The Bridge

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If you already are where you need to be, do you need a bridge? If there is nowhere to go, do you need a bridge? Have there been little bridges built across your synaptic gaps to make things faster? When we see the word “bridge” or think about bridges over which we have traveled or even card games we have played, images may spring to mind in the form of pictures or sounds or sensations in the bodymind. Now, of course, when that happens you all know what to do. Any moment of experience that arises which you know of – which there is a moment of knowing – is the opportunity presenting itself freely and for no reason whatsoever, it is presenting itself for you to practise or for Knowing, which is what you really are, to practise that moment of noticing. And it’s so simple! Feel the breath moving the arches of the ribs in and out. Feel the architecture of the bones and allow the bodymind to align and straighten itself. Feel the neck straighten and balance the skull. Open to peripheral vision and you have practised that moment. As you do that over and over and over again, practice becomes embodied. That means that many, indeed all, – over time – all the patterns that have been set in place in the bodymind are opened and you find that you are where you always were, which is in this moment and you have everything you need to Wake Up entirely, to Wake Up past all of your beliefs and stories about who you are and how the world is so that the bodymind is living the experience of this moment and you know that that is what you are doing. You know that this moment is being responded to skillfully in appropriate ways.

When the poster for this Dharma Assembly went up on the bulletin board there was a flurry of interest and it was about the word “bridge”. Now I didn’t explore it with people who asked what did it mean, but I surely got a sense that we were looking for shortcuts, [laughter from students] a way of getting from “here” to “there” faster and safely.

Well, that’s not what I meant [More laughter].

It actually started off because I was thinking about and experiencing from students the many stories that self-image – self-image being not an “evil twin”, not the “dark side”, not some sort of “assassin” to our wellbeing and hopes and dreams – but self-image simply as two words with a little line in between, used in this practice to describe all of the stories and views we have about how we are and how the world is. (And they are usually wrong to a greater or lesser degree.)

One of the very common ones that I experienced myself, and please bear in mind that I am not talking about any one student, I am talking about my own experience of things and it may be remarkable or maybe not so remarkable, maybe totally unremarkable because that is how things are, if it is reflective of your own experience. Because although we come in different heights and widths and smells and inclinations and hairdo's and foot size, the process of being a human being is the same and it has been the same for all human beings since the beginning of human beings, whenever that might have been, but that is a whole different story. So with the bridge, we want shortcuts.

We remember, or I remember, many, many times telling myself that I would never survive this round of zazen. Never. "I am going to die". In fact, one time I did manage to get myself into such a state, and bear in mind that this was early on, this was in 1988 and I think it was the first sesshin that I ever did. And at that sesshin, the Roshi, "Sensei" at the time, was the leader of the sitting, the Teacher, the jikido, the tenzo and he gave dokusan down in the basement – dank, dark, insect ridden basement at Daijozan. The stairway was so steep it was like going into a deep, black pit. One day during that particular sesshin, the Roshi was in the kitchen cooking and I came staggering out and I was blind with pain. I had gotten myself into such a contracted situation that I could barely manage to gasp out to him "I need to go to the hospital". [laughter from students] But when he reminded me what we were doing there I recognized that perhaps I was being a little extreme. But there can come points in our practice when we are sitting zazen, when we think that we are not going to be able to stand up at the end of the sitting round. And so I thought, "Well if you believe that, have I got a bridge for you." And when I mentioned this to the Roshi, how I thought it would be kind of neat to talk about self-image and its lies with the Oil Can Harry kind of super-duper salesman who apparently extracted money from many people – like say, he would sell them the Brooklyn Bridge – Roshi said "People won't know what that means" and I realized that he was right, absolutely right, that right now and into the future, that that may not be something that is familiar to people. So that had to be dropped. But the bridge kept haunting me because it is such a lovely word and it evokes many things: it evokes the arching of beautiful bridges over large rivers, large bodies of water, soaring, somewhat akin to the soaring towers that were built, the soaring steeples that were built which were apparently built because of a yearning after a heavenly experiencing, a yearning after that which could never be attained unless we handed ourselves and all of our possessions over to some middleman. But a bridge is more utilitarian than that.

