

4

Lok'anta Gamana Sutta 1¹

Paṭhama Lok'anta Gamana Sutta

The First Discourse on Going to the World's End | S 35.116

Loka Kāma,guṇa Sutta The Discourse on the World as Sense-pleasures

Theme: How the world will really end

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2003

1 Introduction

1.1 The structure of the Lok'anta Gamana Sutta 1 is almost identical to that of **the Madhu,piṇḍika Sutta** (M 18):² the Buddha gives “an instruction in brief” (*sāṅkhitta uddesa*) and leaves [§2]; the monks look for a suitable elder to explain “the meaning of the teaching in detail” (*vitthāra attha*)[§§3-5]; an elder is approached [§6], and he initially responds by relating the simile of the heartwood [§§7-8]; the elder then explains the teaching in detail [§§9-11]; and the Buddha praises the elder and endorses the teaching [§§12-15]. The same framework of the sutta [§§3-15] is also found (involving Mahā Kaccāna) in **the Uddesa Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 138).³ The heartwood simile is stock and common to all three suttas.

1.2 The Samyutta Commentary explains that the Buddha gives a brief teaching and then retires to his dwelling because he foresees that the monks will approach Ānanda, who will then give a proper answer that will win the Buddha's approval. The monks will then esteem Ānanda and this will promote their welfare and happiness for a long time. (SA 2:388)

1.3 In this Sutta, the sense-bases are called “the world” (*loka*) [§13] because they are the conditions for being a perceiver and a conceiver of the world.

We might conjecture that the five physical sense bases are prominent in making one a “perceiver of the world,” the mind base in making one a “conceiver of the world.” No such distinction, however, is made in the text. The six sense-bases are at once part of the world (“that in the world”) and the media for the manifestation of a world (“that by which”). The “end of the world” that must be reached to make an end of suffering is Nibbāna, which is called (amongst other things) the cessation of the six sense bases. (Bodhi, S:B 1413 n99; emphases added)

1.4 The Lok'anta Gamana Sutta should be read as a commentary on **the Rohitassa Sutta** (S 2.26/-1:61 f),⁴ and **the (Lujjati) Loka Sutta** (S 35.83),⁵ where the same teaching is given in a brief form. 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 6 sense-bases.

2 Significance of the Sutta

2.1 In **the Lok'anta Gamana Sutta**, the Buddha, in simple words with profound senses, explains what it really means to “save the world.” We need to first understand what “world” really means. In **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23), the Buddha declares that all that there is are our 6 sense-faculties and their 6 respective sense-objects: these are the “all” (*sabba*). This is the world, the universe, we have created for ourselves. Nothing is meaningful for us beyond this.⁶

2.2 The Buddha has never exhorted us to “save the world,” as this ultimately refers to all our senses, from which we liberate ourself. Even when taunted by the wanderer Uttiya, who asks, with all the

¹ PTS ed calls it **Loka,kāma,guṇa Sutta**, the discourse on the world and the cords of sensual pleasure.

² M 18/1:108-114 @ SD 6.14.

³ M 138/3:223-229 @ SD 33.14a].

⁴ S 2.26/1:61 f @ SD 7.2.

⁵ S 35.83/4:52 f @ SD 7.3.

⁶ S 35.23 @ SD 7.1.

Buddha’s attainments and teachings, “Is the whole world liberated by this, or only half of it, or a third of it?” The Buddha remains silent, because the question is wrongly put.⁷

2.3 In an important sense, we can say that the Buddha’s teaching is about “saving oneself” *from* the world. The world is what we make of it: we create our own world. Hence, it is within our power to change our “world,” that is our own self. This is the spirit of “**renouncing the world**,” of letting go of the world so that we are free of the falseness and unwholesomeness we have created for ourselves. To save the world, then, we need to renounce it.

