

SACRED SPACES



by

A handwritten signature in black ink, followed by a small circular seal containing Chinese characters.

Richard Murai

*Moon Festival
Jokhang Temple, Lhasa, Tibet 2006*

These photographs are selections from an ongoing project of documenting sacred sites. Photographing these revered places stems from my interest in exploring diverse religions, their history, culture, iconography and people. An avowed generalist, I enjoy merging the subtle qualities of the landscape tradition and environmental portraiture within a documentary context.

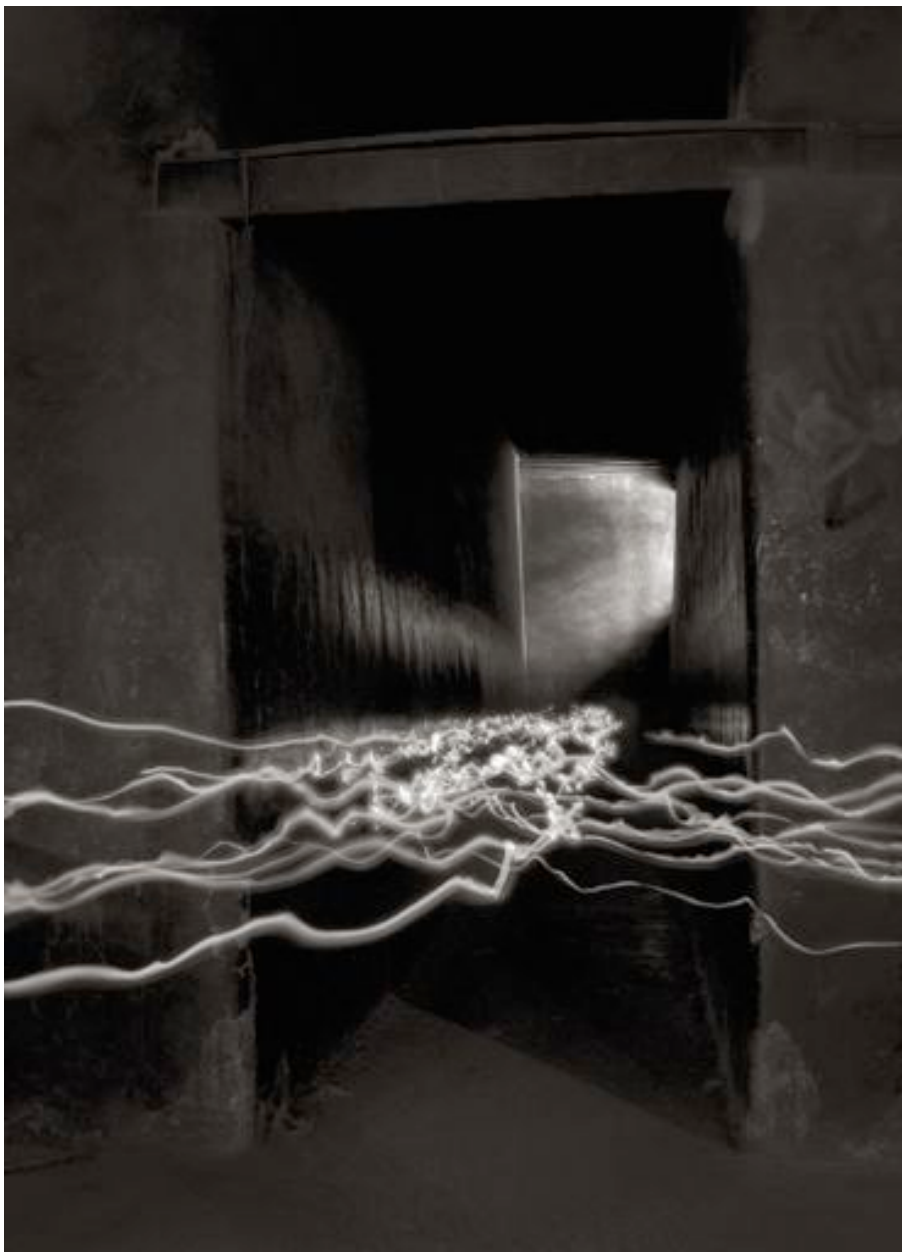
While working on the Cambodia/Angkor Wat project [featured in *LensWork* #47, Jun-July 2003] I arranged a one week side-trip to produce the Myanmar (Burma) images in this portfolio. The images of Tibet were made during a three-week visit to China in June, 2006.

As a culture-shock junkie I want to possess a fresh naivete' so that I can experience a region with a fairly clear slate on which to draw my impressions. I've learned that preconceived creative ideas typically fail to materialize, so other than researching the history and establishing an itinerary, I prefer not to study existing photographs produced from that region.

To maximize my time I always hire a driver and guide. Whether it's escaping the stifling mid-day heat and humidity, conversing with a wary subject, or negotiating entry to restricted areas — an assertive and knowledgeable guide is invaluable.

I carry the least amount of equipment possible, so that I can work quickly and discreetly. After years of using large format, I now use a medium format camera (Pentax 645N) with three lenses. Along with film, filters and a small flash, everything except a tripod fits in a small bag that I can easily take through airport security, or comfortably and safely carry in the field. I also carry an old Polaroid SX70 so that I can offer a snapshot to the locals that I photograph. The immediacy of watching their image develop is always a fun and exciting event for everyone to share. For many in the developing world, this may be the only image they've seen of themselves.

