

## Khema Theri



THE BUDDHA PREACHING TO KHEMA, THE QUEEN OF KING BIMBISARA

**Introduction** – Presents here are two version of the same person for comparison – (a) Sri Lanka Version and (b) the Burmese version. At the time of **Buddha Padumuttara** (App.A), she cut off her hair to acquire money to buy alms for the Buddha and made her aspiration before the Buddha Padumuttara, one hundred thousand world cycles ago, to be the chief female disciple of a future Buddha and foremost in wisdom. Buddha Padumuttara gave the prophecy that she would realize her aspiration at the time of Buddha Gotama in this Buddha Kappa.

She was a Dhamma teacher at the time of Buddha Vipassi. She again was a lay disciples in each of the three Buddhas - **Kakusandha, Konagamana and Kassapa**, in this Baddha Kappa. She had built monasteries and giving alms to each of the Buddhas and his retinues. For these good deeds, she was finally acclaimed **the first female chief disciple of the Buddha, ranked foremost in wisdom and insight.**

**She was the role model for all Nuns at that time. She could be the best role model for all our female readers.** She was mentioned in several places as the highest ideal of womanhood worthy of imitation, and is described as the nun par excellence.

This statement by Buddha to Khema is the most moving instruction to all of us.

*"Just as the spider follows the web of its own making, so are sentient beings that have attachment will follow the stream of defilements that are of their own making. The wise*

*do not have any desire or regard for sense pleasures, but cut off the stream of defilements and go forth to Nibbana*

*Can you imagine a female Arahant – Khema Theri - Theri Khema, by her supernormal power, also came through the sky to pay homage to the Buddha. Female are also capable of flying through the sky. I we were in Myanmar, we man are forbidden, even to walk under the cloth line (Hta Min Kyo Than) where woman sun dry their skirt (Longyi). I guess, when a woman becomes an Arahant, she is a purified aggregates.*

## **Khema Theri**

**Khema, who was of royal birth, lived in the city of Sagala in the kingdom of Magadha. Because of her golden skin, her parents had named her Khema. When she grew up she became the chief consort of King Bimbisara. She was extremely beautiful and very conscious of her exquisite beauty. As such she did not want to see the Buddha or hear the Dhamma, as the Buddha had made it quite clear that external beauty was impermanent and of no value to enlightenment.**

**King Bimbisara, who was a devoted follower of the Buddha, wanted his queen to listen to the Buddha’s teachings. He thought of a plan to entice her to visit the monastery in which the Buddha was residing. King Bimbisara had his musicians describe in song the natural beauty of the grove in which the Buddha was residing. Khema, who was extremely fond of beauty, listened enraptured to their description of the beautiful flowers and trees that surrounded the Buddha. Wanting to experience the beauty of the grove, Khema decided to visit the monastery.**

**The Buddha was giving a discourse to a large gathering when he saw Khema in the distance, approaching the monastery. With his psychic powers he created a vision of an exquisitely beautiful maiden by his side. Khema, enchanted by the beauty of the grove and its scented flowers, walked closer and closer to the gathering until her attention was drawn to the beautiful maiden who was fanning the Buddha. Khema, who admired beauty, was captivated by the maiden whose beauty far surpassed her own.**

**The Buddha then made the beautiful maiden age slowly before her eyes. Khema saw the maiden’s beautiful skin wrinkle, her hair change to gray and her body age. She then saw the body collapse with age and pass**

away, leaving behind just a corpse, which in turn changed to a heap of bones. Understanding that all conditioned phenomena were impermanent, Khema realized that the same would happen to her. How could she retain her beauty when this exquisite vision aged and decomposed before her very eyes?

Khema was ready to listen to the Buddha, who then dispensed to her the dangers of lust and sense pleasures and requested her to give up sense pleasures which were transient. Directing her spiritually advanced mind to the teachings, **Khema attained Arahantship**. She then received permission from King Bimbisara to enter the Noble Order of Nuns.

Khema was able to penetrate the truth so quickly because of her **practice of the virtues and wisdom many aeons ago**. Because of her strong attraction to the Truth and wisdom, Khema had attained birth in the proximity of Buddhas, Pacceka Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in many previous lives and had studied, practiced and taught the Dhamma.

