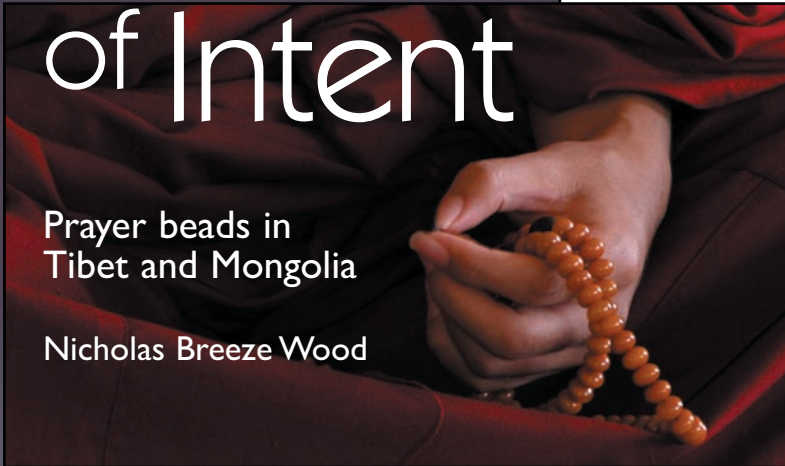


# Beads of Intent

Prayer beads in  
Tibet and Mongolia

Nicholas Breeze Wood



Beads have been associated with prayer and magic for thousands of years. In fact the word bead itself actually comes from the Anglo Saxon words *bidden* (to prayer) and *bede*

(prayer). It is thought that the use of prayer beads in Europe may have come from contact with Islamic prayer bead traditions, the Muslims themselves having been inspired by contact with the much older Hindu and

Buddhist prayer bead traditions.

In Europe prayer beads are generally called rosary, (from the Latin word *rosarium* meaning rose garden) and it is interesting that the rose is associated with prayer beads in both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions as well; the earliest Hindu prayer beads were called *japamala* (rose chaplet) and *mala*, a common Tibetan name for prayer beads, is sanskrit for 'a garland of flowers.'

## TIBETAN BEADS

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 their 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. These are called a *mala*, or *tenwa* in Tibet or *shu-zhu* in China.

## SOUNDS OF POWER

Mantras 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, the practitioner

identifies with that being totally, and 'arises as' or actually *becomes* 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 *Chenrezi*, (also called *Avalokiteshvara*), the Bodhisattva of compassion. Chenrezi's mantra is the famous '*Om Mani Padme Hum*'. Other mantras include '*Om Ah Hum Vajra* (pronounced *Benza*) *Guru Padma Siddhi Hum*' - the mantra of Padmasambhava, and '*Om Tare Tuttare Ture Swaha*' - the mantra of Green Tara.

Besides using mantras for help with 'arising' as the being for whom you have received an empowerment, they can also be recited for other purposes such as to empower a place or object, to pacify a hostile spirit, to increase personal power, life energy or wealth, to overcome obstacles, or to bind dangerous spirits or powers to your will.

Each time the mantra is said the beads of a mala are moved forward one bead, and over time the beads

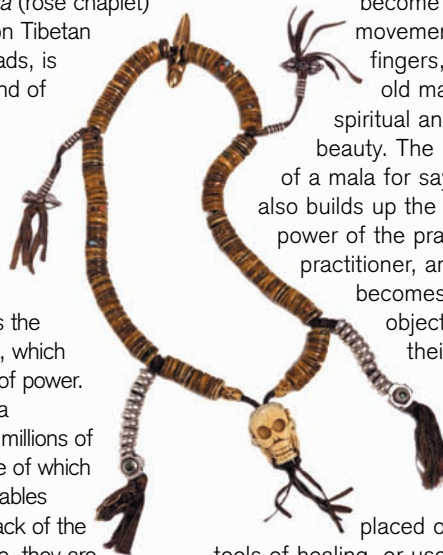
become worn by the movements of the fingers, making an old mala a thing of spiritual and physical beauty. The repeated use

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.

Old, well-used and empowered malas are sometimes placed on people as tools of healing, or used as objects for blessing.