2.4 In the **Lok’anta Gamana Sutta 1** (S 35.116), the Buddha declares what kind of “world” that we can really save or liberate. First, the Buddha shows us what kind of world needs “saving”:

Bhikkhus, the end of the world cannot be known, seen or reached by going, I say. Yet, bhikkhus, I also say that without reaching the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering.⁸
(S 35.116,2), SD 7.4

The first mention of “the world” refers to the physical universe, which is with neither beginning nor ending in terms of time and space (*okāsa, loka*). It also refers to the world of beings (*satta, loka*), simply put, the cycle of births and deaths (*samsāra*) itself, which is external to us, so to speak. However, *within* us are the world of formations (*saṅkhārā, loka*), the self-created and self-centred “world”—this is our real prison of craving and ignorance, what we need to awaken from and so be liberated.⁹

2.5 The Lok’anta Gamana Sutta further records the Buddha as declaring, “That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world—this is called ‘the world’¹⁰ in the noble one’s discipline.”¹¹ (S 35.116,22). This refers to the workings of the 6 sense-bases. Then, the Buddha famously declares in the **Rohitassa Sutta** (S 2.26):

In this very fathom-long body, endowed with perception and mind, I declare
the world,
the arising of the world,
the ending of the world, and
the way leading to the ending of the world.”¹² (S 2.26,9), SD 7.1

2.6 In short, the Buddha does not exhort us to “save all beings”—this is simply a logical impossibility (we cannot save beings of the past or the future!) and a theological doublespeak (“ultimately,” we might then say, “there are no beings to be saved!”) Even when we cultivate lovingkindness, “May all beings be well and happy,” we are simply using conventional language to help us clear our mind and heart of all ill will and radiate lovingkindness. It means an unconditional acceptance of others, and to begin there with our wise compassion. We need to awaken ourselves first before we can awaken others. Once we are awakened, then we would see how frivolous and false we have been even in our most religious moments, and how spiritual efficacious we are even in our silent moments.¹³

⁷ A 10.95/5:195 @ SD 44.16.

⁸ *Nāhaṃ bhikkhave gamanena lokassa antaṃ nātayyaṃ daṭṭhayaṃ pattayyaṃ ti vadāmi. Na ca pañāhaṃ bhikkhave apatvā lokassa antaṃ dukkhassa anta, kiriyāṃ vadāmi ti.* On the meanings of “world,” see **Rohitassa S**, SD 7 (1).

⁹ On these “3 worlds” (*loka*), see SD 7.2 (1).

¹⁰ See for example **Sabba S** (S 35.23/4:15) where “the world” refers to the 12 sense-bases.

¹¹ *Yena kho āvuso lokasmiṃ loka, saññī hoti lokamānī ayaṃ vuccati ariyassa vinaye loko.* See **Rohitassa S** (S 2.-26) + SD 7 (2). On the physical sense-bases making one a “perceiver” and the mind-base making one a “conceiver,” see Bodhi’s remark in *Intro* above. See **Bhāvanā S** (A 7.67/4:125-127), SD 15.1.5.

¹² *Api khvāhaṃ āvuso imasmiṃ, nēva vyāma, matte kaḷevare saññimhi samanake lokam ca paññāpemi loka, samudayaṃ ca loka, nirodham ca loka, nirodha, gāminim ca paṭipadan ti.*

¹³ This whole section recurs at SD 49.2 (4.5.9.7).

The First Discourse on Going to the World's End

S 35.116

[93]

The world's end not reached by going

2 Bhikshus, the end of the world cannot be known, seen or reached by going, I say. Yet, bhikshus, I also say that without reaching the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering.¹⁴

Having said this, the Blessed One rose from his seat and entered his dwelling.¹⁵

3 Then soon after the Blessed One had left, the monks thought:

“Now, friends, the Blessed One, after giving an instruction in brief, thus ‘*Bhikshus, the end of the world cannot be known, seen or reached by going. Yet, bhikshus, I also say that without reaching the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering,*’ without giving the meaning in detail, rose from his seat and entered his dwelling.

