

# Beads of Intent

The use of prayer beads in Tibetan and Mongolia

Nicholas Breeze Wood



One of the most important parts of both Tibetan Buddhism and Bonpo shamanism is the recitation of mantras, which are spells or words of power. During a lifetime a practitioner may say millions of these mantras, some of which can be over 100 syllables long, and to keep track of the total number of these, they are generally counted on a set of prayer beads called a *Mala*, or *Tenwa* in Tibet or *Shu-Zhu* in China.

## SOUNDS OF POWER

Mantras are spells or sounds of power and are specific for each of the beings of the Tibetan or Bonpo cosmos. In reciting the mantra of a Buddha or being which a practitioner has been ritually empowered into working with, they identify with that being totally and 'arise as' or actually *become* that being during the visualisations that are performed during the saying of the mantra.

Probably the most famous mantra in Tibetan Buddhism is that of Chenresig, or Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

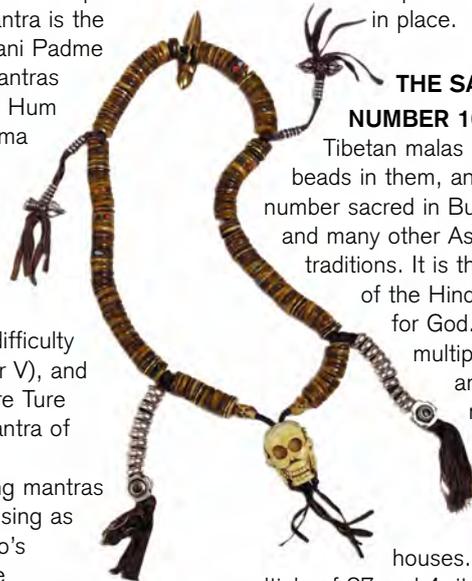
Chenresig's mantra is the famous 'Om Mani Padme Hum'. Other mantras include 'Om Ah Hum Vajra Guru Padma Siddhi Hum' (which is said 'Om Ah Hung Benza Guru Pema Siddi Hum' as Tibetans have difficulty saying the letter V), and 'Om Tare Tuttare Ture Swaha', the mantra of Green Tara.

Besides using mantras for help with arising as the Buddha who's practice you are empowered into and which you perform on a daily basis, as spells or sounds of power, mantras can also be recited for other purposes such as to appease spirits who are hostile, to increase power, life energy or wealth, to overcome obstacles, or to tame dangerous spirits or powers by forceful means.

The beads of a mala are moved one bead at a time, each time the mantra is said, and over time the beads become worn by the movements of the fingers, making an old mala a thing of spiritual and physical beauty. The repeated use of a mala for saying mantras also builds up the intent of the power of the practice for the practitioner, and the mala becomes a powerful object for them in their practice.

## A FEW MALA BASICS

Using a mala to help you recite mantras is quite straight forward, but the traditional specifics will vary from one tradition to the next. To begin with, the mala is held with gentleness and respect, generally in the left hand. One bead is counted for each recitation of the mantra, beginning with the first bead after the *guru bead*, which is the larger, more decorative bead often found at the end of a mala. The first bead is held between the index finger and thumb, and with each count the thumb pulls another bead in place.



## THE SACRED NUMBER 108

Tibetan malas have 108 beads in them, and 108 is a number sacred in Buddhism and many other Asian sacred traditions. It is the number of the Hindu names for God. As a multiple of 12 and 9, it represents the nine planets in the 12 zodiac houses. As a multiple of 27 and 4, it also represents the four quarters of the moon in each of the 27 lunar mansions or constellations.

In Pranayana Yoga it is calculated that a human being takes 21,600 breaths in a 24-hour cycle consisting of 60 periods of 360 breaths; a 12-hour day cycle therefore equals 10,800 breaths. There are 54 letters in

Above: a Tibetan man wears a mala around his neck, together with necklaces of Sherpa corla dn dzi stones.

Left: Mala made from human bone complete with counter beads and a carved skull shaped human bone guru bead.

the Sanskrit alphabet, and both have a male and female aspect making 54 times 2 or 108. And if you want a few more cosmic meanings to the number, the diameter of the sun is 108 times the diameter of the earth, the distance from the sun to the earth is 108 times the diameter of the sun and the average distance of the moon from the earth is 108 times the diameter of the moon. The 108 beads also ensure that at least a hundred mantra recitations have been completed in a full mala.

To aid in mantra counting, on many malas there are divider beads every 27 beads, or in other words at the quarter and half way points of the mala. These are generally of a different colour and normally larger than the 108 normal beads of the mala, and they are not counted during recitations of the mantra.

There may also be a pair of counter strings tied to the mala which act as a sort of simple abacus, each string of these pair is threaded with 10 small beads, generally made of silver, gold or bronze, and these are used to count the completed mantra cycles and the tens of completed mantra cycles. So at the end of 108 mantras, one counter on the one string (often ending with a tiny representation of a Tibetan Buddhist bell) is moved, and when 10 times 108 mantra malas have been recited and all 10 beads on this string have been moved, a bead on the other string (often ending with a tiny representation of a Tibetan Buddhist vajra or thunderbolt) is moved.

