

13

Chiggaḷa,yuga Sutta 2

(Be) The 2nd Discourse on the Yoke With a Hole | S 56.48

Ce Ee Se **Chiggaḷa Sutta 2** The 2nd 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

This sutta is similar to **Chiggaḷa Sutta 1** (S 56.47),¹ SD 57.12, which precedes it in the Papāta Vagga in the Sacca Saṃyutta (S 56). Using the same parable of the blind turtle and the one-hole yoke cast into the ocean, it is a reflection on the rarity of human birth, that is, the condition of humanity or humaneness.

[For a fuller appreciation of this Sutta, begin with reading **the Chiggaḷa Sutta** (S 56.45), SD 57.11, especially (1); followed by **the Chiggaḷa,yuga Sutta 1** (S 56.47), SD 57.12; and only then continue here again with **the Chiggaḷa,yuga Sutta 2** (S 56.48), SD 57.13.]

1.2 PROGRESSIVE PARABLE [SD 57.11 (1.2.2 f)]

1.2.1 Probability hyperbole

1.2.1.1 The triad of suttas—**the Chiggaḷa Sutta** (S 56.45), **the Chiggaḷa,yuga Sutta 1** (S 56.47) and **the Chiggaḷa Sutta 2** (S 56.48)—are unified by the employment of hyperboles highlighting the rarity of the arising of the Buddha Dharma [§5] by way of **the 4 noble truths**, and why we should make every effort to realize them [§6].

1.2.1.2 **The Chiggaḷa Sutta** (S 56.48), SD 57.13, employs **the parable of probability** in terms of 3 levels of difficulty, thus:

- (1) 1st level of difficulty. Some Licchavī archers expertly serially shoot arrows through a “very small key-hole,” hitting the target each time (even telescoping the arrows, says the Commentary).
- (2) 2nd level of difficulty. Arrows are serially shot through a very small keyhole to split a “tail-hair” into 7 strands.
- (3) 3rd level of difficulty. The penetration (realization) of the 4 noble truths leading to attaining the path of awakening. This is the most difficult feat of all.

1.2.1.3 **The Chiggaḷa Sutta**, however, closes with the Buddha simply declaring that we should devote ourself to understanding “as it really is” **the 4 noble truths**. Although the reason is not mentioned, we know that this is for the attaining of the path of awakening beginning with streamwinning and ending in nirvana.

The Buddha’s call for us to devote ourself to understanding the 4 noble truths is because *the Buddha Dharma has arisen in the world* [1.2.1.4]. There is the teaching on how to understand these truths. One clear practical way to do this is **the perception of impermanence** in terms of the 4 noble truths, which brings us streamwinning in this life itself [SD 57.12 (1.1.3.3)].

¹ For a discussion of the names of the sutta triad, see SD 57.11 (1.2.0 f).

1.2.1.4 The fact that **the Buddha has arisen in the world** means that his teaching of awakening is available to us even here and now. We only need to study, practise and realize it.² This good news of the Buddha's presence in the world (after his death, the presence of his teaching) is mentioned in **the Chiggaḷa.yuga Sutta 2** (S 56.48,4), Moreover, we have now attained **the human state** (S 56.48,5), SD 57.13. These 2 vital facts drastically lessen the odds in our ability to reach the path of awakening—when we aspire to attain **streamwinning** right here and now [SD 57.12 (1.1.3.3)].

1.2.2 Temporal hyperbole

1.2.2.1 The hyperbole of probability is also employed in **the 2 Chiggaḷa,yuga Suttas** (S 56.47 + S 56.48), that is, the parable of the blind turtle [SD 57.12+13]. Imagine, says the parable, that a person were to cast a one-hole yoke into the ocean (we are not told when or how often), and *a blind turtle* would *on its own* (randomly) rise once every century to the ocean-surface. What is the chance of it putting its head through that single hole in the yoke? The possibility of this happening is very difficult to imagine. This is the hyperbole of probability in terms of time, or simply **the hyperbole of time**.

