

*'Within your own mind, you already have what you need to succeed, the ability to put others ahead of yourself. This is called virtue, the wish-fulfilling jewel'*

*Buddha Shakyamuni*



## BLAZE WITH MAJESTIC BRILLIANCE

An introduction to Himalayan dZi beads

James Wainwright



Ancient banded agate, known as Bhaisajyaguru dZi

Below: two-eyed dZi with red coral beads, and two longevity dZi

The people of Tibet and the Himalayan regions have long adorned their bodies, temples, statues and ritual items with heirloom and prized beads.

Marco Polo, the famous medieval Italian explorer and trader, mentions how important Mediterranean coral was to the Tibetans, as far back as the C13th. Other beads are also held in high esteem as amulets and continue to be used today for their medicinal properties. These include amongst others; amber, turquoise, pearls, carnelian and lapis lazuli.

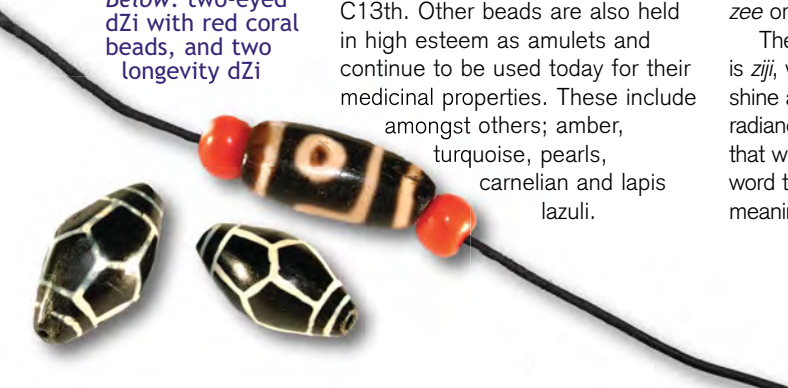
There is one sacred bead however, that stands out from all others. This is known as the dZi bead or dZi stone.

The most widely adopted spelling in the world today is dZi, however, it is also commonly spelled *gzi* or *zi*. The word dZi translates as bright, shine or luminous and should be pronounced *zee* or in some regions of Tibet *zūh*.

The Tibetan word for confidence is *ziji*, which is made up of *zi* meaning shine and *ji* meaning splendour, radiance or dignity. I personally feel that when we connect this Tibetan word to dZi beads, it gives us a close meaning to what dZi represent to

those who wear them. As the Tibetan Buddhist master, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche says: "A person with *ziji* has dignity, the radiant power of a mind that has relaxed into its own inherent strength".

I first encountered dZi beads whilst I was an ordained Buddhist monk, and became immediately fascinated by them. The magical claims of healing and protection plus their association with the gods and mythical creatures captured my imagination, and since that time I have been a custodian of an ever increasing collection of Himalayan beads.





Tibetans have a deep reverence and trust that dZi can avert illness and other unfavourable conditions. A bead might be used as a defence against poison for example. They are sometimes believed to absorb illness and as a result become a much paler colour.

The weaker the colour the less potent the bead is believed to be. Beads with a dark brown to black base colour with a well contrasted design, are considered to be the most powerful.

Some say dZi attract unseen beings who act as personal protectors to the wearer. I have also heard claims that they shield against knife and bullet attacks (don't try this at home). When a bead breaks it is believed to have absorbed significant misfortune for the owner, and in some cases may even have driven away an untimely death.

I personally wear a stone bead necklace, comprised of beads collected over many years. On some occasions I simply wear a single dZi bead. Even when I go to sleep I am unlikely to remove it. I also keep a mala (string of Buddhist prayer beads) always at hand, so I fully understand how deeply connected the people of the Himalayas feel towards their beads, and the inseparable role they play in their daily lives and dharma practice.

The word 'bead' actually derives from the old English word, *gebed* meaning prayer. It is in this spirit, that for me, the use and wearing of beads has always been a reminder of turning the mind inwards.

### GIFTS OF THE GODS

Tibetans believe that a genuine dZi bead is not created by human hands, but instead is of divine or even miraculous origin. Even the hole through the bead is believed to be a natural occurrence and not drilled by people.

There are many stories that tell us how dZi appear in the Himalayan regions. In the 'Epic of King Gesar', a poem believed to be 1000 years old, it mentions that many dZi were brought to Tibet by King Gesar of Ling, after his army defeated the King of Tajik in the Persian Empire.

