscient Tathāgata has abandoned (form).

Because of this we must see the meaning of these question in two ways: one as a question about beings in general, which cannot be said to exist (not exist, both exist and not exist,

¹ AA 1.5.2.

² These are four question of a sequence which sometimes includes a total of ten profound questions.

neither exist nor not exist) after death because there is no underlying something that has continual existence in human life, only conditionally arisen phenomena.

On the other hand in this context we cannot say the Realised One exists (not exists, both exists and not exists, neither exists nor not exists) after death because the state of Nibbāna is unincorporated in the categories of existence altogether, as is anyone who has attained Liberation. Indeed, this is the definition of Liberation, to be free from renewed existence.

So the discourse throws new light on our understanding of these difficult questions, and rightly Arahāt Khemā was placed at the foremost levels of great wisdom, through her profound understanding of these deep questions and her exposition of their meaning, which is later confirmed when the King, who is asking the questions, asks the very same questions of the Buddha himself and gets the same replies..

Ānandajoti Bhikkhu,
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Khemā Therī's Wisdom *(Khemāsuttaṃ SN 44.1)*

Introduction in Toraṇavatthu

At one time the Fortunate One was dwelling near Sāvattḥī at Anāthapiṇḍika's grounds in Jeta's Wood.

Then at that time the nun Khemā, while walking gradually through Kosala on walking tour, between Sāvattḥī and Sāketa, had reached and was dwelling in Toraṇavatthu. Then the Kosalan King Pasenadi was going to Sāvattḥī from Sāketa and was between Sāvattḥī and Sāketa and had reached and was dwelling in Toraṇavatthu for a night.

Then the Kosalan King Pasenadi addressed a certain man, saying: "Please go, dear Sir, and in Toraṇavatthu see if there would be a suitable and knowledgeable ascetic or brāhmaṇa I can pay homage to today."

"Yes, your Majesty", said that man, and after replying to the Kosalan King Pasenadi, and wandering through the whole of Toraṇavatthu, he did not find a suitable and knowledgeable ascetic or brāhmaṇa that the Kosalan King Pasenadi could pay homage to. But the man did see that the nun Khemā had reached and was dwelling in Toraṇavatthu.

Having seen her, he approached the Kosalan King Pasenadi, and after approaching he said this to the Kosalan King Pasenadi: "There is not, your Majesty, in Toraṇavatthu a suitable and knowledgeable ascetic or brāhmaṇa your Majesty can pay homage to today. But there is, your Majesty, the nun named Khemā, who is a disciple of the Fortunate One, the Worthy One, the Perfect Sambuddha, and about this Noble Lady this beautiful report has gone round: 'She is wise, learned, intelligent, a beautiful orator and extemporary speaker.' Your Majesty can pay homage to her."

Khemā Therī answers the Questions

Then the Kosalan King Pasenadi approached the nun Khemā, and after approaching and worshipping the nun Khemā, he sat down on one side.

While sitting on one side the Kosalan King Pasenadi said this to the nun Khemā:

"How is it, Noble Lady, does the Realised One exist after death?"

"This has not been answered, Great King, by the Fortunate One: 'Does the Realised One exist after death?' "

"But how is it, Noble Lady, does the Realised One not exist after death?"

"This has not been answered, Great King, by the Fortunate One: 'Does the Realised One not exist after death?' "

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“How is it, Noble Lady, does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?”

“This has not been answered, Great King, by the Fortunate One: ‘Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?’ ”

“But how is it, Noble Lady, does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?”

“This has not been answered, Great King, by the Fortunate One: ‘Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?’ ”

“ ‘How is it, Noble Lady, does the Realised One exist after death?’ – when there is this question, you say: ‘This has not been answered, Great King, by the Fortunate One: “Does the Realised One exist after death?” ’

‘But how is it, Noble Lady, does the Realised One not exist after death?’ – when there is this question, you say: ‘This has not been answered, Great King, by the Fortunate One: “Does the Realised One not exist after death?” ’

‘How is it, Noble Lady, does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?’ – when there is this question, you say: ‘This has not been answered, Great King, by the Fortunate One: “Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?” ’

‘How is it, Noble Lady, does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?’ – when there is this question, you say: ‘This has not been answered, Great King, by the Fortunate One: “Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?” ’

What is the cause, Noble Lady, what is the reason, why does the Fortunate One not answer this?”