1.2.2.2 In other words, without the presence of the Buddha who teaches the Dharma, there is practically *no* chance for us, on our own, to hear, much less understand, the Dharma of awakening. However, now that the Buddha has arisen in our world, and with the continued presence of his teaching, we have much better chances to understand and master his teaching of **the 4 noble truths**.

Further, with our attaining **a human form**, the chances of our hearing and awakening in the Buddha Dharma is even greater. To get this amazing chance, we must, of course, make the effort to seek the Dharma so that we can study, practise and realize the 4 noble truths that bring us awakening.

1.2.3 Spatial and motional hyperbole

1.2.3.1 The parable in **the Chiggaḷa,yuga Sutta 2** (S 56.48) adds another element to lessen the odds in the parable of the blind turtle putting its neck into the one-hole yoke—this is the hyperbole of space. Imagine, this time, the whole world is one mass of water, one great ocean. A person comes along apparently just once and casts the one-hole yoke into this unimaginably huge ocean, wherein lives a fabulous blind turtle. This is **a hyperbole of space**.

To complicate things, strong ocean winds blow the one-hole yoke about in all directions all over the ocean before it drops onto the water-surface. This, then, is **a hyperbole of motion**. So, we have the factors of *time, space and motion*, all working to make a complex **hyperbole of probability** (probability is itself another key factor in the hyperbole).

The blind turtle then rises to the ocean-surface only once, on its own, every century. The chances now for the blind turtle to put its neck through the yoke's hole is even more remote! [1.3.2]

1.2.3.2 The purpose of this complex parable of **hyperboles** is to highlight the rarity and difficulties of being human, of the arising of the Buddha and the presence of his teaching. All these are stated in this instructive Dhammapada verse:

<i>Kiccho manussa,paṭilābho</i>	Difficult it is to gain a human state;
<i>kicchaṃ maccāna jīvitam</i>	difficult is the life of mortals;
<i>kicchaṃ saddhamma,savanaṃ</i>	difficult it is to hear the Dharma;
<i>kiccho buddhānaṃ uppādo</i>	difficult is the arising of buddhas.

(Dh 182)

² This triad of “study, practise, realize” is called **the 3 good truths** (*saddhamma*), ie, the 3 phases of the 4 truths [SD 40a.1 (3.4); SD 40a.4 esp (2)]. The 4 noble truths are fully mastered by way of 4 modes in 3 phases: SD 1.1 (6.2).

The 1st line, on **gaining the human state**, is of our immediate concern. It is not merely about being *born* a human, but more so about being a human. We may have a human body, but to be *humanized* we need healthy human contacts, the love and coaching of parents, guardians and peers, and other humans. Even living in such a human presence, we often still harbour stubborn non-human habits and defilements. In other words, despite our *human body*, we may still have, at some time at least, the mind of an asura, an animal, a preta or a hell-being—a mind of a ruthless exploitative asura, an ignorantly routine and fearful animal, an insatiably addictive preta, or an abusively violent hell-being.

Hence, the life of **a mortal**, human or otherwise, is not easy. Only with **moral virtue** (*sīla*)—the respect for life, for happiness, for freedom, for truth and for wisdom³—do we cultivate the “human state” (*manussatta*).⁴ We may be born with a human body, but we must each by and for ourself cultivate our **humanity** which is the basis for mental cultivation, to become *Homo sapiens*, the man who thinks, who is wise.⁵

1.3 THE BLIND TURTLE

1.3.1 The parable of the blind turtle and the yoke is also found in **the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129), the discourse on the foolish and the wise, which describes the karmic fate of the foolish being. The Sutta adds that even when we do become human again, our past foolish deeds would condition us to arise in a miserable state and lowly status. Or, when we are born into some high social status (such as a family of power, wealth and fame), we will still not be truly happy despite the pleasures and plenty.⁶

The Majjhima Commentary adds that **a foolish person** (*bāla*) engages in 3 kinds of misconduct (bodily, verbal, mental), on account of which he suffers hellish sufferings. Due to his karmic residue, even when he returns to the human state, it is one that is suffering and disadvantaged. He continues to engage in 3 kinds of unwholesome conduct and is again reborn in hell (MA 4:214,7-11). This is a case of “going from darkness to darkness.”⁷

1.3.2 The most elaborate form of **the parable of the blind turtle** is given here in **the Chiggaḷa Sutta 3** (S 56.48). Although it is essentially a hyperbole of probability, it has all the hyperbolic elements of *time, space and motion*. Hence, altogether these features form perhaps the most complex unified literary figure in Pali literature.

