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## Chiggaḷa Sutta

(Tāḷa, chiggaḷa Sutta) The Key-hole Discourse | S 56.45

Be Ce Se (*uddāna*) Vāla Sutta The Discourse on the Tail-hair

Ee Chiggaḷa, yuga Sutta 1 The 1<sup>st</sup> Discourse on the Yoke-hole

Theme: The human state is rare; seize the moment for awakening

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2012, 2020

### 1 Summary and significance

#### 1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY AND TITLE

##### 1.1.1 Summary

**1.1.1.1** The elder Ānanda, during his almsround in Vesālī, after his meal, approaches the Buddha and tells him that he has just seen some Licchavī youths expertly practising archery. They are able to serially shoot arrows without fail through a “very small keyhole” to their target.

In reply, the Buddha asks Ānanda which is more difficult: to shoot an arrow through a keyhole or to hit a hair-tip, splitting it sevenfold. Ānanda of course agrees that the latter would be much more difficult to do. The Buddha explains that to penetrate the 4 noble truths is even more difficult than an arrow hitting a hair-tip splitting it sevenfold.

**1.1.1.2 The sutta teaching** is that the best thing we can and should do is to seize this moment to seek and understand the 4 noble truths so that we awaken to true reality. **The Chiggaḷa Sutta** (S 56.45)—like the related pair, **the Chiggaḷa, yuga Sutta 1** (S 56.47) and **the Chiggaḷa, yuga Sutta 2** (S 56.48)—is about the “moment” (*samaya*)<sup>1</sup> of opportunity or “opening” (*okāsa*)<sup>2</sup> in samsara for our *taking that step towards the path of awakening*, since this is the time when the Buddha has arisen, and we have attained the human state (*manussatta*).

##### 1.1.2 The Sutta title

The Sinhala and SE Asian manuscripts call **S 56.45 the Vāla Sutta**, the tail-hair discourse. We can also call it **the Tāḷa Chiggaḷa Sutta**, the key-hole discourse (S.56.45), after the obstacle through which the Licchavī archers shoot their arrows to hit their target [§3]. The PTS manuscript simply calls this **the Chiggaḷa Sutta 1**, and the other 2, the Chiggaḷa Suttas 2 and 3, respectively [1.2].

#### 1.2 RELATED SUTTAS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

1.2.0	<u>title translation</u>		<u>chiggaḷa parable</u>	
<b>Chiggaḷa Sutta</b>	the key-hole	<b>S 56.45</b> /5:453 f	the key-hole and the archers	SD 57.11
<b>Chiggaḷa, yuga S 1</b>	the one-hole yoke	<b>S 56.47</b> /5:455 f	the blind turtle & the one-holed yoke	SD 57.12
<b>Chiggaḷa, yuga S 2</b>	the one-hole yoke	<b>S 56.48</b> /5:456 f	the turtle, one-hole yoke, the winds	SD 57.13

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on *samaya*, see DhsA:P 80-82.

<sup>2</sup> On “the opening in the closed” (*sambādh’okāsa*), see **Sambād’okāsa S** (A 6.26), SD 15.6.

### 1.2.1 Meanings of *chiggala*

**1.2.1.1** S 56.45 is here simply called **Chiggala Sutta**, not to confuse it with S 56.47+48, but S 56.45 should be properly and fully called **the Tāla, chiggāla Sutta**, the key-hole discourse, after the Sutta’s key-word [§§3+6+7]. The Pali Text Society’s Saṃyutta manuscript (Ee) names it as the Chiggala, yuga Sutta but this is a misnomer since the phrase *chiggala, yuga* is not found in S 56.45 [1.2.1.2].

**1.2.1.2** Ee, however, applies the name *chiggala, yuga*, “a yoke with a hole,” to all the 3 suttas: S 56.-45, S 56.47 and S 56.48. Hence, they are there respectively called “Chiggala Sutta 1,” “Chiggala Sutta 2” and “Chiggala Sutta 3.” However, the phrase *chiggala, yuga* does not appear in S 56.45 (the 1<sup>st</sup> sutta), but in the last two.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> Sutta, *chiggala* means “key-hole,” since it comes from **tāla, chiggala** as already noted [1.2.1.1]. However, in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Suttas, *chiggala* refers to the **chiggala, yuga**, the one-hole yoke, a plough with a hole, used in their parable. These 3 names may seem convenient but they are inaccurate, even misleading.

