

With Rohitassa (S 2.26 / S i 143⁽ⁱ⁾)

At Sāvattṭhī.

Standing to one side, the godling Rohitassa said to the Buddha:⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

“Sir, is it possible to know or see or reach the end of the world by traveling to a place where there’s no being born, growing old, dying, passing away, or being reborn?”

“Reverend, I say it’s not possible to know or see or reach the end of the world by traveling to a place where there’s no being born, growing old, dying, passing away, or being reborn.”

“It’s incredible, sir, it’s amazing, how well said this was by the Buddha.

Once upon a time, I was a seer called Rohitassa, son of the benefactors. I was a sky-walker with psychic powers.⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ I was as fast as a light arrow easily shot across the shadow of a palm tree by a well-trained expert archer with a strong bow.^(iv) My stride was such that it could span from the eastern ocean to the western ocean.^(v) This wish came to me: ‘I will reach the end of the world by traveling.’ Having such speed and stride, I traveled for my whole lifespan of a hundred years — pausing only to eat and drink, go to the toilet, and sleep to dispel weariness — and I passed away along the way, never reaching the end of the world.

It’s incredible, sir, it’s amazing, how well said this was by the Buddha. ‘Reverend, I say it’s not possible to know or see or reach the end of the world by traveling to a place where there’s no being born, growing old, dying, passing away, or being reborn.’”

“But Reverend, I also say there’s no making an end of suffering without reaching the end of the world. For it is in this fathom-long body with its perception and consciousness that I describe the world, its origin, its cessation, and the practice that leads to its cessation.^(vi)

The end of the world can never be reached by traveling. But without reaching the end of the world, there’s no release from suffering.

So an intelligent person, understanding the world, has completed the spiritual journey and gone to the end of the world. Assuaged, knowing the end of the world, they do not hope for this world or the next.”

English transl and notes: Sujato Bhikkhu / Akincano
Pali: Traditional lineages, courtesy of the Digital Pali Reader

- (i) This Sutta has several parallels already in the Pali (AN 4.45 / A ii 48 and AN 4.46 / A ii 50). It has also three Chinese parallels at SĀ 2 306, SĀ 1307 and EĀ 43.1.
- (ii) Rohitassa means “red horse”, *Agni* in his manifestation as the swift sunbeam. *Agni* was he of red horses (*rohiḍaśva*, Rig Veda 1.45.2, 4.1.8, 8.43.16, 10.7.4, 10.98.9; see 2.10.2). This can mean the tongues of the ritual fire whose message is speedily conveyed to the gods, but especially the “ruddy steed” swift as the wind (*aruṣā rohitā*, 1.94.10), the “red horses of the dawn” (*aruṇebhir aśvair*, Rig Veda 1.113.14, see 4.52.2, 6.65.2, 7.75.6). The current Sutta seems to draw on the conception of *Rohita* in *Ātharvaveda* 13, glorifying *Agni* as the Sun, who “arrives in a flash” (13.2.15), “swift” (13.2.2), “rushing” (13.2.19), “traversing the sky” (13.2.22), radiating as far as worlds extend (13.2.42, 13.2.10, 13.1.16), racing over the world never letting his thought stray (13.2.15). The “Sun’s bay horses” (*jūryaśyāśvā harayaḥ*, 13.1.24) are seven ruddy steeds who carry it, spreading out its rays (13.2.4, 13.3.16).
- (iii) The coming of the dawn was greeted with priestly gifts offered by benefactors (*bhojā*). These benefactors may be the *Āṅgīraṣas*, shining poets who ushered in the dawn (RV 3.53.7), or else the *Aśvins*, horse deities driving the Sun’s chariot and close with the Sun’s daughter (4.43.2, 8.8.2), or the dawns themselves (4.51.3, 7.79.3, 8.25.21).
- (iv) A similar teaching is given by the Buddha to two brahmin cosmologists (*lokāyatikā*) at AN 9.38:4.
- (v) It has been pointed out that a swift arrow can fly at 250 f/s, which would take 0.008 seconds to cross the width of a palm trunk of two feet. India ocean to ocean is about 2400 km. To cross it in 0.008 seconds would require a velocity of around 300,000 km/s.
- (vi) This echoes *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.2.5.14 and 7.1.1.37, where the fire altar is measured out as a fathom (*vyāmamātra*) for this is the length of a human. The altar and the human person encompass the whole world.