

The Mala as Mandala: The Symbolism and Function of Prayer Beads in Buddhist Practice

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ABSTRACT

Buddhist malas, often known as prayer beads or japamala in Sanskrit, are important spiritual tools in different Buddhist traditions. They are sacred object used to support meditation, mantra recitation, and growing mindfulness. Malas have their roots in ancient Indian spiritual practices. They were first linked to Hindu rituals before being adopted into Buddhist disciplines. Over time, they have changed into deeply meaningful objects that represent devotion, discipline, and the journey to enlightenment. This study looks at how malas have developed historically, their symbolic elements, including bead numbers, materials, and the guru bead, as well as their ritual uses in Vajrayana, Zen, and Theravada Buddhism. Besides their traditional roles, this article also explores how malas have transformed in modern contexts. the research provides a well-rounded view of the mala as both a ritual object and a symbol of the spiritual journey's cyclical nature. By tracking their evolution and present significance, the study reveals how malas continue to be meaningful tools for mindfulness and personal growth in both religious and secular environments.

Keywords: japamala, Buddhist Malas, Meditation, Symbolism, Ritual Practice

INTRODUCTION

Buddhist malas, also called prayer beads or japamala in sanskrit, are much more than decorative items. They serve as sacred tools in Buddhist practice, playing a vital role in meditation, mantra chanting, and mindfulness (Dharma-Beads.net, Prayer Beads). Malas originated in ancient India, where they were first used in Hindu rituals. Over the centuries, they have been incorporated into Buddhist traditions. Today, these prayer beads are powerful symbols of devotion, discipline, and the search for enlightenment in the various Buddhist schools (Dharma-Beads.net, Hindu Malas).

A typical mala has 108 beads, along with a guru bead. It is not just for counting recitations; it also holds deep symbolic meanings (Anguttara Nikaya [Numerical Discourses of the Buddha]. In The Pali Canon.). Each part of the mala, including the number of beads, materials, colors, and its overall structure, conveys multiple meanings that align with key Buddhist beliefs (Prayer Beads in buddhism). The way malas are used differs among traditions. In Vajrayana tradition focuses on visualization and deity practice, while Zen tradition uses them in simple yet meaningful ways. Theravada tradition may employ them less frequently or in a more casual manner. Despite these differences, malas are a common element in Buddhist rituals and meditation.

In recent years, malas have moved beyond monasteries and temples. Their popularity has grown through wellness trends, spiritual shops, and fashion, leading to both new appreciation and concerns about secularization, commercialization, and cultural appropriation (B.King, 2023). These shifts highlight the need for a detailed study of malas not just as ritual items but also as cultural symbols in transition.

This study will explore the many meanings of Buddhist malas in religious, cultural, and meditative settings. It aims to trace their historical origins and development in Buddhist traditions, emphasizing their evolution from Hindu mantra beads to Buddhist tools. It will also look at the meanings behind aspects of the mala, such as bead counts, materials, colors, and features like the guru bead. The research will examine how different Buddhist schools particularly Vajrayana, Zen, and Theravada use malas in their practices, taking into account

doctrinal differences and practical approaches. Additionally, it will address contemporary issues related to malas, including their secular use, global spread, commercialization, and the nuances of cultural appropriation. The research will view the mala as a metaphor for the Buddhist spiritual journey, showing how its physical form reflects concepts of ongoing practice, mindfulness, and transformation. Ultimately, this work will enrich Buddhist studies by providing a well-rounded examination of malas that includes historical, symbolic, ritual, and cultural insights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of Buddhist malas connects various academic areas, such as religious studies, anthropology, material culture, and meditation research. Even though malas are widely used, they have not received much detailed attention in scholarly writing. They are often included in larger discussions about ritual tools or meditation methods.

Historical and Religious Context

The mala has its roots in the religious and spiritual traditions of ancient India, existing even before Buddhism. The word mala comes from the Sanskrit term for "garland." It symbolizes not just physical beads strung together but also a spiritual cycle. Initially, malas were used in Hinduism for repeating mantras and for ritual purification, a practice that dates back thousands of years before Buddhism (Dharma-Beads.net, Hindu Malas).

The 14th Dalai Lama, emphasizes the mala's importance in Vajrayana Buddhism. It serves as a counting tool and a focus for tantric visualization and empowerment rituals. The guru bead, represents the bond between teacher and student, conveying wisdom and blessings (Avatamsaka Sutra [Flower Garland Sutra]. In Mahayana Buddhist Canon.). Recent studies in Buddhist material culture have highlighted the symbolic meanings found in ritual objects like malas. Materials such as rudraksha seeds or sandalwood carry deep meanings that can change based on cultural backgrounds and doctrinal beliefs (Lama, 1995).