**1.2.1.3** The Burmese (Be), Sinhala (Ce) and Siamese (Se) manuscripts correctly call S 56.45 **the Vāla Sutta**, the discourse on the tail-hair, after the Buddha’s parable [§7]. However, it is better named **Chiggala Sutta** to remind us of the common component, the “hole” (*chiggala*) in the triad of suttas, as in “key-hole” (S 56.45) and the “one-hole yoke” (S 56.47 + 48). The last 2 are respectively called **Chiggala Sutta 1** and **Chiggala Sutta 2**, following Be, Ce and Se.

**1.2.1.4** This parable of **the “yoke”** (*chiggala*) is referred to in the following places:

<b>Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta</b>	M 129,24	the blind turtle and the one-hole yoke	SD 57.12 (1.2.2)
<b>Sumedhā Thī</b>	Thī 500	the parable of the blind turtle	SD 57.12 (1.2.1)
<b>Milinda, pañha</b>	Miln 204,12-14	the difficulty of attaining the human state	

### 1.2.2 Parables and hyperboles

**1.2.2.1** The suttas often depict the Buddha as using some **hyperbole**, a literal device that is an exaggeration or over-statement not to be taken literally, to express astronomical distances,<sup>3</sup> durations and probability. Before the rise of science, defined by theories and measurements, *the non-technical latitude of early Buddhist spiritual experience and its experiential language*—and the Indian creative mind—delight in the application of a hyperbole as a means of expressing both our existential limits as well as our spiritual potential.

The hyperboles of the 3 **Chiggala Suttas** (S 56.45+47+48) are used by the Buddha to express probability or chance. The hyperboles are used in similar parables for each sutta, in turn, with a new interesting detail [below].

**1.2.2.2** In **the Chiggala Sutta** (S 56.45), Ānanda reports to the Buddha that some Licchavī youths are expert archers who are able to serially shoot (*poṅkhānupoṅkha*) arrows through a “very small key-hole” (*sukhuma tāla-c, chiggala*) without missing at all (*avirādhita*). **Keys** in ancient India were much larger than our average keys today: they were approximately palm-sized. Even a “very small key-hole” would easily allow a normal arrow to easily pass through. Even then, the distance demands great precision and skill on

<sup>3</sup> Hyperboles expressing distance (the universe’s limits) (A 4.45), the world-cycle or aeon (*kappa*) (S 15.5) and the duration of samsara (S 15.4) are common: SD 57.10 (1.5.3).

the archer's part for his arrow to smoothly pass through it; and to do so every time. This is an amazing feat in itself.<sup>4</sup>

**1.2.2.3** Building on this, the Buddha proposes an even more difficult, even nearly impossible, feat of shooting an arrow to split a tail-hair into 7 strands. Yet, we must imagine this to be finer than human hair, and to split this sevenfold.

Further, the number “**seven**” is often mentioned in the suttas and probably as an auspicious prime number, evoking a sense of power through completion, bringing things into a complete circle: the child Bodhisattva's 1<sup>st</sup> 7 steps (SD 52.1 (3.4)), the 7 weeks after the awakening (SD 26.1 (5)), the world monarch's 7 jewels (SD 36.12 (3)), the 7 treasures (SD 45.18 (2.7)), the 7 noble treasures (SD 37.6), the 7 stations of consciousness (SD 23.14), the 7 qualities of a true individual (SD 23.7 (3.1.5)), the 7 awakening-factors (SD 10.15), the 7 lives “at most” of a streamwinner (SD 3.3(3)), the head shattering into 7 pieces (SD 21.3 (1.1.3)), and so on.

Even more difficult than splitting a hair-tip sevenfold, declares the Buddha, is for us to spiritually penetrate the 4 noble truths (to awaken to true reality). Yet, this is possible right here and now since **the Buddha** has arisen in the world, and we are in the best position to follow his teaching with our humanity!<sup>5</sup> Why throw away this golden opportunity, and only to surely fall into the suffering states.

### **1.2.3 Hyperbole in time and space** [SD 57.13 (1.2.2+1.2.3)]

**1.2.3.1 The Chiggaḷa Sutta** (S 56.45) employs the hyperboles of probability: the chances of the young Licchavī archers in hitting their distant target through the tiny key-hole [§4 etc] and an archer splitting a tail-hair sevenfold. The hyperbole of probability continues to be employed in **the Chiggaḷa,yuga Suttas 1 + 2** (S 56.47+48), SD 57.12+13, by way of the chances of a blind turtle putting its head through a “one-hole yoke” (*chiggaḷa,yuga*) [1.2.3].

