

Building Bridges for the Buddha



S. Dhammika
Essays on Buddhist Doctrines

Building Bridges for the Buddha



Some years ago, while visiting my younger brother in France he, his family and I made a day trip to the small town of Vaison-la-Romaine in the south-east of the country. The river that divides the town is spanned by a bridge built by the Romans in the 1st century AD, the first Roman bridge I have ever seen. This remarkable structure still takes traffic just as it has done for 2000 years, remarkable evidence of the skill of Roman engineering. The bridge got me thinking along these lines – Roman, Chinese and Islamic cultures were all bridge-building civilizations, but what about the civilizations shaped by Buddhism? Is it true, as is often said, that while some religions encouraged social engagement Buddhism acted as a damper to such impulses, or at least did nothing to encourage them. I knew that in the Samyutta Nikaya the Buddha said; “Those who would lay out a park or an orchard, construct a bridge, a place to drink, dig a well, or build a shelter, their merit always increases by day and by night. Established in Dhamma and endowed with virtue, they will go to heaven.” Of course I also knew that in the Jataka the Bodhisattva is said to have repaired roads, dug wells along wilderness thoroughfares, constructed bridges and established rest houses for the benefit of travellers. But did these words have any impact on later generations?



An ancient bridge in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka

Bridges are useful structures. They make travel easier and this assist trade, speeds up communication and generally make life easier for people. For the most part India was not a bridge building civilization although there are occasional references to these structures. The

Tipitaka for example, mentions a bamboo bridge and what it calls “a reliable bridge” which the commentary defines as one strong enough for a caravan, elephants or horses to cross. Apart from the Buddha’s exhortation, the fact that he frequently used crossing rivers as a metaphor for the spiritual endeavour, gave building bridges, paying for their construction or repairing them a particular attraction for early Buddhists.

A dozen or so Mahayana sutras mention the virtues of building bridges. In his book ‘The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture’ historian John Kieschnic quotes the Sarvagunapunyaśhetra Sutra in which the Buddha is said to have addressed Indra with these words; “There are seven types of great donations called ‘the field of merit.’ What are they? The first is to build stupas, monasteries, halls and other shelters. The second is to provide gardens, orchards, reservoirs, forests and cool places. The third is to donate medicine and to treat the sick. The fourth is to maintain boats for people to cross rivers. The fifth is

to construct bridges so that the weak and the ill can cross rivers. The sixth is to dig wells close to roads so that the thirsty can drink. And the seventh is to make latrines and other places of connivances.”



The covered bridge at Bogoda, Sri Lanka, 16th century

As Buddhism spread it took these expression of practical kindness with it. The Culavamsa, the latest of Sri Lanka’s chronical, record the names of several monarchs who built bridges out of religious motives. King Vijayarajasiha, for example, “had stone bridges put up where water made the road impassable, for the comfort of those coming and going.” The chronicle also gives the dimensions of several large and strong bridges constructed by King Devappatiraja. Similar projects were

initiated in Tibet. The versatile genius Thangtong Gyalpo (1385-1464) built over 50 bridges throughout Tibet and Bhutan. His most famous engineering feat was the Chakzam Bridge, a chain suspension bridge that crosses the wide Tsangpo River and which he built in 1430. It had a span of 137 metres, the links in the iron chain were each 30.48 cm long, and at



Thangtong Gyalpo's bridge in Paro, Bhutan

the time it was the only chain suspension bridge in the world. One of Thangtong Gyalpo's bridges which is still in use can be seen near Paro in Bhutan. It too is a chain suspension type and while its span is much less than that of the Chakzam Bridge it was just as helpful for

the people in the area.

Records show that building bridges as a religious practice became very popular in China and Japan. The 'Technical Skills' section of the 'History of Song', mentions a monk named Huaibing who constructed a pontoon bridge moored by eight anchors. Another work, the Sichuan tongzhi, reports a monk saying; "At first I thought that the greatest source of merit came from carving wooden statues and clay images of the Buddha. But one day I realized that the true ladder and ship of merit was to help other people and other beings." After this, the monk embarked on a program of bridge building. He is said to have travelled through the

country collecting funds which were used for the construction of 19 bridges. Chinese sources referring to bridge construction by monks or lay devote people frequently add that they did it out of “compassion pity for the difficulties of the people” or out of compassion “for people who drowned in boats while attempting to cross the river.”

The Japanese monk Doto (7th century) was renowned as a road, dam and bridge engineer. A stone inscription placed near the famous wooden Uji Bridge in Kyoto reads; “From ancient times until now nobody knew how to cross this river. Then came a servant of the Buddha by the name of Doto. In the second year of the Taika era (646) he built this bridge which allowed people and animals to cross. He hoped that all sentient beings would share his wish and realize the cause of suffering.” This bridge did not just embody design innovations it was also elegant, which made it a favourite subjects of artists throughout the centuries.



The Uji Bridge in Kyoto, first built in 646

The Uji Bridge was washed away several times over the centuries and rebuilt on the same plan, most recently in 1996.

One of Japan’s most famous pre-modern bridges, the elegant Spectacle Bridge in Nagasaki, was designed and built by the monk Mokusunyoujo in 1634. It was given its name because when its two arches are reflected in the water it looks like a pair of spectacles. This innovative

structure was the first stone-arched bridge in Japan and is still takes pedestrian traffic today. In 1982 a deluge washed away six other bridges on the Nakashima River and although the Spectacle Bridge was damaged it only needed minor repairs, thus demonstrating how well built it was.



The Spectacle Bridge, Nagasaki, 1634

Having taken this brief tour of the ancient Buddhist tradition of bridge building it is necessary to add something a little less inspiring and positive. It is a sad truth that this and many other practical expressions of kindness and helpfulness for the most part withered away in Buddhism centuries ago. By the beginning of the 20th century for example, Thangtong Gyalpo's wonderful bridge that had been a blessing for travellers for hundreds of years could no longer be used; no one had bothered to maintain or repair it. All attention was given to squandering resources on elaborate rituals and ceremonies supposedly to "make merit." After the Anuradhapura period there is only one example of a bridge being built for specifically religious reasons in Sri Lanka, the one in Bogoda village in Badulla district. People came to believe that the highest meritorious action was to construct huge Buddha statues, offer lavish danas or donate robes to monks who already had cupboards full of

them. In fact, it seems that the Buddha's teaching about how meritorious it is to repair roads, dig wells, build bridges, etc., was no longer given the attention it deserved. Related to this, people today have come to feel that the best way to "spread metta" is to think kind thoughts about others while sitting in meditation. This is not meant to say that meditation is unimportant, it is very important! But there are other ways to practice metta as well, and one of these is to do practical things that visibly and immediately improve people's lives. I hesitate to put myself into the mind of the Buddha, but I think he would rather see a clinic, a school, a library and yes even a bridge, built in the Buddha's honour than a huge cement statue of him.