**One hundred thousand world cycles ago, at the time of the Buddha Padumuttara**, Khema was born in a servant family in the City of Hannsavati. She had been inspired by the Padumuttara Buddha who was dispensing the Dhamma to an assembly of monks and nuns. There arose in her a strong desire to offer a meal to the Padumuttara Buddha. (App.A) As she had no money, she had **cut off her beautiful hair and sold it to earn the money required giving alms to the Buddha**. She had then made the **aspiration to be the chief female disciple of a future Buddha and foremost in wisdom**. From that time onwards Khema had worked tirelessly to fulfill her aspiration. Ninety-one world cycles ago at the time of the Buddha **Vipassi**, she was a Bhikkhuni and a teacher of the Dhamma. At the time of the Buddhas **Kakusandha, Konagamana** and **Kassapa** in the present Maha Baddha Kappa, she had been a lay disciple of the respective Buddhas, had built monasteries and given alms to each of the Buddhas and their retinue of monks and nuns, and practiced the Dhamma diligently.

There are many Jataka stories of Khema's previous births. She had had the opportunity to develop wisdom **as the wife of the Bodhisattva Gotama** (Jataka 354), **as His daughter-in-law** (Jataka 397), and **as the wife of Shariputra** (Jataka 534). In each of these previous birth stories

she had been virtuous and had performed many meritorious deeds to fulfill her aspiration.

After attaining Arahantship Khema understood the impermanence of the body and the dangers of sensual pleasures. Once an insistent admirer tried to seduce her, as follows:

*"You are so young and beautiful,  
And I myself am in the bloom of youth;  
Come, noble lady, let us rejoice  
In the music of a fivefold ensemble."*

Khema, who was already an Arahant, admonished him as follows:

*"I am repelled and humiliated  
By this putrid, fleshy body,  
Afflicted by illness, so very fragile  
I have uprooted sensual craving.  
Sensual pleasures are now like sword stakes,  
The aggregates are their chopping block.  
That which you call sensual delight  
Has become for me no delight at all.  
Everywhere delight has been destroyed,  
The mass of darkness has been shattered.  
Know this O evil One -  
You are defeated, Exterminator.  
Fools who do not know reality  
In forest glades they seek retreat  
And worship in reverence, planets, stars, or fire  
To quench passion's impurity.  
The great Buddha, noblest of all men  
I who worship Him  
From sorrow of repeated birth am free  
The Noble Buddha Order, I protect devotedly.  
-- (Therigatha 139-144)*

**Khema, who was the first female chief disciple of the Buddha, ranked foremost in wisdom and insight.** She was respected by all for her wisdom and ability to explain the higher teachings. Her wisdom and lucid explanations of deep subjects made a lasting impression on King

**Pasenadi Kosala, who had great respect and regard for her. Khema, with her sharp mind, wisdom, and analytical skills, helped the Buddha in teaching the Dhamma to His large congregation of nuns and in training the nuns, to whom she served as a role model. There are also many recorded instances where Khema, with compassion and understanding, taught the Dhamma to male and female lay devotees.**

**This story was written by - Radhika Abeysekera - Sri Lanka version.**

## **The story of Khema Theri**

**Translated by Prof. U Ko Lay**

**(a) The past aspiration of the Theri.**

The Future **Khema Theri** was born into a wealthy family in the city of **Hamavata** during the time of **Padumuttara Buddha**, a hundred thousand world-cycles previous to the present world-cycle. One day she had occasion to listen to the Buddha's sermon and became a devotee of the Buddha, being established in the Three Refuges.

Then she got her parents approval to offer an extraordinary feast to the Buddha and the Samgha. At the end of seven days of the great offering she saw **Sujata Theri** whom the Buddha designated as the foremost Bhikkhuni in the matter of Knowledge. She was inspired by that example. She gave an extraordinary offering again before expressing her wish to become such a foremost bhikkhuni in her own time later. Padumuttara Buddha prophesied that a hundred thousand world-cycles hence she would become the foremost bhikkhuni in the matter of Knowledge in the Teaching of Gotama Buddha.

**In successive Repeated existences she was either Deva Queen or Human Queen.**

That rich man's daughter on passing away from that existence was reborn in the five deva realms, namely, **Tavatimsa**, **Tusita** **Nimmanarati**, **Paranimmitavasavati** successively as queen of the devas. When she passed away from there she was reborn as queen of the Universal Monarch or as queen of a great king. Thus, wherever she was reborn she was born as queen.

She enjoyed the most glorious state in the deva world and the human world for many, many world-cycles.