The parables in these 2 Suttas are compounded further. **The Chiggaḷa,yuga Sutta 1** (S 56.47) employs the hyperbole of time, and **the Chiggaḷa,yuga Sutta 2** (S 56.48) adds on the hyperbole of space. A man, we are told, throws a one-hole yoke onto the ocean's surface (we are not told when or how frequent, presumably only *once*), and, according to **S 56.46**, a blind turtle on its own would come up to the ocean-surface *only once a century*, but we do not know.

Either event (the man throwing the one-hole yoke onto the ocean-surface, and the blind turtle surfacing) occurs randomly (*adhicca*). Both the turtle's blindness and the vastness of the ocean heighten the hyperbole of probability in the parable.

**1.2.3.2 The Chiggaḷa,yuga Sutta 2** (S 56.48) is the most interesting of the triad of suttas. Besides the blind turtle rising to the ocean surface and the man throwing a one-hole yoke into the waters—both happening *any time* once in a century, perhaps—there is now **the hyperbole of space**: the surface of the whole world is *one great ocean*! In other words, this primordial sea-turtle has to cover an unimaginably larger area—the whole world itself!

This dramatic set of hyperboles is used by the Buddha to highlight **the rarity of being born as a human**, or more exactly, our attaining **humanity** (*manussatta*)—the mind of wisdom and heart of compassion—to see and understand *the 4 noble truths* so that we will be free from suffering and awaken to freedom. On a simpler, more practical, level, we should seize *this moment* of our humanity to aspire to streamwinning, and reflect on *impermanence* so that we reach the path of awakening in this life itself.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> On the hyperbole of probability: [SD 57.123 (1.2.1)].

<sup>5</sup> See **Appa,mattaka Vg**: A 1.19,1-15 (SD 57.8).

<sup>6</sup> See (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

Otherwise, we would surely fall into one of the suffering states, that is, become an asura, a hell-being, an animal, or a preta.<sup>7</sup>

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## Chiggaḷa Sutta

### The Key-hole Discourse

S 56.45

1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in the Pinnacled Hall in the great wood outside Vesālī.

2 Then, in the morning, the venerable Ānanda, having dressed, taking bowl and robe, entered Vesālī for alms.

#### The expert archers

3 The venerable Ananda saw some Licchavī youths practising archery in the mote-hall, shooting arrows, serially (one after another),<sup>8</sup> from a distance through a **very small keyhole**,<sup>9</sup> without missing at all.<sup>10</sup>

4 When he saw this, it occurred to him:

“These Licchavi youths are indeed trained! These Licchavi youths are indeed well trained, in that they shoot arrows serially, from a distance through a very small keyhole, without missing at all.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See SD 57.10 (3.2.2).

<sup>8</sup> *Poṅkhānupoṅkham* (PED: *poṅkh'ānupoṅkham*). Comy: He saw them shoot one arrow after another—called the “after-nock” (*ānupoṅkham*) in such a way that the nock of the first arrow’s shaft was split; then shoot still another through the nock of the second arrow.

<sup>9</sup> PED: **Tāḷa 2** (nt; Skt *tālaka* = *tāḍa*, Avadś 2.56’ *tāḍaka*, Divy 577) a key (orig, a “knocker”?) V 2:148 (3 kinds: metal (*loha-*), wood (*kaṭṭha-*), horn (*visāṇa-*); -c,*chiggaḷa*, a key-hole (S 4:290, 5:453; Vism 500); -c,*chidda* id (V 2:-120, 148, 153 (all *tāla-*), 3:118; DhA 3:8 (1).

