

A *Dhâraṇî* Culture Shared Between Eastern India and the Wider Asian Region

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Abstract

The ritual of *dhâraṇî* practice has a long history in various Buddhist traditions. *dhâraṇî*, generally known as a mantra, is a functioning code believed to provide protection and the power to generate merit for Buddhist devotees when it is recited, stamped, or copied in a ritual process. Around and during the second half of the first millennium, one of these *dhâraṇîs*, the *Bodhigarbhâlaṅkāralakṣa-dhâraṇî* or the *dhâraṇî* of the Hundred Thousand Ornaments of the Essence of Awakening, was widely circulated in the Eastern-Gangetic Plain and Eastern India. This Sanskrit *dhâraṇî*, inscribed on stone slabs and stamped on multiple clay sealings, was recovered in numerous archaeological sites in Odisha, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh. However, the practice of invoking its benefits was not limited to these regions. Traces of this *dhâraṇî*, in the form of clay sealings or metal stamps, were found in the north-western region of Pakistan, and in Afghanistan. Fragments of this *dhâraṇî* in Uyghur letters were also recovered in the Tarim Basin. The *dhâraṇî* has been transcribed into Chinese characters in *Chang'an* and preserved in the Chinese Buddhist Canon which was then circulated widely in China including Korea, and Japan. Similarly, the *dhâraṇî* was transcribed into Tibetan and preserved in various Tibetan Kanjurs. To the southeast of India, the *dhâraṇî* found its way through the Bay of Bengal to the Thai-Malay Peninsula in Malaysia and the island of Java in Indonesia. Over there, the *dhâraṇî* was stamped on clay sealings, and engraved onto a gold foil respectively. Therefore, from this example of the transmission of the *Bodhigarbhâlakâralakṣa-dhâraṇî* alone, it can be deduced that the ideology of merit-making in Buddhism by way of specific ritual practices is shared in different regions. Even though the rituals might have taken different expressions in different locations, the quest for merit in desiring a better life and protection remains a common aspiration between people in Eastern India and the wider Asian region over the centuries and is still relevant today.

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