### **Her existence as Bhikkhuni.**

After faring in the fortunate existences only, during the time of Vipassi Buddha, ninety-one world-cycles previous to the present world-cycle, she was reborn into a worthy family. She had opportunity of hearing the Buddha's Dhamma which made her solely devoted to the Pure Life and she became a bhikkhuni learned in the Doctrine, skilful in the knowledge of [Paticcasamuppada](#), a bold exponent of the four Ariya Truths, a persuasive preacher, besides being a diligent one in the practice of the Dhamma. Thus she was a model of those who took up the Threefold Training under the Buddha's Teaching.

Passing away from there, she was reborn in Tusita deva realm. After that, wherever she was reborn the great merit acquired in her existence during Vipassi Buddha's Teaching endowed her with the best that that particular existence could offer, making her talented, pure in morality, rich in resources attended by wise following, well provided with ease and comfort. Further, the religious practices observed in that existence led to superior social status, making her a queen, whether in deva existence or human existence, loved and respected by the king.

### **Her existence as donor of a monastic complex.**

During the time of [Konagamana Buddha](#), in the present world-cycle, she was reborn into a rich family in [Baranasi](#) and in association with two other rich ladies by the name of Dhananjani and Sumedha (her own name being unknown but may be referred to as Khema), built a monastic complex for use by the Samgha as a whole. At their death the three of them were reborn in the Tavatimsa deva realm, and after that existence too they were reborn in the human world and the deva world enjoying superior status.

### **Her existence as the eldest of the seven daughters of King Kiki**

During the time of Kassapa Buddha, in the present world-cycle, King Kiki of Baranasi in the province of Kasi was a supporter of the Buddha tending closely on the Buddha. He had seven daughters by the names of (1) Princess Samani (2) Princess Samanagutta (3) Princess Bhikkhuni (4) Princess Bhikkhadayika (5) Princess Dhamma, (6) Princess Sudhamma and (7)

Princess Samghadayika. - who were later, during Gotama Buddha's Teaching to become (1) Khema Theri (2) Uppalavanna Theri, (3) Patacara Theri, (4) Kundalakesi Theri, (5) Kisagotami Theri (6) Dhammadinna Theri and (7) Visakha, donor of Pubbarama Monastery.

The Future-Khema Theri Princess Samani on hearing a Sermon by Kassapa Buddha, was very keen to become a Bhikkhuni but her father would not give her permission to do so. So she as the eldest of the seven daughters made a common resolve not to marry and remained spinsters throughout their lives which lasted twenty-thousand years. They supported Kassapa Buddha with the four bhikkhu requisites for life.

On one occasion the Buddha made a marvellous discourse entitled *Mahanidana sutta*, (which is recorded as the second sutta in *Mahavagga* of *Digha Nikaya*). Princess Samani was so absorbed in hearing it that she learnt it by heart, and recited it often.

As the result of those good deeds on her death she became the Chief Queen (of Sakka) in the Tavatimsa,

#### (b) Taking up Bhikkhunihood in her last existence.

During the time of Gotama Buddha, she was reborn as her last existence as the daughter of King Maddaraja of Sagala. Since her birth brought peace to the land she was named 'Khema' (peace). When she came of age she became the Queen of King Bimbisara and was adored by her husband. She was conceited with her beauty.

The Buddha was then residing at the Veluvana monastery in Rajagaha Queen Khema had heard people saying that the Buddha always made discourses pointing out the faults of physical beauty, so she never went to see the Buddha for fear that her beauty might as well come under the Buddha's censure.

#### **King Bimbisara's clever manoeuvre.**

King Bimbisara thought: "While I am the most important lay supporter to the Buddha it is inconceivable that my queen has never visited the Buddha." He contrived a plan: he had a song composed by an able poet in praise of the Veluvana monastery which he ordered songsters to sing within earshot of the Queen.

## **A Four - Stanza Eulogy on the Veluvana Monastery.**

1. Anyone who is not fortunate enough to see the Veluvana monastery, the Bamboo grove residence of the Buddha, we consider him or her as one who has never seen the Nandavana Park of the celestial realm.
2. He or she who has seen the Veluvana Grove which is so much cherished by King Bimbisara of Rajagaha, the people's favorite ruler, the cynosure of the whole world, has truly seen the Nandavana Park, the favorite resort of Sakka, King of devas.
3. Many of the Tavatimsa devas, having abandoned the Nandavana Park and descended to the earth (the southern Island Continent) and cast their eyes on the Veluvana Grove, are astonished and all their cares forgotten, they are never satisfied with seeing it
4. That Veluvana Grove has appeared due to the King's past merit and is adorned by the Buddha's majesty; that poet could adequately describe its endless merits?"