<sup>10</sup> *Santhāgāre upāsanaṃ kāronte durato va sukhumena tāla-c,chiggaḷena asanam atipātente poṅkhānupoṅkham avirādhitaṃ* (S 5:453,11 f): *upāsana*, shooting (arrows), practice (of archery); practising (a skill); *tāla*, key; *tāla-c,-chiggaḷa*, a keyhole; *asana*<sup>3</sup> (from *assati*), a shot, a missile, an arrow (M 1:82,36; S 5:453,11); *atipātente* (from *atipātetī*, to make fly, shoot); *poṅkhānupoṅkha*, shot after shot (of arrows) (increm of *puṅkha*, a fletching, an arrow’s feathered part); *avirādhita*, without missing. *Poṅkha* (only in redupl cpd *poṅkhāpoṅkha*) means “arrow”: so PED + PTC 3:329, svv; also DPI 638). Comy explains ***poṅkhānupoṅkha***, thus: “He saw them shooting an arrow, then another. This is called an ‘after-fletching’ (*anupoṅkha*), where the first arrow was split in the fletching by the second arrow, and that one split by another” (*ekam kaṇḍam khipitvā yathā assa sarassa poṅkham vijjhati, aparaṃ anupoṅkham nāma dutiyassa poṅkham, puna aparaṃ tassa poṅkhan’ti evaṃ atipātente addasa*). Comy is describing what is called in archery slang a series “Robin Hood” or “telescoping” (an arrow hitting another in the target, splitting it in the middle) which may well happen, but it’s difficult to imagine it happening *all* the time. It’s more likely that the canonical Pali expression *poṅkhānupoṅkha* simply means “shaft after shaft,” ie, a continuous series of arrows being skillfully or expertly shot.

<sup>11</sup> For even more amazing feats of archery by the Bodhisattva as Joti,pāla, see **Sarabhaṅga J** (J 522/5:129-131).

### Ānanda meets the Buddha

5 Then, when the venerable Ananda had walked for alms in Vesālī and returned from his alms-round, after his meal, he approached the Blessed One.

Having approached the Blessed One, he saluted him, and sat down to one side. Sitting at one side, the venerable Ānanda said this to the Blessed One:

6 “Here, bhante, in the morning, I, having dressed, taking bowl and robe, entered Vesālī for alms.

Then, bhante, I saw *some Licchavī youths practising archery in the mote-hall, shooting arrows serially, from a distance through a very small keyhole, without missing at all.*

6.2 When I saw this, it occurred to me:

“*These Licchavi youths are indeed trained! These Licchavi youths are indeed well trained, in that they shoot arrows serially, from a distance through a very small keyhole, without missing at all.*”

### Hair-splitting trick

(The Blessed One:) [454]

7 “What do you think, Ananda, which is more difficult, more challenging— to shoot arrows serially, from a distance through **a very small keyhole**, without missing at all, or to pierce with the arrowhead **the tip of a hair and splitting it into 7 strands?**”<sup>12</sup>

“It is more difficult and challenging, bhante, *to pierce with the arrowhead the tip of a hair splitting it into 7 strands.*”

### Understanding the 4 truths frees us from suffering

8 “But, Ananda, they penetrate something even more difficult to penetrate

who penetrate as it really is: ‘This is suffering’;

*who penetrate as it really is:* ‘This is the arising of suffering’;

*who penetrate as it really is:* ‘This is the ending of suffering’;

*who penetrate as it really is:* ‘This is the way leading to the ending of suffering.’

9 Therefore, Ananda,

you should devote yourself understand as it really is: ‘This is suffering’;

*you should devote yourself understand as it really is:* ‘This is the arising of suffering’;

*you should devote yourself understand as it really is:* ‘This is the ending of suffering’;

*you should devote yourself understand as it really is:* ‘This is the way leading to the ending of suffering.’”<sup>13</sup>

*evam*

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<sup>12</sup> **Abhaya Tha** alludes to it (Tha 26); cf Tha 42, 1160 f. Comy glosses *durabhisambhavataram* with *dukkarataram*. On the splitting of the hair, I follow Be, which reads *satta,dhā*, supported by Comy (both Be and Ce). Ce and Ee of text have *satadhā*, “a hundred strands.” Comy: Having split one hair into 7 strands, they fix one strand to an eggplant and another to the tip of the arrowhead; then, standing at a distance of an *usabha* (about 200 feet), they pierce the strand fixed to the arrowhead through the strand fixed to the eggplant. (SA 3:301,25-302,2). Comy on **Meghiya Thera V** (DhA 3.1) refers to how a fletcher makes an arrow “fit to shoot a hair with” (DhA 1:288).

<sup>13</sup> On how to follow up this teaching with practice (the perception of impermanence), see SD 57.13 (1.2.1.3); SD 57.12 (1.1.3.3).