## A FEW MALA BASICS

Using a mala to help you recite mantras is quite straightforward, but the 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



*Left:* a Tibetan man wears a mala around his neck, together with necklaces of Sherpa coral and *dzi* stones. *Above:* Mala made from human bone, complete with counter beads and a carved skull-shaped human bone 'guru bead'. *Between the pages:* mala of bone inset with turquoise and red coral and with C17th 'Sherpa coral' divider beads.



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 108

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 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

## During their lifetime a practitioner may say millions of mantras, some of which can be over 100 syllables long

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, and these are used to count the completed mantra cycles and the 10's of completed mantra cycles. So at the end of 108 mantras, one counter on the one string (often ending with a tiny *dorje*) 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 *dilbru* bell) is moved. When all 10 beads have been moved on the string ending with the bell, 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 10,800 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).

### TYPES OF MALA

Malas are made from many materials. Bodhi seeds are 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-

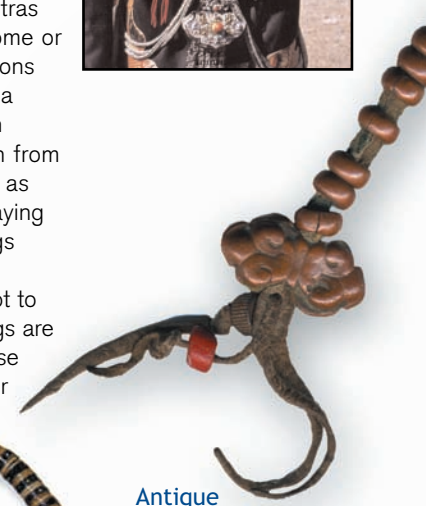
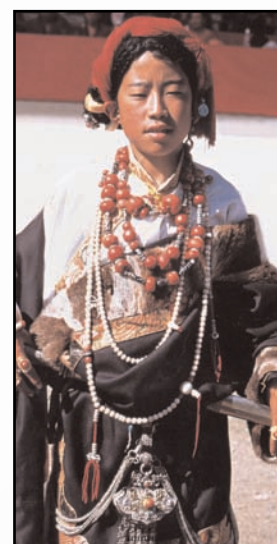
precious stones, coral, metals, shell and bone. People choosing these malas tend to have specific reasons for using them.

For instance, the beads used to count mantras intended to please Buddhas should be of crystal, pearl or mother-of-pearl, and mantras counted on these are said to clear away obstacles, such as illness and other problems, 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 powerful spirits or demons should be made of Rudraksha seed<sup>1</sup> or bone (ideally human bone, each bead being taken from the 3rd eye point of a skull), as should malas used for the saying of mantras for wrathful beings such as Mahakala.

There are certain things not to do with a mala, as these things are considered disrespectful. These include wearing a mala just for



Antique set of copper counters with a *dorje* end



Mala made from human bone discs cut from skulls, with red coral divider beads, and showing counter beads hanging from it



show, stepping on a mala, hanging a mala from your belt, throwing a mala in a playful way and taking a mala into a toilet.

### MALA DIVINING

In Tibetan Buddhism and Mongolian shamanism, malas are used as tools of divination. Here is one simple traditional 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 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 results, but neutral results in business, although some weakness on the part of your enemies.

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 in bad land, widows get married, 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 Lion**

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, then letting go of the image and building it again with the next bead, until it has been built 108 times.

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.

Nicholas Breeze Wood has been a shamanic practitioner and craftsman for many years. His work is shown on [www.nicholaswood.net](http://www.nicholaswood.net) He also runs [3Worlds.co.uk](http://3Worlds.co.uk) an on-line gallery specialising in antique shamanic and Tibetan Buddhist ritual objects including malas, where you can also hear his free podcast on various shamanic practices.

Notes 1: Rudraksha seeds are the dried berries of the Rudraksha tree, grows in Indonesia, Nepal and India; they are round and pitted, with granular protuberances, and are sized between about 8 mm to



Old, well used and empowered malas are sometimes placed on people as tools of healing, or used as objects of blessing.

Top: a mala made from Rudraksha seeds

Above: a bone mala inset with coral and turquoise and with an amber 'guru bead'

Right: a Tibetan man carries a mala made from wooden beads

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When I asked my spirit helpers for a way to connect with my own spiritual resources, their answer was direct and clear. The first step was to make a shortlist of those spiritual resources that regularly guide and sustain me.