Other stories tell us that dZi were concealed as *terma* by Padmasambhava, the Indian master, revered by Tibetans as the second Buddha. A *terma* is a sacred text or special object that has been hidden for future generations, they are then revealed at the appropriate time by highly accomplished *Vajrayana* [tantric] adepts known as *Tertöns*. These great Tibetan masters are also considered to be Padmasambhava's disciples from previous lifetimes. The C19th Tibetan master Terchen Barway Dorje tells us that Padmasambhava himself wore a six eyed dZi bead'.

There is also the belief that dZi beads are the sacred droppings of the Garuda bird - a huge mythical bird or bird-like creature that appears in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions with a wing-span said sometimes to be miles

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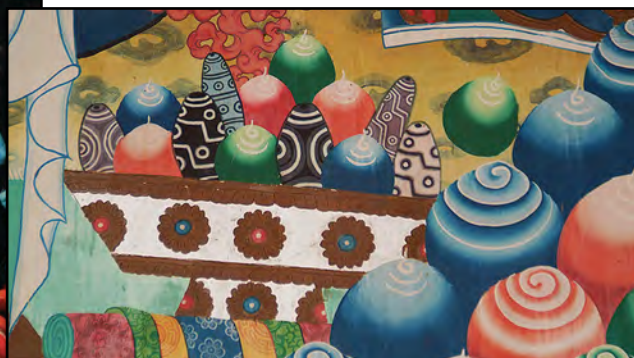
Small ancient dZi and decorated agates



New Six Eyed dZi (front centre) flanked by ancient beads.



Ancient Phum dZi bead with gold end caps



Above: A painted offering of dZi beads displayed on a temple wall in Boudhanath, Nepal

Left: Tibetan women display their families' wealth, wearing necklaces and hair ornaments comprised of amber, coral, turquoise, ivory and dZi





**Above:** stunningly beautiful gilded statue of the Buddha adorned with coral, turquoise and dZi stones. C7th, Jokhang temple, Lhasa, Tibet

**Right:** ancient chong dZi strung with red coral beads

**Below:** recently made three-eye dZi bead



across - or the Khyung bird, a pre-Buddhist shamanic mountain spirit, said to have been subjugated by Padmasambhava and converted into a protector of Buddhism in Tibet. In some cases the Garuda is also seen as a manifestation of Padmasambhava. The Garuda and Khyung have become somewhat fused into one mythological being over the centuries.

The Garuda is regarded as a keeper or protector of hidden treasures. The droppings of the Garuda (in the form of dZi) fall to the ground as he flies through the sky.

Other stories tell us that these beads are dropped or discarded by the gods, thus enabling fortunate human beings to find them.

One of the most widely held beliefs is that they are a worm-like

creature that crawls on the ground. This creature turns into a dZi stone if touched by human hands. Some dZi beads are believed to be found in nests in the ground or recently ploughed fields. In fact the first genuine dZi bead that I acquired, was supposedly found in a farmers field in Nepal.

Female Yaks (Tibetan: *dr*) are also said to give birth to dZi beads, which is similar to a story from the Chin people of Burma, who say that their goats give birth to the Chin's sacred Pumtek beads. Pumtek are decorated fossilised or opalised wood beads that are not too dissimilar from dZi in appearance and manufacture.

### THE WISH-FULFILLING GEM

One widely adopted belief is that dZi are found near hot springs, which I personally believe associates them with the Naga<sup>2</sup> (Tibetan: *Lu*). Naga is a Sanskrit word that means snake, and these snake-like beings (often depicted as half human and half snake) are generally thought to inhabit water or a subterranean land known as Patala.

Tibetans believe that certain Nagas have vowed to protect the Buddha's teachings and have also been entrusted with important Dharma treasures. Once again, like *terma*, these can only be released when the right causes and conditions are present. One of the qualities of a Naga is to be able to bestow wealth and abundance, such as good harvests and rainfall, so recognising special Naga days is an important aspect of Tibetan Buddhism.

The King of the Nagas is said to possess a 'wish-fulfilling jewel' that he wears in his crown or topknot. Precious gems that can grant all of one's wishes are a recurring theme in the world of Tibetan Buddhism. Indeed the patron bodhisattva of Tibet, Chenrezig, holds a wish-fulfilling jewel in his hands. So to a Tibetan, perhaps a dZi bead makes a very real connection to the legendary wish-fulfilling jewels that are so often mentioned in their spiritual teachings?

