

Rohitassa Sutta

The Discourse to Rohitassa | S 2.26/1:61 f = A 4.45/2:47-49

Theme: The world's end cannot be reached by going

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

1 “The world”

In the Rohitassa Sutta, the word “**world**” (*loka*) is used in two senses:¹ in the sense of the physical world and the world of formations. Rohitassa asks the Buddha a question on the physical world (*cakka-vāḷa loka*, “universe world”), but the Buddha answers him referring to the world of formations. Throughout the Buddhist texts, the word “world” has three senses:

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|--------------------------|---|
| (1) <i>Saṅkhāra loka</i> | the world of formations, |
| (2) <i>Satta loka</i> | the world of beings, |
| (3) <i>Okāsa loka</i> | the world of space (ie the space-time reality). |
- (Vism 7.37/204 f; DA 1:173; MA 1:397, 2:200)

The world of formations is defined in the **Paṭisambhīdā, magga** thus: “One world: all beings are sustained by food.” (Pm 1:122). The world of beings is referred to when it is said, “The world is eternal” or “The world is not eternal” (M 1:426). The world of space is referred to in such passages as:

As far as the moon and the sun
Shine and light up the quarters
Over a thousand times as many worlds
Does your power hold sway. (M 49.9/1:328)

However, in the stanza that follows this one, the world of beings is referred to:

And there you know the high and the low,
And those with lust and those free from lust,
Existence is one form or another,
The coming and going of beings. (M 49.9/1:328).

The (Samuday’atthaṅgama) Loka Sutta (S 12.44) explains how the world (formations) arises through the dependent arising of sense-experiences.²

2 The noble truths

The sutta closes with the key statement made by the Buddha:

However, avuso, without having reached the end of the world, there is no making an end to suffering, I say. Avuso, in this very fathom-long body endowed with perception and with mind that I make known the world, the arising of the world, the end of the world, and the way leading to the end of the world. [§9]

The Saṃyutta Commentary glosses these 4 statements in the last sentence as those of the 4 noble truths, that is, “the world” (*loka*) = “the noble truth of suffering” (*dukkha, sacca*) and so on. Thus the Buddha says: “I do not, avuso, make known these four truths in external things like grass and wood, but right here in this body composed of the four great elements.” (SA 1:117 f). “This pithy utterance of the Buddha,”

¹ For a discussion on the meaning of *loka*, see S:B 393 n182; also Harvey 1995:78 ff (ch 5).

² SD 12.44/2:71-73 = SD 7.5.

remarks Bodhi, “which may well be the most profound proposition in the history of human thought,”³ is clarified in **the Lok’anta Gamana Sutta**⁴ which should be read as a commentary on the Rohitassa Sutta.

In the Lok’anta Gamana Sutta, Ānanda explains that in the noble discipline, “the world” refers to “*That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world,*” that is, the six sense-bases. Bhikkhu Bodhi remarks on this important statement:

From Ānanda’s explanation, we can draw out the following implications. The word with which the Buddha’s teaching is principally concerned is “the world of experience,” and even the object world is of interest only to the extent that it serves as the necessary external conditions for experience. The world is identified with the six sense bases because the latter are the necessary internal condition for experience and thus for the presence of a world. As long as the six sense bases persist, a world will always be spread out before us as the objective range of perception and cognition. Thus one cannot reach the end of the world by travelling [*gamana*, “going”], for wherever one goes one inevitably brings along the six sense bases, which necessarily disclose a world extended on all sides. Nevertheless, by reversing the direction of the search it is possible to reach the end of the world. For if the world ultimately stems from the six sense bases, then by bringing an end to the sense bases it is possible to arrive at the end of the world.

Now the six sense bases are themselves conditioned, having arisen from a chain of conditions rooted in one’s own ignorance and craving.⁵ Thus by removing ignorance and craving the re-arising of the six sense bases can be prevented, and therewith the manifestation of the world is terminated. This end of the world cannot be reached by travelling [or going], but it can be arrived at by cultivating the Noble Eightfold Path. Perfect development of the path brings about the eradication of ignorance and craving, and with their removal emergence of the six senses, and therewith the reappearance of a world. (Bodhi, S:B 393 n182)

For a lengthy philosophical commentary on this sutta, see Ñāṇananda 1972, 2:70-85.

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The Discourse to Rohitassa

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1 At Sāvathī.

Rohitassa meets the Buddha

2 Standing at one side, the devaputra Rohitassa⁶ said this to the Blessed One:

“Is it possible, bhante, by going, to know or to see or to reach the end of the world, where one is not born, does not age, does not die, does not pass away, does not arise?”

3 “As to that end of the world, avuso, where one is not born, does not age, does not die, does not pass away, does not arise—it cannot be known, seen or reached by going, I say.”

³ S:B 393 n182.

⁴ S 35.116/4:93-97.

⁵ See (**Samuday’atthāṅgama**) **Loka S** (S 12.44/2:73 f = 35.107/4:87) = SD 7.5.

⁶ For an interesting possible identification of Rohitassa, see **Kevalāḍḍha S** (D 11), where the Buddha tells the story of a “certain monk,” with the psychic power of astral travel, and wishing to discover if the end of the physical universe could be reached, astrally speeds through it. (D 11.67-85) = SD 1.7.