Now who will expound in detail the meaning of this instruction that the Blessed One taught in brief without giving the meaning in detail?”

4 Then they thought:

“The venerable Ānanda is praised by the Teacher and held in high esteem by wise companions in the holy life.¹⁶ He would be capable of giving the detailed meaning of this instruction given in brief without the meaning being given in detail by the Blessed One. Let us approach the venerable Ānanda and question the venerable Ānanda over and again¹⁷ regarding this matter.”

5 Then the monks approached the venerable Ānanda and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and friendly exchange was concluded, they sat down at one side.

6 Seated thus at one side, [94] they said this to the venerable Ānanda:

“Friend Ānanda, the Blessed One, after giving an instruction in brief, thus ‘*Bhikshus, the end of the world cannot be known, seen or reached by going. Yet, bhikshus, I also say that without reaching the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering,*’ without giving the meaning in detail, rose from his seat and entered his dwelling.

6.2 Then we thought:

“Now, who will expound the detailed meaning of this instruction given in brief without the meaning being given in detail by the Blessed One?”

6.3 Then it occurred to us:

“The venerable Ānanda is praised by the Teacher and held in high esteem by wise companions in the holy life. He is capable of giving the detailed meaning of this instruction given in brief without the meaning being given in detail by the Blessed One. Let us approach the venerable Ānanda and question the venerable Ānanda over and again regarding this matter.

Let the venerable Ānanda give us a detailed analysis [of this matter]!”¹⁸

¹⁴ *Nāham bhikkhave gamanena lokassa antam nātayyam daṭṭhayaṃ pattayyan ti vadāmi. Na ca panāham bhikkhave apatvā lokassa antam dukkhassa anta, kiriyam vadāmi ti.* On the meanings of “world,” see **Rohitassa S**, SD 7 (1).

¹⁵ On the Buddha’s reason for doing this, see Intro.

¹⁶ Ānanda is the foremost amongst monks who are (1) learned (*bahusuta*), (2) with good memory (*satimā*), of proper behaviour (*gatimā*), resolute (*dhitimā*) and personal attendants. (A 1:24)

¹⁷ “Question...over and again,” *paṭipuccheyyāma*, lit “we will counter-question (him).”

¹⁸ “Let...give us a detailed analysis,” *vibhajatu*.

The heartwood simile

7 “Friends, just as a person needing heartwood, seeking heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood, after passing over the root and trunk of a great tree that stands full of heartwood, were to think that heartwood would be found amongst its branches and leaves; even so it has come to this, venerable sirs, so it is with you, that you think I should be asked about the meaning of this matter when you were right before the Teacher himself.¹⁹

7.2 For, friends, the Blessed One knows the known, sees the seen; he is the eye, he is knowledge, he is Dharma, he is Brahmā; he is the instructor of spiritual duties,²⁰ the shower of meanings, the giver of the deathless, the lord of truth, the Tathāgata [thus come].²¹

7.3 That was indeed the time when you should have asked the Blessed One over and again regarding the meaning [of the Blessed One’s statement]. As he explained to you, so you should have remembered it.”

8 “Truly, friend Ānanda, the Blessed One knows the known, sees the seen; he has become the eye, become knowledge, become the Dharma, become Brahmā; he is the instructor of spiritual duties, the shower of meanings,²² the giver of the deathless, the lord of truth, the Tathāgata [thus come].

8.2 That was indeed the time when we should have asked the Blessed One over and again regarding the meaning [of the Blessed One’s statement]. As he explained to us, so we should have remembered it.

8.3 But the venerable Ānanda is praised by the Teacher and held in high esteem by wise companions in the holy life. He is capable of giving the meaning in detail of this teaching taught in brief without the meaning being given in detail by the Blessed One. Let the venerable Ānanda give us a detailed analysis [of this matter], if it is no trouble!”

Ānanda’s reply

9 “Then, listen, friends, pay close attention to it, I will speak.”

“Yes, venerable sir!” the monks replied to the venerable Ānanda.