Big bridges, seeing their own stories in their height, in the way that they do arch over, gracefully, to the other side wherever that may be. The problem, and I think it is a major problem with beautiful bridges, is that for example, we may be driving along in our car. We look out the window and we see ahead of us the bridge that is going to take us somewhere. We might think about how beautiful the surroundings are going to look from that bridge, what a gorgeous view we will have. And a sense of anticipation builds up. Then we get on the bridge, the car is on the bridge [O-sensei imitates the sound of tires on metal struts] the wheels vibrate. We look out the window and see vast expanses of cement rushing by at whatever the speed of the car is. It's just another damned road.

We can get excited in practice about the idea of a shortcut and we forget over and over again that we don't need a shortcut because we are not going anywhere. Everything that you need is right here, right now, including instruction. Everything. There is no other side to get to. It's not surprising that we have become confused because over the centuries there has been a lot of talk generated by various and sundry versions of self-image about "bridges to" the "lower world", the "upper world", the "world of light". And it seems that

always with these things there is a toll keeper and you will get the information when you have offered whatever is appropriate and that varies from tobacco to vast amounts of gold, again to that toll keeper, to the middleman (and I don't mean that as a totally male thing, not at all. But we could say, what could we say…person? But let's not get into that).

The bridge, the idea of the bridge seems to be one that is incredibly appealing for us because we want to save time and we want to get there faster. With practice we know because we are constantly told, there is nowhere to go. You do not need a bridge. You might need a guide, you need instruction, you need a Teacher, but you don't need a shortcut and there isn't one. And you have to do everything. Only you can enter into this moment fully and completely and all you need to do is notice what's going on in your own experiencing. When any experience whatsoever presents itself, feel the breath moving the bodymind in and out; feel the breath as air around the bodymind; feel the architecture of the bodymind; allow it to align itself; open the peripheral vision. That is all you need to do.

Now, on the poster for the Dharma Assembly there is a graphic and it was executed as a hanging scroll by Hakuin, one of the Dharma Ancestors and it was done in the 1760s. It's rectangular, about five times as wide as it is high and it shows what appears to be a bridge executed with a single brush stoke. In the background in the right-hand side, there are mountains and on that ink stroke are two figures, two human figures with sticks. It's entitled "Blind Man on a Long Bridge " and it is inscribed on the left "In both spiritual training and dealing with the world, keep in mind a blind man crossing a dangerous bridge."

"Blind Man on a Long Bridge " was found on Google and they describe it as "an elegantly composed depiction of two blind men feeling their way across a log bridge" and the inscription says in this one, "Caring for health and living life are like the blind man's round, long bridge. A mind that can cross over is the best guide." The reference to the blind echoes a common Zen theme: a person without knowledge of Buddhism is as confused as a blind man with a lantern. And what that…however it was put originally by Hakuin, means is pay attention. Pay attention to what is happening right now. We all have experience of thinking about something happening and having it happen. We may be walking in kinhin attending quite openly to this step, the feeling in the hips, the feeling in the spine, the sensations of the hands touching each other in the mudra, and then we think "I'm doing really well at this" and sometimes at that point we trip ourselves up because attention has become narrowed and focused on that "self", that little knot in space, that contraction of a "me" who is doing something well.

When you notice that sense of a "me", that contraction, recognize it as being a moment of experience, nothing more, nothing less, no more significant than the feeling of the foot on the floor; no more significant than the feeling of the hair growing on your head; no more significant than a drop of sweat running down your side. It is a moment of experience that has been noticed. So feel the breath, sit up straight, open the eye gaze. Practise **that** moment so that **this** moment and **this** moment and **this** moment are embodied, until you are the activity of this moment.

