

PRAYER BEADS

What Are They?

Prayer beads are used by members of various religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and the Bahá'í Faith to mark the repetitions of prayers, chants or devotions, such as the rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Catholicism, and dhikr (remembrance of God) in Islam. The number of beads on the strand varies by religion or use.

The English word bead derives from the Old English noun *bede* which means a prayer. The oldest image of a string of beads in a religious context and resembling a string of prayer beads is found on the fresco of the "Adorants" (or "Worshippers") in the prehistoric settlement of Akrotiri, Santorini (Thera,) Greece dating from the 17th c. BCE (c. 1613 BCE). The exact origins of prayer beads remain uncertain, but their earliest historical use probably traces to Hindu prayers in India. Buddhism probably borrowed the concept from Hinduism.

Materials used to make prayer beads are varied (e.g., glass, stone, wood). Whether made of simple or precious materials, prayer beads reveal highly sophisticated and complex arrangements and structure rooted in their symbolic meanings and ritual use. Prayer beads are religious objects of a particularly personal nature, and so the materials often reflect both the status and taste of the beads' owner.

Tibetan Buddhist Prayer Beads or Japamala/Mala



What Is It and How Is It Used?

A Japamala or Mala (Sanskrit: *mālā*, meaning garland) is a string of prayer beads commonly used by Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and some Sikhs for the spiritual practice known in Sanskrit as *japa*, which

means, “to recite”. This mala with wood beads, purchased in Bodhgaya, is believed to be meant for use in Buddhist meditation.

Malas are used to help keep the mind focused during meditation while reciting, chanting, or repeating a mantra, as the practitioner sits in silence. Mantras are typically repeated hundreds or even thousands of times and the mala is used as a tool to help count mantras. One repetition is usually said for each bead while turning the thumb clockwise around each bead, though some traditions practice with a counterclockwise motion. When arriving at the guru bead, the practitioner turns the mala around and then goes back in the opposing direction.

What Is the History of Malas?

Malas were first created in India 3000 years ago with roots in Hinduism and Buddhism. Malas can be made of many materials including gemstones, rudraksha seeds, sandalwood or wood from the Bodhi tree.

What Are the Components of a Mala?

Malas typically consist of 108 beads with a 109th bead (often called a guru bead), and a tassel.

108 Beads

There are numerous explanations why there are 108 beads in both Buddhist and Hindu traditions. One explanation for the 108 beads in Buddhist tradition is that they signify the 108 mortal desires of mankind. The beads are symbolic of purifying these 108 causes of negative karma.

The number is attributed to the Mokugenji (soapberry seed) Sutra wherein Shakyamuni, the original Buddha, instructed King Virudhaka to make beads and recite the Three Jewels of Buddhism:

- the Buddha, the fully enlightened one
- the Dharma, the teachings expounded by the Buddha
- the Sangha, the monastic order of Buddhism that practice the Dharma

These wooden beads may be made from the Bodhi tree, or at least the wood is in reference to the Bodhi tree, a tree that the Buddha sat under to meditate. Certain materials are thought to impact the merit accrued, especially when associated with a specific type of Buddhist practice. For instance, turquoise is highly regarded by Tibetans as a jewel, so turquoise beads are considered one of the best and most effective materials for accruing merit with prayer beads. Beads made of carved bone are thought to be most suitable for practices related to wrathful deities.

The Guru Bead

The guru bead, also called a sumeru or bindi, is the bead that the tassel attaches directly to. When strung on a necklace, the guru bead is often the 109th bead. Counting should always begin with a bead

next to the guru bead. The guru bead is said to pay homage to the guru from who the student has received a mantra, symbolizing the student-guru relationship.

The Tassel

The tassel is ornamental, but in some religions a tassel may represent a lotus blossom and represent enlightenment.

Sources and Additional Background

[The National](#) | Muslim prayer beads: what they are and what they are used for

[Prayer Beads](#) | A history of prayer beads throughout the world

[Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#) | *Islamic prayer beads*, Syrian, 19th century

[Met Museum](#) | *Strand of Beads*, 9th–12th century, Excavated in Iran, Nishapur

[Rubin Museum](#) | Count Your Blessings: The Art of Prayer Beads in Asia

[Rubin Museum](#) | *Prayer Beads*, 19th Century

[Wikipedia](#) | Buddhist Prayer Beads

Questions and Activities

1. What do you do to help your concentration?
2. How would you describe the feel of the beads in your hand?
3. When you are able to touch the beads, how might it change your initial impression of them?

Collection Connections

- [Figure of Portuguese missionary](#), c. 1880. Unknown artist, China, 2004.261.35.
- [Portrait of Charlotte of France](#), c. 1522. Jean Clouet the Younger, 35.7.98.
- [A Hermit Praying](#), 1670. Gerrit Dou, 87.11.