“Now then, Great King, here I will ask you something in return, as you see fit, so you should answer.

What do you think, Great King, do you have a mathematician, or a calculator or an accountant who is able to count the amount of sand in the Ganges, saying: there is this much sand, or there are so many hundreds of grains of sand, or there are so many thousands of grains of sand, or there are so many hundreds of thousands of grains of sand?”

“Certainly not, Noble Lady.”

“But do you have a mathematician, or a calculator or an accountant who is able to measure the water in the great ocean, saying: there are this many gallons of water, or there are this many hundreds of gallons of water, or there are this many thousands of gallons of water, or there are this many hundreds of thousands of gallons of water?”

“Certainly not, Noble Lady. What is the cause of that? Great is the ocean, Noble Lady, deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom.”

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“Just so, Great King, through knowing whatever bodily form a Realised One can be known by, that form the Realised One has abandoned, cut off at the root, made a palm stump, made unviable, so that by nature it is unable to rise again in the future.

The Realised One, Great King, is free from being considered as bodily form, he is deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean.

‘Does the Realised One exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One not exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?’ does not apply.

Through knowing whatever feeling a Realised One can be known by, that feeling the Realised One has abandoned, cut off at the root, made a palm stump, made unviable, so that by nature it is unable to rise again in the future.

The Realised One, Great King, is free from being considered as feeling, he is deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean.

‘Does the Realised One exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One not exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?’ does not apply.

Through knowing whatever perception a Realised One can be known by, that perception the Realised One has abandoned, cut off at the root, made a palm stump, made unviable, so that by nature it is unable to rise again in the future.

The Realised One, Great King, is free from being considered as perception, he is deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean.

‘Does the Realised One exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One not exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?’ does not apply.

Through knowing whatever (volitional) processes a Realised One can be known by, those (volitional) processes the Realised One has abandoned, cut off at the root, made a palm stump, made unviable, so that by nature it is unable to rise again in the future.

The Realised One, Great King, is free from being considered as (volitional) processes, he is deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean.

‘Does the Realised One exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One not exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?’ does not apply.

Through knowing whatever consciousness a Realised One can be known by, that consciousness the Realised One has abandoned, cut off at the root, made a palm stump, made unviable, so that by nature it is unable to rise again in the future.

The Realised One, Great King, is free from being considered as consciousness, he is deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean.

‘Does the Realised One exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One not exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?’ does not apply.’”

Then the Kosalan King Pasenadi, after greatly rejoicing and gladly receiving this word of the nun Khemā, having worshipped and circumambulated the nun Khemā, departed.

King Pasenadi meets the Buddha

Then the Kosalan King Pasenadi at another time approached the Fortunate One, and after approaching and worshipping the Fortunate One, he sat down on one side.

While sitting on one side the Kosalan King Pasenadi said this to the Fortunate One:

“How is it, reverend Sir, does the Realised One exist after death?”

“This has not been answered, Great King, by me: ‘Does the Realised One exist after death?’ ”

“But how is it, reverend Sir, does the Realised One not exist after death?”

“This has not been answered, Great King, by me: ‘Does the Realised One not exist after death?’ ”

“How is it, reverend Sir, does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?”

“This has not been answered, Great King, by me: ‘Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?’ ”

“But how is it, reverend Sir, does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?”

“This has not been answered, Great King, by me: ‘Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?’ ”

“ ‘How is it, reverend Sir, does the Realised One exist after death?’ – when there is this question, you say: ‘This has not been answered, Great King, by me: “Does the Realised One exist after death?”’

‘But how is it, reverend Sir, does the Realised One not exist after death?’ – when there is this question, you say: ‘This has not been answered, Great King, by me: “Does the Realised One not exist after death?”’

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‘How is it, reverend Sir, does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?’ – when there is this question, you say: ‘This has not been answered, Great King, by me: “Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?”’