From a meditative standpoint, malas serve as tactile tools that improve concentration and mindfulness (Digha Nikaya [Long Discourses of the Buddha]. In The Pali Canon). The physical act of counting beads reinforces focus, helping the practitioner engage more deeply in their mantra or breath (Donald S.Lopez, 1995). Research on different traditions shows that Vajrayana tradition often uses elaborate malas blessed by lamas, while Zen Buddhism tends to use simpler juzu beads mainly for chanting. Theravada Buddhism prefers natural seed malas for basic chants. The growing popularity of malas in wider culture has led to discussions about cultural appropriation and commercialization, raising questions about their use as mere fashion items (Robert E.Buswell jr, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach that combines textual analysis, historical context, and personal reflection to look at the symbolism and ritual use of prayer beads (malas) in Buddhist practice. The primary sources include important Buddhist texts like the Pali Nikayas, which emphasize repetition and mindfulness, such as anapanasati and anusati meditations. These texts provide the basis for how malas are used. Mahayana sutras, like the Karandavyuha Sutra, present the mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum" and highlight mantra recitation as a way to achieve spiritual purity, often helped by mala beads. Tantric texts, such as the Guhyasamaja Tantra and Hevajra Tantra, detail the types of materials and specific rituals for using malas in Vajrayana contexts. Historical and artistic sources, from monastic rules to sculptures and thangkas from Gandhara and Tibet, help place mala practice in the context of broader devotional and monastic traditions. The study also includes insights from published field accounts and experiences shared by practitioners regarding mala use, reflecting their spiritual lives. The analysis uses semiotic theory to interpret symbolic aspects, phenomenology to examine the experience of ritual, and comparisons within Buddhist practices to understand the different roles of malas in rituals and meditation without going beyond Buddhist traditions.

Historical Origins

The Buddhist mala has deep historical roots that go beyond Buddhism itself. It originated in the spiritual and ritual contexts of ancient India (Eliade, 2004). The word mala comes from the Sanskrit term for “garland.” It symbolizes not just physical beads strung together but also a spiritual cycle. Originally, malas were used in Vedic and Hindu practices to count the repetition of mantras and prayers (mirrorwisdom.org, 2015). According to traditional Buddhist stories, the mala was introduced by the historical Buddha around the 5th century BCE. A popular legend tells of King Vaidunya, who was instructed by the Buddha to use a string of 108 beads to recite the Three Refuges (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha) (ultimatepopculture.fandom.com, 2020). This practice helped him overcome worldly attachments and impurities.

As Buddhism spread beyond India, the mala changed in form, material, and meaning, adapting to local cultural and religious contexts. The Vajrayana malas often included sacred materials like bone or precious stones. Zen Buddhism adopted shorter bead counts of 27 or 54 beads for chanting and meditation. Theravada Buddhism preferred simple malas made from natural seeds or wood (Gray Henry, 2008). Throughout these cultural changes, the mala kept its main function as a physical and symbolic aid for spiritual growth.

Symbolic Structure and Components

The physical construction of Buddhist malas is rich with layered symbolic meanings that connect deeply to Buddhist philosophy and practice (Donald S.Lopez, 1995). The number of beads on a mala is one of its most important symbolic features. While malas can have different numbers of beads, 108 is seen as the standard and most sacred count. This number symbolizes the 108 defilements or kleshas that block enlightenment (L.S, 2009).

The guru bead is a special bead that marks the start and end of the mala cycle. It symbolizes the spiritual teacher or guide. When practitioners reach this bead, they reverse direction, showing respect. Malas can be made from various materials, including bodhi seeds (enlightenment), rudraksha (calmness), sandalwood (purification), lotus seeds (spiritual growth), gemstones (healing), and bone (impermanence) (Dharma-Beads.net, Prayer Beads).

Colors also convey symbolic meanings: white for purity, red for compassion, green for healing, blue for wisdom, yellow for joy, black for protection, and purple for spiritual insight. Structural elements such as string, knots, and counters help support meditative practice by aiding concentration and rhythm. Finger Placement and Tactile Engagement Different fingers have symbolic meanings in some traditions (Hevajra Tantra. In Vajrayana Buddhist Texts.). Thumb, often used to move the beads. It symbolizes wisdom. Index Finger, this finger is sometimes avoided because it represents ego or self, which Buddhist practice aims to go beyond (ultimatepopculture.fandom.com, 2020). Touching the beads helps to ground the mind. It provides sensory feedback that improves concentration and mindfulness. Research in meditation has shown that this tactile element can reduce distractions and promote deeper calm (Wallace, 2006)

Material Symbolism

Malas are made from various materials, each with spiritual and energetic properties connected to Buddhist beliefs and practices. The choice of material can improve the mala’s effectiveness in meditation or represent specific qualities the practitioner wants to develop (Hevajra Tantra. In Vajrayana Buddhist Texts.).

Material	Symbolism and Usage
Bodhi Seeds	Symbolize the Buddha’s enlightenment under the Bodhi tree; widely used for all practices.
Rudraksha Seeds	Traditionally Hindu but adopted in Buddhist practice; associated with calmness and healing energy.
Sandalwood	Signifies purification, tranquility, and spiritual clarity.