When Queen Khema heard that song, although she had been to the Veluvana Grove on a pleasure visit with the King, her interest in the Grove was aroused afresh. She was very keen to visit the place She asked the King's permission to go there and went there with a big retinue. She chose the hour of the day that she presumed the Buddha was surely not there, i.e., during the morning when the Buddha usually went to the city for collecting alms-food. She roamed about the Bamboo Grove which was full of all kinds of flowering trees, fruit trees, where bees and bumble bees busied themselves collecting honey, and where the koels sang and the peacocks preened their feathers in the quiet seclusion of the park. She also visited the monastic dwellings of the religiously bent men, their meeting halls, rest-houses and walks.

She came across a youthful bhikkhu sitting in meditation at the foot of a tree and thought that young man ought to be enjoying the pleasures of life and should take up the religious life only in his old age. Feeling sure that the Buddha was not there in his private chamber, she went near it. The Buddha knew that she would come and remained in his private chamber. He had created by his powers a young maiden whose beauty surpassed that of queen Khema fanning the Buddha.

When Queen Khema saw that lovely maiden she abandoned attachment to her own good looks but become fascinated and enamored of the strange beauty in front of her. But even as she was gazing at the girl, due to the Buddha's powers, the beauty of the girl diminished perceptibly and within a few moments she turned old and decrepit with wrinkled skin, gray hair, nursing teeth, black spots all over the skin, floppy breasts, bony, joints protruding, veins twining about the body, bent double, and soon the old woman was trembling and breathing hard, struggling for life; and then she gasped and collapsed. She was dead.

This vivid sight caused emotional religious awakening. samvega, in Queen Khema She realized thus:

"Oh, this form (body) is impure It is indeed loathsome Foolish women relish this impure, loathsome body"

Then the Buddha spoke to Queen Khema in these verses.

- 1. Khema, look at the body that is afflicted with pain, impure, putrid, discharging impurities upwards and downwards, which foolish persons take so much delight in.*
- 2. "Cultivate the mind to get fixed on an object of meditation, so as to be able to perceive the loathsomeness of the body. Let you be mindful of the thirty-two aspects (constituent parts) of the body, let there be weariness about them.*
- 3. "(Khema), just as the body of this woman by my side breaks up, so too will your body break up. Just as your body seem attractive for a while before death, so too the body of this woman by my side looked attractive before she died: (therefore) give up attachment to the body both internally and externally.*
- 4. "Cultivate a perception of insubstantiality noting closely the rising and falling of phenomena. Give up the notion of a self; by doing so you will quell the eleven fires burning in you and reach Nibbana.*
- 5. "Just as the spider follows the web of its own making, so also sentient beings who have attachment follow the stream of defilements that are of their own making. The wise do not have any desire or regard for sense pleasures, but cut off the stream of defilements and go forth to Nibbana."*

The Buddha knew that after listening to the discourse the mind of Queen Khema had become delighted and receptive, he continued with another discourse entitled *Mahanidana Sutta* (which very *sutta* Queen Khema had heard and learnt by heart from Kassapa Buddha in her previous existence as Princess Samani). Queen Khema remembered the *Sutta* and she won Stream-Entry knowledge there and then.

After becoming an Ariya as a Stream-Enterer, she wanted to make amends for her mistaken conceit about her beauty. She prostrated before the Buddha and submitted her apology in these five stanzas:

1. "The all-knowing One, I pay homage to you.

The Embodiment of Compassion, I pay homage to you.

Buddha who has crossed over the flood of Samsara, I pay homage to you.

Giver of the Deathless, I pay homage to you.

2. "I had been befuddled and led astray by attachment to sensuality, thus springing forward into the thicket of wrong view. By means of an appropriate device, you, the Bhagava, have tamed me (who had been befuddled) and made me happy in being so tamed.

3. "Lacking an opportunity of meeting such a great One as yourself, endowed with morality, Concentration, etc., sentient beings suffer enormous dukkha in the ocean of *Samsara*

4. "Even though the Pure One who has reached the Purity of Nibbana, had been staying at the Veluvana monastery, I had failed to come and pay homage to the Lord of the three worlds. That failure on my part I (now) admit to the Bhagava as my fault.

5. "I had a mistaken idea about the Great Benefactor to the three worlds, the Bestower of the Ultimate Boon (*Magga, phala Nibbana*) as one who is unprofitably censorious because I had been too fond of my beauty. My fault in having entertained such foolish thoughts and my failure to come and pay homage to you earlier, I (now) admit to the Bhagava as my fault. (The Myanmar renderings are by the late Mahavisuddharama Sayadaw in his *Chiddapidhanani*).