When all 10 beads have been moved on the string ending with the vajra it means that 10,800 mantras have been said. Many malas also have an additional counter bead which is removable and clipped between the beads on the mala proper. This bead is moved once every 10800 mantras, and by counting around the mala how many beads it has travelled, the practitioner knows how many mantras they have said in total, for example, if it is placed after the 36th bead of a mala the practitioner has completed at least 360,000 mantras (388,800 in actuality).

Long malas with 108 beads are used by most practicing Tibetan Buddhists, but there are also

smaller wrist malas generally of 27 beads, four circuits of which total the 108 beads of a full mala.

#### DIFFERENT TYPES OF MALA

Malas are made from many types of beads. Bodhi seed are generally considered auspicious for any practice or mantra, as it was the tree under which the historical Buddha became enlightened, red sandalwood beads and lotus seeds are also widely recommended for general use.

Other popular beads used are glass, semi-precious stones, coral, metals, shell and bone. People choosing these malas tend to have specific reasons for using them.

For instance, the beads used to count mantras intended to appease should be of crystal, pearl or mother of pearl, and should at least be clear or white in colour. Mantras counted on these beads serve to clear away obstacles, such as illness and other calamities, and purify the practitioner.

The beads used with mantras intended to increase life energy or wealth are often of gold, silver, copper or lotus seeds.

The beads used with mantras which are intended to overcome or tame other beings should be made of sandal wood or other fragrant materials.

Subduing mantras should be said using Rudraksha seed<sup>1</sup> or bone (ideally human) malas, as should mantra practices for wrathful beings such as Mahakala.

There are certain things not to do with a mala, as they are considered disrespectful. These include wearing a mala just for show, stepping on a mala, hanging a mala from your belt, throwing a mala in a playful way and carrying a mala while going to the toilet.

#### DIVINING WITH MALAS

In Tibetan Buddhism and Mongolian shamanism, malas are used as tools of divination. Here is one simple method of using them for this purpose.

Visualise your question and then take hold of the mala in both hands at two random points around it. Count off the beads by threes

moving the hands towards each other, until you are left with either one, two or three beads between the hands. Remember this number and repeat the whole process again. Now you will have two numbers, which are either one, two or three.

One bead is called a *Falcon* - a positive sign showing good luck, success and support, and success in legal affairs.

Two beads are called a *Raven* - this is a negative sign showing bad luck, misfortune and lack of support and illness.

Three beads are called a *Snow Lion* - a sign that indicates that although you are supported by the spirits, you can expect slow but stable accomplishments, but



Rudraksha seed mala.



Mala made from human bone with red coral divider beads, and complete with counter beads hanging from it.

neutral results in business, although some weakness on the part of your enemies.

### READING THE MALA

You have two numbers, one for each time you divided the mala. Here are the results for each of the possible variations, first time after second time.

#### 1: Falcon after Falcon

Everything is favourable.

#### 2: Falcon after Raven

Every wish will be fulfilled; you will escape from danger.

#### 3: Falcon after Snow Lion.

Spirit's help is at hand, make an offering to the spirits.

#### 4: Raven after Falcon

A bad omen, contagious disease will come. If you worship the gods and dispel the demons, it can be prevented.

#### 5: Raven after Raven.

The cloudless sky will be darkened, there will be loss of wealth.

#### 6: Raven after Snow Lion

Mediocre results, and possible legal problems.

#### 7: Snow Lion after Falcon.

Rice plants grow on sandy hills, widows obtain husbands, poor men get rich.

#### 8: Snow Lion after Raven

Turquoise fountains spring forth and fertilise the ground; unexpected food can be found, and you can escape from danger.

#### 9: Snow Lion after Snow Lions

Prosperity is at hand in all things.

The use of malas for prayer and magic is a deeply ancient practice many thousands of years old, and far older than Buddhism. Working with a mala is a way of increasing both intent and the power of the visual imagination. You may not be drawn to using a mantra, but even without their use a mala can be used for simple practices.

One way I often use a mala is as a part of a healing ceremony. Using it this way I visualise the sick

person I am working with being completely well and healthy 108 times, constructing a clear mental, intentful picture of them with good clear energy each time, before I move on to the next bead, and not moving on to the next bead until that image of them being strong and well is fixed firmly in my focused imagination.

As a way of developing intent this technique could be used for other purposes, and that building of intent is perhaps the greatest magic of these beads of power.

Notes 1: Rudraksha seeds are the dried berries of the Rudraksha tree, which grows in Indonesia, Nepal and India; they are round and pitted, with granular protuberances, and

are sized between a quarter of an inch to more than an inch in diameter.

### PHOTOS:

Left: mala of bone inset with turquoise and red coral and with 17th C 'Sherpa coral' divider beads. Right: an open ended turquoise and red coral mala, with coral counter and divider beads. Below: a bone mala inset with coral; and turquoise and with an amber guru bead. Large image - a Tibetan man carries a mala made from wooden beads.