Tibetan medicinal pills called Rinchen Ratna Samphel or 'Precious Wish-fulfilling Jewel' also include ground up fragments of dZi as part of their ingredients.

Tibetans are particularly careful about upsetting Nagas and the



environment they inhabit. If you were to get on the wrong side of a Naga they might inflict illness or create imbalance in the environment. Nagas are often associated with causing diseases of the skin and thus special practices or medicine associated with the Garuda are believed to be a powerful antidote. Images of the Garuda often show him holding a snake in his mouth and hands. This is an indication of his ability to overwhelm the Nagas and is also a potent symbol that he has conquered desire.

### DECORATED STONE BEADS

There are many types of ancient agate beads (both decorated and undecorated) that would be labelled and recognised as dZi by Tibetans. The most desirable of all the dZi beads however, are those decorated with eyes and designs that may resemble Buddhist symbols, aspects of the natural environment or even animals. A bead might show a *vajra* (thunderbolt) or have a design that looks like a mountain peak or lotus flower for example.

The process of decorating stone beads has been known since at least 2,500 BCE in the Indus Valley. Decorated carnelians (also known as 'etched carnelians') were probably the most widely traded of all. They were clearly in high demand for adornment and were likely to have had a much deeper significance to the wearer. Many of these beads displayed eyes and were probably used to ward off the 'evil eye' or give general protection against negative influences. Some beads display symbols that may have been associated to a particular god or deity. They were also traded widely in Mesopotamia, Iran and central Asia. It is also clear that there were highly skilled stone bead making industries in South East Asia. The incredible variety of stone beads from ancient Burma and Thailand are testimony to this.

There were numerous methods used to alter the colour and decorate stone beads in antiquity. Most methods were

probably kept secret, and today they are still not fully understood. The Roman historian Pliny the Elder wrote about the process of agates being turned darker by treatments that involved soaking and heating the bead in a honey solution. Due to this process and the acidic nature of honey, it was able to penetrate deep into the stone.

Also, the colour change would depend on the porosity of the material. Yellow, brown and black colours were achieved by using this method. The agate was soaked and heated over a period of weeks until the desired result was attained. The non-porous crystalline areas of the stone were not affected by this process<sup>3</sup>.

This treatment would also enhance the display of natural banding and stripes in the stone. Decorations were applied to the bead with a sticky alkaline mix that included sodium carbonate, water and plant juice<sup>4</sup>. It is clear that other methods were also used but they are not so well known. Once the decoration was



Above: ancient and antique Burmese Pumtek beads

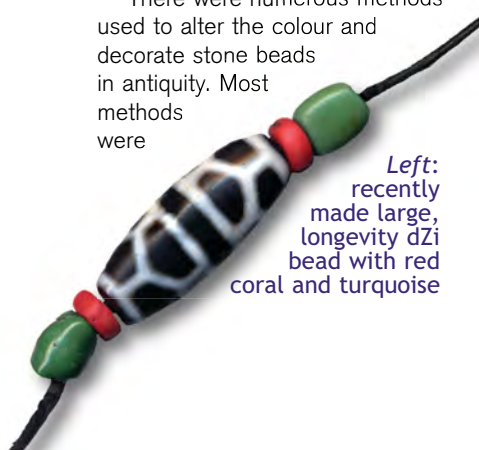
complete the bead was again heated to allow the design to penetrate the surface of the bead. Designs then became permanent. In cases where the design did not take properly to the bead, the whole process may have been repeated.

Many of the decorated beads we find on Tibetan heirloom necklaces, have probably been traded centuries ago from other parts of Asia, with the majority having their origins in India. Despite many examples of other forms of decorated stone beads appearing outside of the

Below: a Tibetan child at a festival is adorned with a mix of both old and more recently made dZi beads, together with coral, amber, gold and ivory



Left: recently made large, longevity dZi bead with red coral and turquoise







Above: ancient striped dZi bead approx 2,000 years old, threaded with red coral and turquoise beads



Ancient tiger dZi



Above: newly created Taiwanese two-eyed dZi bead

Below: Antique Tibetan 'Pema Raka' carnelian bead. Sometimes worn to protect against harmful spirits



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For more information about dZi and other types of Himalayan beads you can write to the author at [garuda@talk21.com](mailto:garuda@talk21.com) or visit his blog [www.dzibeads.blogspot.com](http://www.dzibeads.blogspot.com)



A Chong or Chung dZi bead

Himalayan regions, there are probably very few pure dZi that have been found elsewhere.