Upon admission by Queen Khema of her previous fault, the Buddha said, "Let it be Khema, which cooled her heart as though ambrosial water were poured onto her person. Then Queen Khema made obeisance to the Buddha and respectfully left his presence. Back at the royal palace, she saw King Bimbisara and addressed him thus:

1. O great conqueror with golden complexion you had employed a most apt strategy to persuade me to go and visit the Veluvana monastery. Marvellous indeed was your idea! For I had become keenly desirous of seeing the Veluvana Park, (with the consequence that) I have seen (with both my physical eye and the eye of wisdom) the Buddha, the great sage.

2. O King! If you would agree I would take up [bhikkhuhood](#) in the Teaching (which is replete with eight marvels) of the Buddha of unrivalled wisdom, of the embodiment of the highest virtues. Thanks to the wise words of the Buddha, I have gained insight into the tiresome nature of my body.

On hearing the two stanzas spoken by Queen Khema, King Bimbisara who had even from her mine been recognizable as an *Ariya*, one who had won Path-knowledge, raised his joined palm to his forehead and said to his Queen: "My dear queen, I allow you to become a bhikkhuni. May your renouncing the world come to its fulfillment (i.e., may you attain Arahantship). (These words were spoken in half a stanza.) Thereupon the King put Queen Khema on a golden Palanquin and sent her to the Bhikkhuni monastery in great state.

### [Khema Theri gains Arahantship.](#)

[On the fifteenth day](#) of her bhikkhuhood Khema Thera while observing the *uposatha* contemplated on the lamp in front of her, how the flame arose and how it went out. A keen emotional religious awakening took place in her mind. [Applying the insight into the nature of the rise and fall of the flame to all conditioned phenomena](#), i.e., the mind-body complex that constituted her present existence, she gained Arahantship together with the four Discriminations and the six supernormal Powers. (This account of Khema Theri attainment of Arahantship is as described in the [Khema Theri Apadana Pali](#). The Commentary on the *Anguttara Nikaya* and the Commentary on the *Dhammapada* tell this event in a somewhat different manner. We have refrained from discussing them here lest it would confuse the reader).

Khema Theri was devoted both to the learning and the practice of the Doctrine and so she was most proficient in the seven stages of Purity, and

was unrivalled in the exposition of the Ten Subjects of Discussion (*Kathavatthu*), most erudite in the application of the Abhidhamma method, outstanding both in learning and practice. The veracity of these statements may be gauged from *Khema Sutta*, the first *Sutta* in the *Abyakata Samgutta* of *Salayatana Samyutta*.

### ***Khema Theri makes a subtle discourse to the Kosalan King.***

At one time when the Bhagava was staying at the Jetavana monastery in Savatthi, Khema Theri was making a tour of the Kosalan country, and was sojourning at Torana which lay between Savatthi and Saketa. At that time King Pasenadi of Kosala was camping for the night at Torana. Then the King said to a courtier, "So, man, make inquires in this place which samana or brahmana should be fit for my spiritual guide for today." The courtier made thorough inquires in Torana but could find no samana or brahmana whom the king should go to for spiritual guidance. He only saw Khema theri who happened to be sojourning there. He went back to the king and said, "There is no samana or brahmana in this place. But there is a bhikkhuni named Khema Theri a disciple of the Buddha. She is reported to be wise, skillful, learned, an expounder of the Doctrine in a fascinating way, endowed with a remarkable perspicacity. I would humbly suggest that your Majesty go to her for advice and guidance" The king accepted the advice and went to where Khema Theri was staying. He made obeisance to her and sitting in a suitable place, addressed Khema Theri thus:

***"Venerable One, does a sentient being exist after death?"***

"Great King", replied Khema Theri, the Buddha does not say that a sentient being exists after death."

***"If so, Venerable One, does a sentient being not exist after deaths"***

"Great King, the Buddha does not say that a sentient being does not exist after death."

***"Venerable One, does a sentient being exist as well as does not exist after death?"***

"Great King, the Buddha' does not say that a sentient being exist as well as does not exist after death."

*"If so, Venerable One, does a sentient being not exist after death?"*

"Great King, the Buddha does not say that a sentient being neither exists nor does not exist after deaths"

The King was at his wit's end He further put questions which were replied as follows.