We want to bridge things. We want to get "there" faster, wherever "there" may be. There is a book publishing company which, I must say, brought a great deal of joy to my childhood because what that book publishing company did, was take great works and abridge them so that we could digest them more easily. My father would bring home boxes of these books which he picked up at auctions and sales and so forth and the excitement of opening a box and to see all of these different coloured bindings, to smell that kind of mildewy, cottagy, old book smell was wonderful. Here were some or at least a little bit of what the author

had written, which raises questions, of course, about writing, about works that express themselves with words on paper. When we are reading the abridged version, why are we doing that? Now it could be, as in the case mentioned, that was what was there and as a child I would read anything. Even if I had read it before and there was nothing else to read I would read it over again. But when we abridge works, what do we think we're doing? Are we reading what the author wrote? No. Are we reading the essence of what the author wrote? No. We are reading little bits and pieces so that we can have a general idea so that we can say "Oh, I read that." Or we could pass the exam. So if there were a promise that there would be a bridge for you to get "there" faster, beware of it just as the blind men on the round log bridge have to be careful, feeling as the foot steps forward, what's going on, allowing through that moment of experiencing the step, the pressures on the foot, the senses responding to what's happening in that moment, and make the next step. That can only be done from fully experiencing and fully exploring this moment and this is what you are learning to do with practice.

There can be no shortcuts. Again, there is nowhere to go. This is it and you have everything that you need to open fully and completely to who you really are, before and prior to, all of the stories and patterns that have become engraved, as it were, or patterned into the bodymind. Now, you are not the bodymind because the bodymind is how we know experiencing, it is what we experience with. Multiplicity or as the Roshi said in a recent teisho series "the thousands of myriads" of details can be known and each one of them can be used by you to open fully to this moment.

When students come here to practise, it is only to be expected that we bring with us our usual view of how the world is and how we are because that is what we've learned, that's what we've been taught. Now, I bet everybody in this room – but of course I am not a bettor, I am a monk, I don't bet. If I were a betting monk I would be that everybody in this room has had many moments of Waking Up past that usualness throughout their lives, of seeing that "Well, things are not really as I am being told that they are, really, and I really can't get a straight answer to the simple question of 'what's it all about and what's going on?'". We may sincerely open the doors of practice or enter the gates of practice with a pure heart and great sincerity and not notice that in fact we are still propelled by many of the patterns and we want to overlay the practice environment with what we know, or what we think we know. And it can be very strange for us when we notice, for example, that being a nice, polite person who says, "G'day, how are you?" can be and is met by the monastic who answer the front door, with silence. That can make us a little jittery. We want something to bridge that distance so we might extend our hand. We are going to shake our hands. And there is no monastic hand in evidence. Then we might get told that, well, one of the reasons that people started this greeting of shaking hands was so that they could frisk each other to see that they didn't have weapons. That's where the handshake came from. So we have these toys that we use to cover uncomfortable moments removed from us and we are left standing there with all sorts of thoughts running through us about "What are we doing here? What's wrong with them? How come they're so dour? How come they never smile?" And that question gets answered in a short time or a long time, depending. And we start to learn that the monastery, this practice environment, has absolutely no relationship to our usual social understandings of how things are.

After the discomfort passes this can bring a great sense of relief to us because we do not need to bridge time. We can just stand there with our hands in the shashu mudra and watch and notice our own experience, including a sense of a watcher or a knower, which is a moment of experience and can be practised with.

No one can pay a toll and buy their way in here either. There is no selling of dispensations, no little trinkets

to hang on ourselves to make us feel “spiritual”. In fact we are asked to remove our little trinkets so that we are there, barefaced, barefoot and transparent…and one of my favourite phrases of the Roshi: “With our soft, white underbelly hanging out” [laughter from students]. This can make us feel very vulnerable. But of course, in order to feel vulnerable there has to be some sort of danger, wouldn’t you think? And this is the safest place you could be. Nothing is expected of you other than that you do your practice. You can’t buy your way in; you can’t wiggle your way in; you can’t sneak in, but the sincerity of one foot after the other; the sincerity of doing our best not to collapse into whatever patterns are running is all that we need and that can only be done in this moment. And you are the only one that can do it. It’s your bum on the cushion; it’s your feet on the zabuton, your ankles, your knees. For 2600 years individuals just like you have done this practice without a bridge because you don’t need a bridge to get where you are going when you already are where you are. And if you should think differently, heh heh heh….have I got a bridge for you.

Thank you for listening.