Rohitassa Sutta
The Discourse to Rohitassa
[The world’s end cannot be reached by going]
(Saṁyutta Nikāya 2.26/1:61 f = Āṅguttara 4.45/2:47-49)
Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

Introduction

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-vāla loka, “universe world”), but the Buddha answers him referring to the world of formations. Throughout the Buddhist texts, the word “world” has three senses:

(1) Saṁkhāra loka the world of formations,
(2) Satta loka the world of beings,
(3) Okāsa loka 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 Paṭisambhidā, 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, friend, without having reached the end of the world, there is no making an end to suffering, I say. Friend, 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]

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.
The Sānyutta 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, friend, 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,” remarks Bodhi, “which may well be the most profound proposition in the history of human thought,” is clarified in the Lok’anta Gamana Sutta4 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 [gamanena, “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 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 Ānanda 1972, 2:70-85.

3 S:B 393 n182.
5 See (Samuday’aṭṭhaṅgama) Loka S (S 12.44/2:73 f = 35.107/4:87) = SD 7.5.
The Discourse to Rohitassa
(S 2.26/1:61 f = A 4.45/2:47-49)

1 At Sāvatthī.

Rohitassa meets the Buddha
2 Standing at one side, the devaputra Rohitassaemed said this to the Blessed One:
   “Is it possible, venerable sir, 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, friend, 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.”
4 “It is wonderful, venerable sir! It is amazing, venerable sir! How well this is stated by the Blessed
   One: ‘As to that end of the world, friend, 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, venerable sir, I was a seer named Rohitassa Bhoja,putta [son of Bhoja], posses-
   sed of spiritual power, able to travel through the sky [space]. [62] My speed was such, venerable sir, that I
   could move just as fast as an archer with a strong bow,’ trained, skillful, well-practised, experienced,8
could easily shoot past the shadow of a palmyra tree9 with a light arrow.
6 My stride was such, venerable sir, that it spanned the eastern ocean and the western ocean.
   Then, venerable sir, the wish arose in me, ‘I will reach the end of the world by going.’
7 Possessing such speed and such a stride, and having a lifespan of a hundred years, without paus-
   ing except to eat, drink, take meals and snacks, to void and pee, to sleep and dispel tiredness. Yet I died
   along the way without reaching the end of the world.
8 It is wonderful, venerable sir! It is amazing, venerable sir! How well this was stated by the
   Blessed One: ‘As to that end of the world, friend, 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, friend, without having reached the end of the world,10 there is no making an end to
   suffering, I say.
   Friend, in this very fathom-long body11 endowed with perception and mind, that I make known

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6 For an interesting possible identification of Rohitassa, see Kevaliddha 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.
7 “With a strong bow,” dalha,dhammo. Comy glosses dalha,dhammo (lit “of a strong nature”) as dalha,dhanu
   (“with a strong bow”); possessed of a bow of the greatest size (uttama-p, pamānena dhanunā samannāgato) (SA
   1:115). The plural dalha,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,” dr̥ddhadhanvin and dr̥ddhadhanvin. See Tha:N 289
   n1210. Bodhi proposes that we could assume it is the former that appears in Pali as dalha,dhamma,
   the latter as dalha,dhammin. See S:B 393 n181 & 411 n264.
8 “Trained…experienced,” sikkhito kata, hattho, kat’upāsano. Kata, hattho, lit “done with the hand,”
   handy. This stock phrase describing an adept archer also occurs in Dhanuggaha S (S 20.6/2:265 f).
9 “Palmyra tree,” tāla, the fan palm, Borassus flabelliformis.
10 By “world” (loka) here the Buddha means the “world of formations” (saṁkhāra, loka), speaking on the level
   of “ultimate truth” (param’attha, sacca) in response to Rohitassa question based in reference to the “physical world”
   (okāsa, loka), that is, on the level of “conventional truth” (saṁmuti, sacca). On the two levels of language, see
   Poṭṭhapaṇḍa S (D 9/1:178-203) in SD 7.14 Intro (4).
11 http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com or http://www.dharmafarer.net
the world,
the arising of the world,
the ending of the world, and
the way leading to the ending of the world.”

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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Bibliography

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Ṇāṇananda, Bhikkhu

11 “In this very fathom-long body,” imasmiñ-ñ-eva vyāma,matte kaḷevara. The word kaḷevara is probably cognate with the English “cadaver.” Comy glosses these 4 statements as those of the 4 noble truths. Thus the Buddha shows: “I do not, friend, 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)