"Venerable One, When I asked. Does a sentient being exist after death?" you replied, 'Great King, the Buddha does not say that a sentient being exists after death!' (1) When I asked, 'If so, Venerable One, does a sentient being not exist after death?' you replied, 'Great King, the Buddha does not say that a sentient being does not exist after death.' (2) When I asked, 'Venerable One, does a sentient being exist as well as does not exist after death?' you replied, 'Great King, the Buddha does not say that a sentient being exists as well as does not exist after death.' (3) When I asked, 'If so, Venerable Sir, does a sentient being neither exists nor does not exist after death?' you replied, 'Great King, the Buddha does not say that a sentient being neither exists nor does not exist after death' (4) Now, Venerable One, why does the Buddha not say anything regarding these four questions. Why is the reason for the Buddha's refusal to answer these four questions?"

Khema Theri then said. "Great King, in that case let me put you a question. You may answer it as you wish. What do you think of what I am going to say now? Do you have within your dominion any man who can practically count things or an arithmetician who can say, 'There are such and such number of grains of sand in the Ganga river? Or who can say, 'There are so many hundreds, so many thousands, so many hundred thousand grains of sand in the Ganga river?"

No, Venerable One, there is none."

"Great King, do you have any man who can practically count things or an arithmetician who can say, 'There are so many vessels or bowls of water in the great ocean "' Or who can say, "There, are so many hundred, so many thousands, so many hundred thousands of bowls of Water in the great ocean?"

"No, Venerable One, This is because the great ocean is too deep, beyond measure, incomprehensible."

"Even so Great King. The Buddha has given up materiality (corporeality) which may be referred to as sentient being;. he has eradicated it completely. He has made it like an uprooted palm tree, has rendered it incapable of coming into being again, and has made it impossible to arise in the future"

The Buddha who is liberated from being called the aggregate of corporeality or the phenomenon of materiality is endowed with attributes and disposition or intentions which are great as the great ocean beyond measure, incomprehensible. As for the Buddha the statement, 'a sentient being exists after death' is irrelevant; statement, 'a sentient being does not exist after death' is equally irrelevant; the statement, 'a sentient being exists as well as does not exist after death is' equally irrelevant; the statement, 'a sentient being neither exists nor does not exist after death' is equally irrelevant."

(It is not proper for the Buddha to say 'that a sentient being exists after death; or a sentient being does not exist after death; or that a sentient being exists as well as does not exist after death, or that a sentient being neither exists nor does not exist after death. This is a very profound matter.)

The Buddha has given up [Sensation . . . p...](#) [Perception. . p...](#) [Volitional activities . . . p...](#) [Consciousness](#) which may be referred to as a sentient being; has eradicated it completely, has made it like a palm tree stump, has rendered it incapable of coming into being again; and has made it impossible to arise in the future.

· The Buddha who is liberated from being called the aggregate of Consciousness or the 'phenomenon of Consciousness is endowed with attributes and disposition or intention which are as great as the great ocean, beyond measure, incomprehensible. As for the Buddha the statement, 'a sentient being exists after death' is irrelevant p... the statement, 'a sentient being neither exists nor does not exist after death' 'is equally irrelevant."

(That was the discussion that took place between the Kosalan king and Khema Theri for the second round. Explanations on this will be given later.)

King Pasenadi of Kosala was delighted with the words of Khema Thera. He made obeisance to her and respectfully departed. Later on, the king visited the Buddha and put the same questions as he did to Khema Theri The Buddha answered them just as Khema Theri did. (These questions and answers may be gleaned from the text.)

When the king found that the Buddha's answers and those of Khema Theri were exactly the same, down to the letter, he was greatly astonished and exclaimed, "Marvellous it is, Venerable Sir! Astounding it is!" The Buddha's exposition is exactly the same as that of the Buddha's disciple, both in meaning and in words. They are in full agreement without any discrepancy. Venerable Sir, I had once put these questions to Khema Theri and she had answered to me in exactly the same way both in essence and in words. Marvellous it is, Venerable Sir! Astounding it is! The Buddha's exposition is exactly the same with that of the Buddha's disciple both in meaning and in words. They are in full agreement without any discrepancy." Then he begged leave of the Buddha to go. He was greatly delighted with the Buddha's answers. He rose, made obeisance to the Buddha and" respectfully departed.

**This is a gist of *Khema sutta***

Explanation:

Why did the Buddha not give any reply to the questions which are so framed; 'that a sentient being exists after death', 'that a sentient being does not exist after death;' 'that a sentient being exists as well as does not exist after death; 'that a sentient being neither exists nor doesn't exist after death'?