Lotus Seeds	Symbolic of spiritual growth, rebirth, and purity emerging from the mud.
Gemstones	Used for healing, energy alignment, and chakra balancing.
Bone (Human or Animal)	Emphasizes impermanence, mortality, and transformation, especially in Tibetan Buddhist practice.

Color Symbolism

Colors in malas express spiritual qualities and connect to Buddhist imagery and meditation aims. While the meanings of colors might differ across traditions and regions, common associations include:

Color	Symbolism
White	Purity, clarity, and spiritual awakening
Red	Compassion, vitality, and life force
Green	Healing, balance, and harmony
Blue	Wisdom, tranquility, and depth of insight
Yellow	Joy, enlightenment, and learning
Black	Protection, grounding, and absorption of negativity
Purple	Spiritual insight, higher consciousness, and mysticism

Multicolored malas can represent the unity of different spiritual qualities or the all-inclusive nature of enlightenment (Guhyasamaja Tantra. In Vajrayana Buddhist Texts.).

Ritual and Meditative Use

Buddhist malas are primarily tools for improving meditation and devotional rituals. They help practitioners maintain focus, cultivate mindfulness, and deepen their spiritual involvement. Japamala meditation consists of repeating mantras and counting each repetition on a bead. Common mantras include Om Mani Padme Hum and Om Ah Hum.

Fingers have specific placements while counting beads, which hold symbolic meanings. For instance, the thumb often moves beads and signifies wisdom, while the index finger is sometimes avoided because it represents ego. Malas are also used in rituals like prostrations, blessings, and offerings. They can act as mindfulness anchors in everyday life, helping to ease anxiety and direct attention. Practices differ among traditions (T).Vajrayana involves intricate rituals. Zen uses simpler beads for chanting, while Theravada emphasizes straightforward recitations (Strand, 2006).

Malas in Different Buddhist Traditions

Buddhist malas are used in various schools of Buddhism, but their design, purpose, and meanings differ based on specific teachings and rituals. In Vajrayana, malas are sacred objects with strong ritual significance. They are often made from bone or precious stones and blessed by lamas. These malas are used in tantric practices and for repeating mantras. Zen Buddhism uses shorter malas, called juzu, which have 27 or 54 beads. They are mainly for chanting and meditation, highlighting simplicity and mindfulness (Stone, 1995).

Theravada Buddhism employs simple seed or wood malas to keep track of recitations of the Buddha’s name or chants. This tradition focuses on mindfulness and devotion. Each tradition shows how malas can adapt and maintain their spiritual importance (Kawanami, 2010).

Contemporary Adaptations and Cultural Relevance

In recent decades, Buddhist malas have moved beyond their religious roots and entered global spiritual, wellness, and popular culture. Malas are popular in mindfulness and yoga communities. They are often worn as jewelry and used as meditation aids outside of Buddhist practices (contributors, 2023). The commercialization of malas raises concerns about losing their spiritual meaning and cultural appropriation. Scholars and Buddhist communities encourage mindful and respectful use, along with education about malas, to maintain their sacred meaning. The use of malas in interfaith and cross-cultural practices shows their universal appeal. However, it also highlights the need for respectful engagement.

Mala as a Metaphor for the Spiritual Path

The mala's circular shape and repeated use capture key Buddhist teachings about spiritual practice and the path to awakening (Eleanor wiley, 2002). The circle represents the ongoing cycle of samsara, with each bead signifying a step in transformation. The guru bead represents the teacher's wisdom and the spiritual lineage, marking both the start and end of the cycle (Klimburg-Salter, 2010). Each bead that is touched helps focus mindfulness and devotion, showing the connection of body, speech, and mind. The mala offers a complete set of spiritual lessons, teaching discipline, patience, and gradual progress on the spiritual path.

CONCLUSION

This study has looked at Buddhist malas as important spiritual tools that connect the physical and spiritual sides of Buddhist practice (Donald S.Lopez, 1995). Originating from ancient Indian religious traditions, malas have evolved over time and across cultures while keeping their essential roles in meditation and devotion. Their design, which involves the use of bead count, materials, colors, and structure, reflects key Buddhist teachings like mindfulness, impermanence, purification, and the value of spiritual guidance (Dharma-Beads.net, Hindu Malas).

By comparing different Buddhist traditions, this paper showed how Theravada, Zen, and Vajrayana share a common respect for malas, even while using them in different rituals and meditation practices. These differences highlight how malas can adapt to various cultural and doctrinal settings, emphasizing their spiritual importance while allowing for unique expressions of practice.

Today, malas have gained international visibility and are becoming spiritual accessories of outside traditional Buddhist contexts. This trend brings both opportunities and challenges, particularly around commercialization and cultural appropriation. Still, their lasting symbolism continues to inspire practitioners, reminding them of inner discipline, teacher-student connections, and the ongoing journey toward awakening.

By adding to the broader discussion on Buddhist material culture, this study encourages more ethnographic and interdisciplinary research into the lived experiences and changing meanings of malas in modern settings. Ultimately, malas remain strong symbols of the sacred journey, linking the repetitive, mindful act of recitation to the deeper quest for spiritual change.

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