Next I was to make a kind of mala, or rosary, and choose a bead for each of the items on my list that would hold the energy of what it represented.

I have a small stash of various kinds of beads collected over the years; some that have sentimental or sacred significance, some I have just magpied away because I really liked them. And so I sat down with my shortlist and spread out my treasure trove of beads.

### SACRED SORTING

The next few hours were an unexpectedly intense distilling out of what really does connect me with my own sacred centre and Spirit. It was a time of deeply playful reflecting and learning for me as I sorted and arranged - and re-arranged - the beads in front of me. In the process I realised some of the 'items' on my list were not that important, and were deleted; some were added, as I realised how valued they were. The time passed in that familiar timeless haze that happens in sacred working.

### PRACTICALITIES

There were practical decisions to make about how to thread the beads. Should they be in a single line, or joined in a circle? How long should the string be - should it fit over my head like a necklace? I decided to separate each of the main beads with a row of small, matching beads so that as my fingers would travel along the string I could contemplate each of the 'aspects' quite separately. Otherwise, I let the sorting process dictate the design.

Then I came the point where all the beads were threaded and I had two 'ends' of the thread. Should I join them, or leave the strand open? Again I was guided by intuition to bring them together and through one bead



which would symbolise the Oneness of all Creation to which my 'circle' of being is joined. The final bead was a tiny silver acorn, a food I am often given by my spirit helper to sustain me when I get weary or the going gets tough!

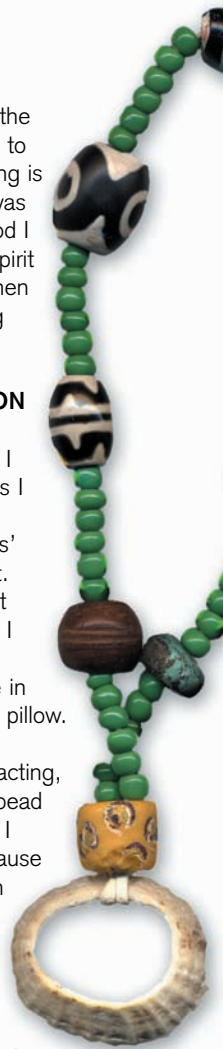
### MAKING CONNECTION

This simple mala now connects me with what I hold true and sacred, as I hold each bead in turn, starting at the 'Oneness' bead and returning to it. Each bead is a different shape and size, so that I know which one I am holding even if they are in my pocket or under my pillow.

If time is short, or circumstances are distracting, I can simply hold each bead in turn for a moment. If I have more time I can pause and give thanks to each aspect, or make specific prayers for their help in tasks ahead. Often I intuitively linger on a particular bead and find that unexpected thoughts drop in, teachings or guidance, or I just feel extra loving support or healing flow from that bead.

The mala is also a clear reflection of my sacred identity and just having it close to me helps me remember that identity when life gets challenging!

On a recent shamanic journey a spirit helper asked to hold the mala and blessed 'her' bead, the first on the string. This may be a new stage of my journey with the beads - to have each one blessed by what it represents.



# Power Beads

Jan Morgan Wood

We each have spiritual resources ... particular wisdom teachings, a special song, dance or place, aspects of the natural world, or a guardian spirit... a collection of things which gladden and sustain our soul.

Recently my spirit helpers showed me a simple way to connect with these soul resources - a version of the worldwide use of prayer beads - rosaries or malas.

They also encouraged me to share the process with others...

From time to time I will no doubt need to add other beads, or take out anything that I no longer feels relevant. Life is, after all, change. Meanwhile I thank my spirits for showing me how to make this simple way to connect with my sacred essentials.

This is a process that anyone can adapt; you can use beads you buy, or make your own. If beads are identical they can be perhaps painted with a relevant symbol or colour. There are no rules - play, experiment, celebrate your beautiful sacred self!

Jan Morgan Wood is a shamanic artist, practitioner and spiritual mentor, and is founding editor of Sacred Hoop Magazine. She has worked with individuals and groups for over twenty years and is author of 'Easy to Use Shamanism'. Tel: (01239) 682 071 [jan@janmorganwood.com](mailto:jan@janmorganwood.com) [www.janmorganwood.com](http://www.janmorganwood.com)