More than that, it highlights the various difficulties we must face in our task of reaching the path of awakening. These difficulties will prevail so long as as we do not aspire to streamwinning here and now.

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³ On these 5 universal values, see SD 1.5 (2.7+2.8); SD 51.11 (2.2.3.4); SD 54.2e (2.3.2.5).

⁴ See Dh 182; DhA 3:235. *Manussattaṃ* is a common word: global search in CSCD.

⁵ See SD 29.6a (4.1.4.1); SD 36.1 (4.3.3.3).

⁶ M 129,24 f/3:169 f (SD 2.22).

⁷ On one “going from dark into dark” (*tamo,tama,parayana*): **Tamo,joti Puggala S** (S 3.21), SD 18.6.

Chiggaḷa,yuga Sutta 2

The 2nd Discourse on the Yoke With a Hole

S 56.48

The blind turtle, the one-hole yoke, the ocean and the winds

2 “Bhikshus, suppose that this great earth were **one mass of water**, and a man were to throw a **one-hole yoke**⁸ into it.

An easterly **wind** were to drive it westward; a westerly **wind** were to drive it eastward; a northerly **wind** were to drive it southward; a southerly **wind** were to drive it northward.⁹

Now, suppose there were a **blind turtle**. It would, on its own, come up to the surface only once a hundred years.

3 What do you think, bhikshus, would that blind turtle, coming up on its own to the surface once every hundred years, **[457]** insert its neck into that one-hole yoke?”

“It would be by chance (remotely),¹⁰ bhante, that that blind turtle, coming up to the surface once every hundred years, would insert its neck into that one-hole yoke.”

The rarity of the human state

4 “Even so, bhikshus, it is by chance that one obtains the human state; *by chance* that a Tathagata, an arhat, a fully self-awakened one arises in the world; *by chance* that the Dharma and Vinaya proclaimed by the Tathagata shines in the world.

5 You have obtained that human state, bhikshus; a Tathagata, an arhat, a fully self-awakened one has arisen in the world; the Dharma and Vinaya proclaimed by the Tathagata shines in the world.

Understanding the 4 truths frees us from suffering

6 Therefore, bhikshus—
 you should devote yourself know as it really is: ‘This is suffering’;
you should devote yourself know as it really is: ‘This is the arising of suffering’;
you should devote yourself know as it really is: ‘This is the ending of suffering’;
you should devote yourself know as it really is: ‘This is the way leading to the ending of suffering.’”

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⁸ “A one-hole yoke,” *chiggaḷa,yuga*: [SD 57.11 (1.2.1)].

⁹ This passage, not found in **Chiggaḷa,yuga S 1** (S 56.48,2)—which only mentions a “one-hole yoke” and the blind turtle—is also found in **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,24) [1.3.1]. However, only **Chiggaḷa,yuga S 2** here mentions “this great earth” as “one mass of water” (*mahā,paṭhavī ekōdakā assa*) [§2].

¹⁰ *Adhiccam idarṃ*. Comy: “This may arise by chance” (*idarṃ adhicc’uppatikarṃ*), provided that the yoke did not rot away, or the sea dry up, or the turtle die; meaning that this occurs “self-willed” (*yad’icchā,vasena*) (SA 3:302,11-14), meaning that it is up to the turtle to do what it likes. This phrase also qualifies the arising of the human state, the Buddha and his teaching: they arise “by chance” in the sense that we cannot take it for granted that they will always be the case every time. In fact, all these 3 states occur through the right causes and conditions, not by chance in the real sense of the word.