Working in remote locations can have challenging moments. Soon after arriving in Tibet, my camera slipped off the tripod and slammed onto a monastery kitchen's well-worn granite floor. The camera was unscathed, but along with traces of ground-in yak butter, my favored lens had broken in half! Now without it, I was forced to compensate, see differently, and create more with less. The solemn environment helped quell the profanities, and my panic and anger were soon replaced by a sense of calm and acceptance. More than mere architecture, I learned that solace and creative inspiration can truly be realized in these sacred spaces.



*Circumnambulation: Butter Lamps
Jokhang Temple, Lhasa, Tibet 2006*



*Interior, Hanging Prayer Scarves (Khana)
Potala Palace, Lhasa, Tibet 2006*



*Clockwise Swastika
Samye Monastery, Yarlong Sampo, Tibet 2006*



Touching Earth: Hand of Buddha
Schwezigon Paya, Bagan, Myanmar 2004



Offerings
Drepung Monastery, Lhasa, Tibet 2006



Monastery Kitchen
Sera Monastery, Lhasa, Tibet 2006



*The Nangkor Kora (Pilgrim Circuit)
Jokhang Temple, Lhasa, Tibet 2006*



Sun and Moon: Wisdom and Compassion
Gyantse, Tibet 2006



*Fresh Breeze, Mani Wheels
Tashilunpo Monastery, Lhasa, Tibet 2006*



Reclining Buddha
Manuha Paya, Bagan, Myanmar 2004



Butter Lamps (Chomay)
Tashilhunpo Monastery, Lhasa, Tibet 2006



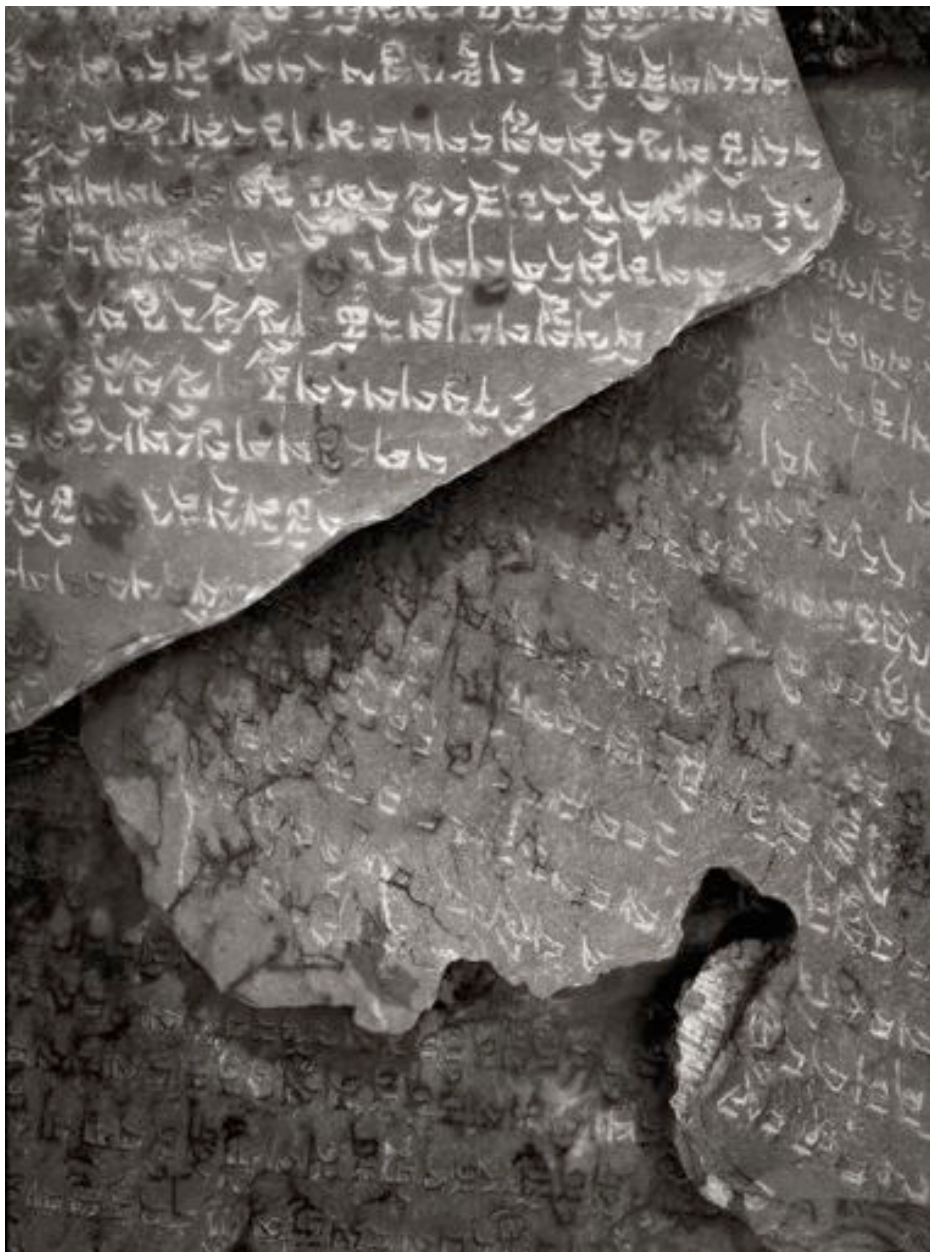
Prayer and Devotion
Jokhang Temple, Lhasa, Tibet 2006



*Mani Wheel
Jokhang Temple, Lhasa, Tibet 2006*



*Wall Detail: Vitarka Mudra (The First Sermon)
Drepung Monastery, Lhasa, Tibet 2006*



*Mani Stones, West Gate
Potala Palace, Lhasa, Tibet 2006*