The venerable Ānanda said this:

10 “Friends, when the Blessed One, after giving an instruction in brief, thus ‘*Bhikshus, the end of the world cannot be known, seen or reached by going. Yet, bhikshus, I also say that without reaching the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering,*’ without giving the meaning in detail, rose from his seat and entered his dwelling, I understand its meaning in detail to be as follows:

11 **That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world**—this is called “the world”²³ in the noble one’s discipline.²⁴

11.2 And what, friends, is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world?

The eye is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.²⁵

¹⁹ A slightly different version of this simile is found in **Mahā Sārōpama S** (M 29.3/1:193).

²⁰ “Instructor of spiritual duties,” *vattā pavattā*, lit “the turner of duties”. My tr is conjectural. This is a cryptic expression which can also be tr as “he is the propounder, the expounder” (M:H 1:144). The **Dhamma,saṅgaṇī Mūla Tīkā** explains *vattā* as *catu,sacca,dhamme*, “the four noble truth”.

²¹ “[K]nows the known...the Tathāgata,” *jānaṃ janāti passam passati cakkhu,bhūto nāṇa,bhūto dhamma,bhūto vattā pavattā atthassa ninnetā amatassa dātā dhamma-s,sāmī tathāgato*. Comy simply says that he knows and sees what is to be known and seen; knowing, he knows; seeing, he sees (MA 2:76).

²² “The shower of meanings,” *atthassa ninnetā*, alt tr “the bringer of the goal” (M:H 1:144). I have rendered it to reflect the mood of the sutta (that of the full meaning of the Buddha’s brief statement).

²³ See for example **Sabba S** (S 35.23/4:15) where “the world” refers to the 12 sense-bases.

²⁴ *Yena kho āvuso lokasmiṃ loka,saññī hoti lokamānī ayaṃ vuccati ariyassa vinaye loko*. See **Rohitassa S** (S 2.-26) + SD 7 (2). On the physical sense-bases making one a “perceiver” and the mind-base making one a “conceiver,” see Bodhi’s remark in *Intro* above. See **Bhāvanā S** (A 7.67/4:125-127), SD 15.1.5.

²⁵ On the 6 sense-bases as “the world” (*loka*) in the sense of disintegrating, see **Loka S** (S 35.82/4:52 f), SD 7. See also Bh Bodhi’s remarks in *Intro* above.

The ear is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.

The nose is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.

The tongue is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.

The body is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.

The mind is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.

That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world—this is called the world in the noble one’s discipline. [96]

12 Friends, when the Blessed One, after giving an instruction in brief, thus ‘*Bhikshus, the end of the world cannot be known, seen or reached by going. Yet, bhikshus, I also say that without reaching the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering,*’ without giving the meaning in detail, rose from his seat and entered his dwelling, I understand its meaning in detail to be as follows.

Now, if you wish, venerable sirs, go to the Blessed One and ask him over and again about the meaning of this. As the Blessed One explains it to you, so should you remember it.”

The Buddha’s approval

12.2 Then the monks, having joyfully approved of the venerable Ānanda’s word, rose from their seats and approached the Blessed One. Having paid homage to the Blessed One, they sat down at one side

13 and related what had happened earlier after the Blessed One’s brief teaching and departure, adding:

14 “Then, venerable sir, we approached the venerable Ānanda and asked him about the meaning [of the Blessed One’s statement].

15 Then the venerable Ānanda explained the meaning to us in this manner, in this way, with these words.”²⁶

15.2 “Ānanda, bhikshus, is wise; Ānanda, bhikshus, has great wisdom! If you had asked me the meaning of this, I would have explained it in the same way that Ānanda had explained it. Such is its meaning and so should you remember it.”

—evam—

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²⁶ “In this manner, in this way, with these words,” *imehi ākarehi imehi padehi imehi vyañjehi*. This is stock, as at **Vīmaṃsaka S** (M 47,16/1:320), SD 35.6.