- 1. There is in truth and reality nothing in the sentient world other than the five aggregates.** There is nothing in the ultimate sense such a thing as a sentient being. Therefore whether a 'sentient being' exist or not is not for the Buddha to say. (*Abyakata Samyutta*; the third sutta therein)
- 2. Only to one who does not understand the nature of the five aggregates according to the four Ariya Truths** there arises the problem of a sentient being and its existence or non existence, in the said four questions, which occur to him due to Wrong View. To one who understands the four Ariya Truths, there is no Wrong View that gives rise to those four questions. Since the Buddha has the most complete understanding of the four Truths there do not arise in him those four questions. That is why he does not say anything about them. (*Ibid*, the fourth sutta.)
- 3. Such questions based on wrong view arise only in, one who has not got rid of attachment to, or craving for the five aggregates.** To one who has no craving for the five aggregates they do not occur. The Buddha who has got rid of Craving for the five aggregates together with any trace of acquired

habit does not have those wrong concepts. Therefore he remains silent when those questions are asked of him (*Ibid.*, the fifth sutta). (In the sixth sutta of the same Samyutta the four questions are dealt with adequately.)

In *Khema Sutta* Khema Theri's answer is somewhat different; it has the undercurrent of reference to the Buddha. This is because she knows that the questioner (Kosalan King) had the Buddha also in mind in putting the four questions. So Khema Theri's answer in essence is this:

The Buddha has, (by getting rid of the cause of the five aggregates) got rid of the five aggregates so that what is usually called a sentient being is not coming into being after his death. He is freed from a future set of five aggregates, therefore there is nothing that may be referred to as a being or a person. Since the Buddha knows this, a 'sentient being' after death is irrelevant for him to speak of. Therefore he remains silent about the four questions.

One might argue thus: since the Buddha is not to acquire a fresh set of the five aggregates it is understandable that he refuses to answer the first question ('Does sentient being exist after death'). But why does the Buddha refuse to answer the second question: 'Does a sentient being not exist after death' ' Should the Buddha say, 'No, it does not'? The Buddha refuses to answer this question too because a 'sentient being' is not a real thing in the ultimate sense. (This is the explanation given in the Sub-Commentary.) *Khema Theri Sutta* is profound in Dhamma. It is a matter for further inquiring for the virtuous.

### (c) Khema Theri is designated as the Foremost Bhikkhuni

The discourse to the Kosalan King at Torana was the immediate cause of Khema Theri being designated by the Buddha as the foremost Bhikkhuni in the possession of deep Knowledge. For on another occasion when the Buddha was residing at the Jetavana monastery, at a bhikkhu congregation for announcing outstanding bhikkhunis as foremost bhikkhunis in their own areas (of proficiency), the Buddha declared:

"Bhikkhus, among my bhikkhuni disciples who have profound Knowledge Khema Theri is the foremost."

This designation accorded her by the Buddha also has been happily recorded by Khema Theri herself in the following stanzas in her own life history:

1. "After I had become a Bhikkhuni I had explained to King Pasenadi of Kosala in accordance with the Doctrine on the profound questions he put to me at a place called Torana (which was between Savatthi and Saketa.)
2. "Later the King approached and put those questions to the Buddha, and the Buddha answered to those propound questions exactly as I had answered.
3. "The Conqueror of the five Maras, the Supreme One among all men, being satisfied with my excellence in expounding the Dhamma, has designated me as the foremost Bhikkhuni among the eminently wise"

### **The Story of Theri Khema \***

While residing at the Gijjhakuta hill, the Buddha uttered Verse (403) of this book, with reference to **Theri Khema**.

One night, Sakka, king of the devas, came with his followers to pay homage to the Buddha. While they were with the Buddha, **Theri Khema, by her supernormal power, also came through the sky to pay homage to the Buddha.** But because Sakka and his company were there with the Buddha, she just paid obeisance to the Buddha, and soon left him. Sakka asked the Buddha who that bhikkhuni was and the Buddha replied, *"She is one of my pre-eminent disciples; she is known as Theri Khema. She is matchless amongst the bhikkhunis in wisdom and she knows how to differentiate the right way from the wrong way."*

Then the Buddha spoke in verse as follows:

**Verse 403:** Him I call a brahmana, who is wise and is profound in his knowledge, who knows the right way from the wrong way, and who has attained the highest goal (i.e., archonship).

### **The Story of Theri Khema**

While residing at the Veluvana monastery, the Buddha uttered Verse (347) of this book, with reference to Queen Khema.

Queen Khema was the chief queen of King Bimbisara. She was very beautiful and also very proud.