We can only speculate where pure dZi beads might have been made, based on known bead making industries in antiquity. India is still by far the most likely contender but ancient Persia must also be considered.

### ANCIENT TREASURES

The discovery of pure dZi seems to be concentrated in those areas where Buddhism is practiced or once flourished. The ancient beads we see today are nearly always heirloom beads, and a small amount pass through the hands of traders.

Genuine ancient beads will usually have tell-tale signs that they have been worn for many hundreds of years. I believe that very few pure dZi (if any) have been found in controlled archaeological digs.

Although many beads that would be recognised as Chong dZi have been discovered in the ground and documented<sup>5</sup>.

A Tibetan would give the name Chong or Chung dZi to a large variety of decorated agate beads and also to the more widely available undecorated or natural agate beads. Although this name is now usually reserved by collectors outside of Asia, for the decorated agate beads that have equatorial stripes. The name Chong actually refers to the type of stone being used. In this case agate or chalcedony. This makes it clear that the bead in question has been made by human hands, and from a mineral found in the ground.

Whereas a 'pure' dZi is never given the name Chong, simply because Tibetans are adamant they have a more sacred origin.

Whilst pure dZi with eyes are the most sought after amulets,

there are other types of decorated agate that are also desirable and very valuable. These can include oval shaped dZi with the appearance of tiger stripes or oval beads that appear to display a lotus or vase design.

There are also Phum dZi, pronounced *pūm* (the h being silent). This name probably derives from the Tibetan word for vase. These beads are decorated with what has become known as the 'longevity' design. This is probably because the decoration resembles the shell of a turtle, a recognised symbol for wisdom and long life in China. Phum dZi are usually fat beads with a grey to black base colour, and Tibetans believe they are the oldest of all the dZi beads found in Tibet.

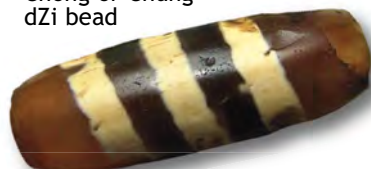
There are also beads called Tasso (Horse Tooth) and round tabular beads known as Luk Mik (Sheep's Eye). The most widely available of all the dZi types however is the Chong dZi.

With pure dZi, it is generally the beads with an odd number of eyes and unique designs that are the most valuable. A nine eyed dZi is extremely sought after and prices for these beads are now said to be anywhere from \$100,000 us to \$1,000,000 us, however, you would be extremely lucky if you could find one for sale.

Even the lowest priced pure dZi beads can run into many thousands of dollars, which only continues to fuel - perhaps for the wrong reasons? - more interest in these beads in and outside of Asia.

With such high selling prices and the scarcity of these ancient beads, there is always an inevitable influx of imitations. If people know they are buying newly created beads there is no problem, in fact new beads have also become very collectible in recent

Chong or Chung dZi bead



*It is important to remember that ancient dZi beads are 'sacred' amulets, not just nice looking artefacts or interesting curio items*

years and are an affordable alternative to the ancient beads.

However, many sellers on a well known internet auction site, continue to claim that beads which are less than ten years old are ancient or antique. This has caused a lot of confusion in the marketplace, and Tibet and the Himalayan regions are now full of new beads that are being passed off to unsuspecting tourists as old.

China and Taiwan are the largest producers of new dZi beads, with the vast majority of the agate being imported from Brazil. Some beads are so well made that they almost pass for the real thing. So it is always very wise to do your research before you part with huge sums of money.

It is important to remember that ancient dZi beads are 'sacred' amulets. They are not just nice looking artefacts or interesting curio items. If we are to preserve Tibetan traditions we must act as responsible custodians. If we do not, then it will be a great loss to future generations of practitioners.

### Bibliography and Notes

- 1: 'Precious Essence, The Inner Autobiography of Terchen Barway Dorje' by Lama Yeshe Gyamtso.
- 2: For an article about Nagas see Sacred Hoop Issue 58.
- 3: 'Gemstone Enhancement' by K. Nassau.
- 4: 'Sasanian Beads: The evidence of Art, Texts and Archaeology' by St J. Simpson.
- 5: Horace C. Beck recorded many finds from the ancient Indian city of Taxila - see 'The Beads of Taxila' published 1941.

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