

Digging the Dharma: A Response to Max Moerman's "The Death of the Dharma: Buddhist Sutra Burials in Early Medieval Japan"

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Max Moerman's study of sutra burials provides us with an unusual avenue for looking at religion in the late Heian era of Japan. It was a fascinating time: many consider this to have been a period of high cultural achievement in Japan, yet at the same time there was a creeping feeling of fear and anxiety that religion and the very world itself were inexorably degenerating. New problems demanded new solutions, and some Japanese Buddhists came up with a rather straightforward answer: if the Buddhist teachings were about to disappear, then why not bury them safely so they could be retrieved later when the time was right? Moerman's project allows us to go beyond the assumed didactic purposes of texts to see their many other functions, both as embodiments of religious power and as material *objects* to be interacted with.

With the world falling apart, necessity was the mother of religious invention, and thus people came up with the idea of burying books; but another way to look at it is to keep in mind the proverb of Chicago native son Rahm Emanuel: "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste." Emanuel was thinking of politics, but crises such as the Final Dharma Age are also rare religious opportunities, if harnessed skillfully. As Moerman shows, sutra burial could be utilized to procure a staggering range of benefits: the ritual interment of texts potentially provided faith healing, supernatural protection, children and heirs, karmic merit, a stable life, longevity, a heavenly afterlife, the salvation of relatives, and even (eventually) buddhahood itself. Another range of benefits, not much explored in Moerman's essay, were more social and immediate. Sutra burials were often public affairs, especially when carried out on the scale of Michinaga's, which is to say they had a strongly performative aspect. All the meticulous and expensive sutra copying, the elaborate rites, the prayers for the emperor and others, and the visits to various shrines demonstrated to onlookers and the wider audience of Japan (and the unseen but observant spirit world) the wealth and status of the donor, forged or reinforced bonds of relationship, and displayed loyalty to favored deities, bodhisattvas, and buddhas. Loyalty in the Japanese religious world is typically part of an exchange transaction: I venerate you, and you provide me with the practical benefits which I seek. Sutra burials thus were tools for improving life in the here-and-now, as well as for ensuring the survival of Buddhism in the (very) long term.

Once religious innovation begins, it may lead in all sorts of interesting directions. The creation of written Buddhist texts produced the ability to (eventually, when there was a reason) ritually bury them. The development of sutra burial led to the possibility of not only preserving the dharma but also accruing benefits for oneself. And as Buddhist "theologies" shifted, the religious technology of sutra burial could be easily adapted to fit new needs, such as the shift from Miroku to Amida worship or the need for protection from newly arising threats. Completely unforeseen results can arise from any innovative religious act: for one thing, when dug up prematurely, sutra burials can teach contemporary scholars about bygone days in Japan, something the donors certainly never intended. We can see the repurposing of religious practices and objects in many different places: Qur'anic inscriptions are hung from rear-view mirrors to prevent road accidents, bibles are used to teach English, vipassana is

marshaled to fight stress, and yoga keeps you fit. Objects, practices, and beliefs mean little in and of themselves—context and usage are key.

Sutra burials are particularly rich sites for considering Buddhism because they displace the role of meditation practice—just one among a constellation of normal Buddhist activities—and return texts from the philosophical to the material world, where we can see how they are manipulated for a variety of functions. But while interesting in their own right, the real value of studying these rituals is that they force us to consider how a similar multiplicity of aims and uses must exist in the performance of other religious rituals. Thus an act like meditation must be seen not merely as providing (hopefully) a measure of insight and calm, but also as a social act that enacts identity, relates to status and cultural roles, reinforces particular worldviews, and exists within a matrix of social relations, individual hopes and fears, economic situations, and much more. This multiplicity must also be expected in other practices, such as preaching, ordination, keeping precepts, and so on; and multiple motives and circumstances apply beyond the Buddhist realm, such as in attendance of the Mass, glossolalia, puja, keeping kosher, and many other practices.

While Moerman's focus is on the sutras and containers that are being buried, there is another aspect of materiality here that is not fully explored: these objects are being put into the ground. This naturally raises the issue of how the earth is understood and interacted with in Buddhism. One striking element of the Lotus Sutra—the scripture most commonly buried in Japan—is the role of the earth in the story. The earth is a place that protects and produces great spiritual beings and teachings in the narrative of the sutra. For example, in chapter eleven a magnificent jeweled treasure stupa holding a primordial buddha of the past rises from the ground, and in chapter fifteen billions of bodhisattvas spring out of the earth to proclaim their unwavering protection of the dharma and those who follow it. There were probably geomantic implications to where sutras were buried, and because of their powerful nature (and the rituals used to inter them) the sutras may have caused the consecration of the ground they were stored in. After all, sutra burial was not just transforming the donors and the future recipients of these texts—it was altering the landscape itself as well. Thus the materiality of the surroundings in which the ritual takes place is also returned to our vision by attention to these rituals.

Although it is from a very different Buddhist culture, it is hard not to associate these sutra burials with the terma tradition of Tibet, which also developed in the eleventh century. Some Tibetan Buddhists dealt with their own changing religious situation by allegedly digging up teachings from the ground—texts that had supposedly been hidden centuries earlier by the great teacher Padmasambhava and his consort Yeshe Tsogyal for use by future generations, when the appropriate time came. Retrieving these buried dharmic treasures allowed their finders to produce innovations while wrapping them in the mantle of tradition; they could be used to assert the authority of the finders.

Thus the earth can both produce and receive the dharma, as the situation demands. The simple act of placing texts into the ground turns out to carry traces of ancient India and China, Shinto worship and Buddhist eschatology, concern for the future millions of lifetimes hence and political calculations in the hear-and-now of medieval Japan.