The king wanted her to go to the Veluvana monastery and pay homage to the Buddha. But she had heard that the Buddha always talked disparagingly about beauty and she therefore tried to avoid seeing the Buddha.

The king understood her attitude towards the Buddha; he also knows how proud she was of her beauty. So the king ordered his minstrels to sing in praise of the Veluvana monastery, about its pleasant and peaceful atmosphere, etc. Hearing them, Queen Khema became interested and decided to set out for the Veluvana monastery.

When Queen Khema arrived at the monastery, the Buddha was expounding the Dhamma to an audience. By his supernormal power, the Buddha made a very beautiful young lady appear, sitting not far from him, and fanning him. When Queen Khema came to the audience hall, she alone saw the beautiful young lady. Comparing the exquisite beauty of the young lady to that of her own, Khema realized that her beauty was much inferior to that of the young lady. As she looked again intently at the young lady her beauty began to fade gradually. In the end, she saw before her eyes an old decrepit being, which again changed into a corpse, her stinking body being attacked by maggots. At that instant, Queen Khema realized the impermanence and worthlessness of beauty.

The Buddha knowing the state of her mind remarked, *"O Khema! Look carefully at this decaying body which is built around a skeleton of bones and is subject to disease and decay. Look carefully at the body which is thought of so highly by the foolish. Look at the worthlessness of the beauty of this young girl."* After hearing this, Queen Khema attained Sotapatti Fruition.

Then the Buddha spoke in verse as follows:

**Verse 347.** Beings who are infatuated with lust, fall back into the Stream of Craving they have generated, just as a spider does in the web it has spun. The Wise, cutting off the bond of craving, walk on resolutely, leaving, all ills (dukkha) behind.

At the end of the discourse Queen Khema attained archonship and was admitted to the Order and became the Chief Female Disciple of the Buddha

**Appendix – A. Twenty Four Buddhas. Starting from the time our Buddisatta received a definite prophecy from Buddha Dipankara.**

1. *Dipankara Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was born as the ascetic *Sumedha* and received the **definite proclamation**

After a period of one Asankheyya there appeared:

2. *Kondanna Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a *Cakkavatti King* named *Vijitavi*

After a period of one Asankheyya there appeared:

3. *Mangala Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a *Brahmin* named *Suruci*
4. *Sumana Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a *Naga king* named *Atula*
5. *Revata Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a *Brahmin* named *Atideva*
6. *Sobhita Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a *Brahmin* named *Ajita*

After a period of one Asankheyya there appeared:

7. *Anomadassi Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was *a leader of demons*
8. *Paduma Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was *a lion*
9. *Narada Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was *an ascetic*

After a period of one Asankheyya there appeared:

10. *Padumuttara Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a man named *Jatila* (This period was 100,000 Maha kappas before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)

After a period of 70,000 Maha kappas there appeared:

11. *Sumedha Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a young man named *Uttara* (This period was 30,000 Maha kappas before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)

After a period of 12,000 Maha kappas there appeared:

12. *Sujata Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was *a chakkavatti king* (This period was 18,000 Maha kappas before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)

13. *Piyadassi Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a young *Brahmin* named *Kassapa*

14. *Atthadassi Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was an *ascetic* by the name of *Susima*

15. *Dhammadassi Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was the *God Sakka*

16. *Siddhatta Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was an ascetic by the name of *Mangala*

17. *Tissa Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a king named *Sujata* who later became an ascetic (This period was 92 Maha kappas before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)

18. *Phussa Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a king by the name of *Vijitavi* who later became a monk

19. *Vipassi Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was the *Naga king, Atula* (This period was 91 Maha kappas before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)
20. *Sikhi Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a king named *Arindama* (This period was 31 Maha kappas before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)
21. *Vessabhu Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was the *king Sudassana* who later became a monk (This period was one Maha kappa before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)
22. *Kakusandha Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a *king named Sema* (This period was in the same Maha kappa as that of the Gotama Buddha)
23. *Konagamana Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a king named *Pabbata* who later became a monk (This period was in the same Maha kappa as that of the Gotama Buddha)
24. *Kassapa Buddha* - The Bodhisatta was a *Brahmin* named *Jotipala* (This period was in the same Maha Kappa as that of the Gotama Buddha)

Reference: *Relatives and Disciples of the Buddha* - By Radhika Abeysekera

Reference –

1. *Relatives and Disciples of the Buddha* by Radhika Abeysekera
2. *The Great Chronicle of Bhuddhas* – by Mingun Sayadaw and Translation by Prof. U Ko Lay – <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/buddhism/gcobbkn1.htm#2>