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Chiggaḷa,yuga Sutta 1

(Be) The 1st Discourse on the Yoke With a Hole | S 56.47

Ee **Chiggaḷa Sutta 1** The 1st Discourse on the Yoke-hole

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

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2012, 2020

1 Summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY, TITLE AND PURPOSE

For an overview of **the triad** of S 56.45, S 56.47 and S 56.48, see **SD 57.11 (1)**.

1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

1.2.1 The rarity of human state

1.2.1.1 This sutta (S 56.47) is very similar to **Chiggaḷa Sutta 2** (S 56.48), SD 57.13, which follows it in the Papāta Vagga of the Sacca Saṃyutta (S 56)—and both employ the parable of **the blind turtle**. The Sutta, with its parable of the blind turtle and the one-hole yoke cast into the ocean, is a reflection on **the rarity of human birth**, that is, the condition of our humaneness or humanity.

1.2.1.2 The parable in **S 56.47** puts together *two random events occurring presumably¹ within the same century*: a man throwing a **one-hole yoke** (*chiggaḷa,yuga*) onto the water surface, and a **blind turtle** that surfaces on its own only once a century. It is more likely, says that Sutta, that the blind turtle would put its head through that one-hole yoke than that a fool caught in the fallen state (*apāya*) (as an asura, hell-being, animal or preta) would become a human again.²

1.2.1.3 The parable has these 3 key components: (1) a man throws a one-hole yoke onto the ocean surface (we are not told when or how often, but probably just once); (2) the turtle's blindness, and (3) its rising to the surface *randomly* only once a century. All these add up to the **hyperbole of probability** making the parable an interesting reflection. [SD 57.12 (1.2.2 f)]

1.2.3 The Chiggaḷa,yuga Suttas (S 56.47 + S 56.48)

1.2.3.1 Like **the Chiggaḷa,yuga 1** (S 56.47), **the Chiggaḷa,yuga Sutta 2** (S 56.48), too, features a blind turtle and the one-hole yoke being cast onto the ocean *once* randomly in either case, perhaps within the same century [1.1.1.2]. Hence, both these Suttas employ a hyperbole of time: the century. The 2nd Sutta adds another hyperbole, that of space. Imagine, the Sutta now opens, that *this whole world* is one great ocean! Now the blind turtle has, as it were to cover an unimaginably large surface of water.

1.2.3.2 In both **S 56.47** and **S 56.48**, the Buddha, using the parable of the blind turtle and the one-hole yoke, reminds us how difficult it is for us to get out of a subhuman state—as an asura, a hell-being, an

¹ We are only told that a person throws a one-hole yoke onto the water surface, but neither when nor how often [S2].

² The suttas of **Appa,mattaka Vg** (A 1.19) is a series of reflections on the rarity of being reborn as a human or a deva.

animal or a preta—to attain the human state. This is only the existential level of the difficulty (attaining humanity); then, there is the spiritual level of difficulty of seeing the 4 noble truths (seeing true reality).

1.2.3.3 Now that the Buddha has arisen in the world, **the 4 noble truths** are known and taught. They can be learned and understood, and the best way to do this is as a human being. When we truly look within, in this very body, we will see the 4 noble truths. In **the Rohitassa Sutta** (S 2.26), the Buddha declares:

“So, avuso, **in this very fathom-long body**,³ along with its 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.” (S 2.26,9/1:62), SD 7.2⁴

Most of us are familiar with this saying (at least now we are), but often we are uncertain how we can put this into practice. In practical terms, we should see the 4 noble truths in this manner:

- (1) constantly, habitually, reflect on **the impermanence** of everything within ourself and without;
- (2) our sufferings arise from our **craving**, but it is all impermanent, why not just let it go;
- (3) **the way** to let it go is to aspire to streamwinning in this life itself;⁵
- (4) this means that we will *surely* attain the path of awakening in this life itself; if not, at the moment of passing away, declares the Buddha, in **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.⁶