4 “It is wonderful, bhante! It is amazing, bhante! How well this is stated by the Blessed One: ‘As to that end of the world, avuso, where one is not born, does not age, does not die, does not pass away, does not arise—it cannot be known, seen or reached by going, I say.’”

Rohitassa’s astral journey

5 Once in the past, bhante, I was a seer named Rohitassa Bhoja,putta [son of Bhoja], possessed of spiritual power, able to travel through the sky [space]. [62]

Just as fast as an archer with a strong bow,⁷ trained, skillful, well-practised, experienced,⁸ could easily shoot past the shadow of a palmyra tree⁹ with a light arrow, endowed were they with such *speed*,

6 My *stride* was such, bhante, that it spanned the eastern ocean and the western ocean.

Then, bhante, the wish arose in me, ‘I will reach the end of the world by going.’

7 Although possessing such speed and such a stride, and having a lifespan of a hundred years, living for a hundred years, travelling for a hundred years, pausing only to eat, drink, to take meals and snacks, to void and pee, to sleep and dispel tiredness— I would die along the way without reaching the world’s end.¹⁰

8 It is wonderful, bhante! It is amazing, bhante! How well this was stated by the Blessed One: ‘As to that end of the world, avuso, where one is not born, does not age, does not die, does not pass away, does not arise—it cannot be known, seen or reached by going, I say.’”

Reaching the world’s end

9 “However, avuso, *without having reached the end of the world*,¹¹ *there is no making an end to suffering, I say.*

So, avuso, in this very fathom-long body,¹² endowed with perception and mind, I declare
the world,
the arising of the world,
the ending of the world, and

⁷ “With a strong bow,” *daḥha, dhammo*. Comy glosses *daḥha, dhammo* (lit “of a strong nature”) as *daḥha, dhanu* (“with a strong bow”); possessed of a bow of the greatest size (*uttama-p, pamāṇena dhanunā samannāgato*) (SA 1:115). The plural *daḥha, dhammino* occurs at S 708b/1:185. KR Norman, in his tr (Tha:N) of **Tha 1210** proposes that this form must have been borrowed from a dialect where *-nv-* > *-mm-* instead of *-nn-*. SED lists two Skt words meaning “having a strong bow,” *dr̥ḥhadhanvan* and *dr̥ḥhadhanvin*. See Tha:N 289 n1210. Bodhi proposes that we could assume it is the former that appears in Pali as *daḥha, dhamma*, the latter as *daḥha, dhammin*. See S:B 393 n181 & 411 n264.

⁸ “Trained...experienced,” *sikkhito kata, hattho kata, yoggo* kat’upāsano. Kata, hattho*, lit “done with the hand,” handy. [*“well-practised,” only here.] This stock phrase describing an adept archer also occurs in **Dhanuggaha S** (S 20,6/2:266); (**Lok’āyatika**) **Brāhmaṇā S** (A 9.38.4a/4:428) = SD 35.2.

⁹ “Palmyra tree,” *tāla*, the fan palm, *Borassus flabelli formis*.

¹⁰ This is elaborated as a parable in (**Lok’āyatika**) **Brāhmaṇā S** (A 9.38.4a/4:428) = SD 35.2.

¹¹ By “world” (*loka*) here the Buddha means the “world of formations” (*saṅkhāra, loka*), speaking on the level of “ultimate truth” (*param’attha, sacca*) in response to Rohitassa’s question based in reference to the “physical world” (*okāsa, loka*), ie, on the level of “conventional truth” (*sammuti, sacca*). On the 2 levels of language, see **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9/1:178-203) in SD 7.14 Intro (4).

¹² “In this very fathom-long body,” *imasmīñ-ñ-eva vyāma, matte kaḷevare*. The word *kaḷevare* is probably cognate with the English “cadaver.” The expression *vyāma, matta* has a Skt cognate, *vyāma, mātra*, which, according to Śata-patha Brahmaṇa 1.2.5.14 is the measure of the Vedic altar, with a man’s shape. It is not only the counterpart of sacrifice, but also the manifested counterpart of the Creator, Prajāpati, “and his body is understood as being identical with the cosmos within which all changes take place. If we deny the existence of the Creator, these changes can occur only in a human being.” (Jurewicz 2000:79). Comy glosses these 4 statements as those of the 4 noble truths. Thus the Buddha shows: “I do not, avuso, make known these four truths in external things like grass and wood, but right here in this body composed of the four great elements.” (SA 1:117 f)

the way leading to the ending of the world.”¹³

- 10a** The world’s end can never be reached
By way of going [through the world],
And yet without reaching the world’s end
There is no release from suffering. 356
- 10b** Therefore, truly, the world-knower, the wise one,
Gone to the world’s end, the holy life fulfilled,
Having known the world’s end, he is at peace:
He longs not for this world or the next. 357

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041207; rev 060123; 081103; 090907; 101111; 101115; 110530

¹³ *Api khvāhaṃ āvuso imasmiṃ, ñeva vyāma, matthe kaḷevare saññimhi samanake lokam ca paññāpemi loka, samudayaṃ ca loka, nirodham ca loka, nirodha, gāminim ca paṭipadan ti.*