‘How is it, reverend Sir, does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?’ – when there is this question, you say: ‘This has not been answered, Great King, by me: “Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?”’

What is the cause, reverend Sir, what is the reason, why does the Fortunate One not answer this?”

“Now then, Great King, here I will ask you something in return, as you see fit, so you should answer.

What do you think, Great King, do you have a mathematician, or a calculator or an accountant who is able to count the amount of sand in the Ganges, saying: there is this much sand, or there are so many hundreds of grains of sand, or there are so many thousands of grains of sand, or there are so many hundreds of thousands of grains of sand?”

“Certainly not, reverend Sir.”

“But do you have a mathematician, or a calculator or an accountant who is able to measure the water in the great ocean, saying: there are this many gallons of water, or there are this many hundreds of gallons of water, or there are this many thousands of gallons of water, or there are this many hundreds of thousands of gallons of water?”

“Certainly not, reverend Sir. What is the cause of that? Great is the ocean, reverend Sir, deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom.”

“Just so, Great King, through knowing whatever bodily form a Realised One can be known by, that form the Realised One has abandoned, cut off at the root, made a palm stump, made unviable, so that by nature it is unable to rise again in the future.

The Realised One, Great King, is free from being considered as bodily form, he is deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean.

‘Does the Realised One exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One not exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?’ does not apply,
‘Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?’ does not apply.

Through knowing whatever feeling a Realised One can be known by, that feeling the Realised One has abandoned, cut off at the root, made a palm stump, made unviable, so that by nature it is unable to rise again in the future.

The Realised One, Great King, is free from being considered as feeling, he is deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean.

Khemā Therī's Wisdom - 8

'Does the Realised One exist after death?' does not apply,
'Does the Realised One not exist after death?' does not apply,
'Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?' does not apply,
'Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?' does not apply.

Through knowing whatever perception a Realised One can be known by, that perception the Realised One has abandoned, cut off at the root, made a palm stump, made unviable, so that by nature it is unable to rise again in the future.

The Realised One, Great King, is free from being considered as perception, he is deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean.

'Does the Realised One exist after death?' does not apply,
'Does the Realised One not exist after death?' does not apply,
'Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?' does not apply,
'Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?' does not apply.

Through knowing whatever (volitional) processes a Realised One can be known by, those (volitional) processes the Realised One has abandoned, cut off at the root, made a palm stump, made unviable, so that by nature it is unable to rise again in the future.

The Realised One, Great King, is free from being considered as (volitional) processes, he is deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean.

'Does the Realised One exist after death?' does not apply,
'Does the Realised One not exist after death?' does not apply,
'Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?' does not apply,
'Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?' does not apply.

Through knowing whatever consciousness a Realised One can be known by, that consciousness the Realised One has abandoned, cut off at the root, made a palm stump, made unviable, so that by nature it is unable to rise again in the future.

The Realised One, Great King, is free from being considered as consciousness, he is deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean.

'Does the Realised One exist after death?' does not apply,
'Does the Realised One not exist after death?' does not apply,
'Does the Realised One exist and not exist after death?' does not apply,
'Does the Realised One neither exist nor not exist after death?' does not apply."

The Conclusion

“It is wonderful, reverend Sir, it is marvellous, reverend Sir, in as much as the Teacher and the Disciple agree in the meaning with the meaning and in the letter with the letter, concur, do not contradict, that is to say, in regard to the highest matter.

On one occasion, reverend Sir, after approaching the nun Khemā, I asked about this matter, and the Noble Lady answered this matter for me with this meaning, with this letter, just as the Fortunate One did.

It is wonderful, reverend Sir, it is marvellous, reverend Sir, in as much as the Teacher and the Disciple agree in the meaning with the meaning and in the letter with the letter, concur, do not contradict, that is to say, in regard to the highest matter.

And now, reverend Sir, we shall go, as we have many duties, and there is much which ought to be done.”

“Now is the time, Great King, for whatever you are thinking.”

The Kosalan King Pasenadi, after greatly rejoicing and gladly receiving this word of the Fortunate One, having worshipped and circumambulated the Fortunate One, departed.