1.3 THE BLIND TURTLE

1.3.1 The Therī,gāthā records the 50 verses of the elder nun **Sumedhā**. In one of her verses, she reminds us of **the Chiggaḷa Sutta 1** (S 56.47), thus:

<p><i>Sara kāṇa,kacchapam̐ pubbe samudde aparato⁷ ca yuga-c,chiddam̐ siram̐ tassa ca paṭimukham̐ manussa,lābhamhi opammam̐</i></p>	<p>(Thī 500)</p>	<p>Remember the blind turtle in former times, and also the yoke with a hole, and putting his head into it— a parable of attaining the human state.</p>
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³ “In this very fathom-long body,” *imasmiñ-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 Brahmana 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, Prajā,pati, “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 4 truths in external things like grass and wood, but right here in this body composed of the 4 great elements.” (SA 1:117 f)

⁴ Also at A 4.45,9/2:48 (SD 52.8a).

⁵ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

⁶ The truth sequence here is 1-2-4-3, following the ancient “practice” sequence, such as that taught in **Mahā Saḷ-āyatanika S** (M 149,11 etc) + SD 41.9 (2.4); SD 53.26 (2).

⁷ On tr of *aparato*, see Thī:N 175 n500.

1.3.2 The parable of the blind turtle and the one-hole yoke is also found in **the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129), the discourse on the foolish and the wise.⁸ [SD 57.13 (1.3.1)]

The parable given in **the Chiggaḷa Sutta 3** (S 56.48) is more elaborate [SD 57.13 (1.2)].

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Chiggaḷa,yuga Sutta 1

The 1st Discourse on the Yoke With a Hole

S 56.47

The blind turtle and the one-hole yoke

2 “Bhikshus, suppose a man were to throw a **one-hole yoke**⁹ into the great ocean, and there were a blind turtle which would come up to the surface by itself *once every hundred years*.¹⁰

3 What do you think, bhikshus, would that blind turtle, coming up to the surface by itself once every hundred years, insert its neck into that one-hole yoke?” **[456]**

“If it would ever do so, bhante, it would be only after a very long time.”

4 “Sooner, I say, would that blind turtle, coming up to the surface once every hundred years, insert its neck into that one-hole yoke than the fool who has gone once to the fallen state (would regain) the human state.

The rarity of the human state

5 What is the reason for this?

Because, bhikshus, therein (in that fallen state)¹¹ there is no conduct guided by the Dharma, no righteous conduct, no wholesome activity, no meritorious activity.

Therein mutual devouring, the devouring of the weak prevails.

6 What is the reason for this?

For what reason?

Because, bhikkhus, they have not seen **the 4 noble truths**.

Understanding the 4 truths frees us from suffering

6.2 What are the four?

The noble truth that is **suffering**.

The noble truth that is **the arising** of suffering.

The noble truth that is **the ending** of suffering.

The noble truth that is **the way** leading to the ending of suffering.

⁸ M 129,24/3:169,9-22), SD 2.22.

⁹ “One-hole yoke” (*chiggaḷa,yuga*): SD 57.11 (1.2.1) Meaning of *chiggaḷa*.

¹⁰ *Seyyathā’pi bhikkhave puriso mahā,samudde eka-c,chiggaḷaṃ yugaṃ pakkhipeyya, tatrā’pi’ssa kāṇo kacchapo, so vassa,satassa vassa,satassa accayena sakim’sakim’ummujjeyya.*

¹¹ “In that fallen state,” *ettha*, “here; in this place,” here an anaphora, referring to the aforementioned state.

7 Therefore, bhikshus:
you should devote yourself to know as it really is: 'This is suffering';
you should devote yourself to know as it really is: 'This is the arising of suffering';
you should devote yourself to know as it really is: 'This is the ending of suffering';
you should devote yourself to know as it really is: 'This is the way leading to the ending of suffering.'"

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