

# **THE JAPA MALA AND MANTRA MEDITATION**

By: Jen Nielsen



## **WHAT IS A JAPA MALA**

In very general terms a japa mala is a counting tool. More specifically, it is an Eastern “rosary”, or prayer beads, consisting of a series 108 beads and one large summit or ‘head’ bead strung together and used to count mantras, prayers, affirmations or the breath during meditation or devotional prayer. Originating in India and used in Hinduism, the world’s oldest religion, the use of prayer beads has spread and been adapted into many religious practices around the world including many different forms of Buddhism, Chinese, Japanese, Islam, and Christianity. According to ReligiousFacts.com, the word “rosary” evolved from the Romans bringing the concept of prayer beads back to the West after invading India. When they encountered the jap mala, they mistook the word jap, which in their language meant “rose”. The word *mala* in Sanskrit means “garland or wreath”, sometimes defined as “garland of flowers or rose”. *Japa* is a form of mantra meditation and refers to the repeated recitation of the mantra. *Mantra* can refer to a word (or set of words), prayer, affirmation or intention, chant, and the name of God or deity. For the purposes of this paper I will refer to each as simply *mala* and *mantra*, to include of all the above definitions.

## **THE PURPOSE OF A MALA:**

The mala is not only used as a counter, but along with the mantra, each serve the body and mind during meditation; thereby enhancing one’s practice on

many levels. Some meditations call for a specific number of recitations of a mantra. A mantra can be chosen for its literal meaning or for focusing an intention on one's practice. There are others chosen for the effect they have on the subtle mind and body. In certain Hindu and Buddhist practices the mantras carry a much deeper meaning and are a reflection of their spiritual journey. The mantras are specially given to the student or practitioner by their guru, teacher or spirit guide. In this case, the importance and sacredness of the mantra is maintained and protected by the practitioner as they refrain from reciting it audibly or revealing their mantra to anyone else; it is very private and personal. No matter which mantra is chosen, or the reason, using the mala allows the practitioner to remember the mantra and recite it with full attention and devotion without being distracted with trying to keep count of the number of recitations.

The mala can also be used as an anchor for the mind. As one moves each bead along the string, the mala serves as an object of focus for the mind giving it something to redirect back to when it begins to wonder; this also saves the meditator from compounding their distraction with losing count of the recitations. The physical movement of the fingers on the beads can also prevent yet another type of distraction...falling asleep. The continued action of redirecting one's attention allows the practitioner to cultivate a greater awareness of the present moment and can strengthen the purpose, intention, quality and outcome of their meditation practice. As one of my meditation guides and mentor, Mr. John Cianciosi says, "the mind is like an unruly monkey; chattering and bouncing about. It can; however, be trained..." and the mala is a useful tool for such training.

### **ANATOMY OF A MALA:**

Typically a traditional mala has 108 + 1 beads strung together with a knot between the beads. 108 beads and one large summit or 'head' bead. Depending on the practitioner, this bead is called the *meru* or *sumeru* bead, or can be referred to as the "guru", "parent, mother, or buddha bead"; on the Roman Catholic rosary the crucifix is representative of the guru bead. Some malas have a tassel carefully knotted and affixed to the guru bead. Some of the smaller malas were created out of a necessity for convenience and travel, as they are much less cumbersome than the full 108 bead mala and can be held more easily during prostrations (a more physical type of meditation often

including actions of bowing). On these malas 108 is divided, halved, quartered, etc. and have beads numbering 54, 36, 27, etc. or some power of the number 9. In some Buddhist traditions certain mantras have a specified number of recitations, in addition to specific intentions of practice. For instance according to Buddha Dharma Education Association, "The beads used with mantras, which are intended to overcome, are made from a compound of ground sandal wood, saffron and other fragrant substances. There are twenty-five beads on this mala." And "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. A rosary for this purpose should have one hundred such beads."

Each component of the mala is significant and holds meaning from the number and type of beads, to string, and the various ways they can be strung or knotted together.

### **108 Beads**

The number 108 (or a mathematical formula relating to it and the power of 9) holds several meanings depending on the beliefs of the practitioner. The number reveals itself often and in many different ways. In Hinduism it reflects the 108 names of the deities or the 108 Upanishads and in Buddhism it is the number of virtues one must attain or impurities to overcome. It shows up in astrology relating to sacred stars and planets; some believe there are 108 types of meditation, or in relation to the number of breaths one takes. There are hundreds of representations for the number 108; these have been included in a list at the end of this paper courtesy of Swami Jnaneshvara Bharati. In general, the 108 beads can be seen to symbolize the entire universe. "When we count the mantra using the mala, we are remembering the presence of the deity who is the Universal Self in every part of the universe. So, after each cycle of repetition, we cover the entire universe by feeling and touching the presence of deity of the mantra in it."

### **THE GURU BEAD; THE 109<sup>TH</sup> BEAD:**

The guru bead is usually the largest bead on the mala. As discussed previously, the guru bead can be called by many different names and generally represents whatever name the practitioner gives to represent what they

consider their most Divine spirit, higher power, God, etc. which resides in and connects each of us. It is shown the same respect one would show to their “guru”, deity, or God. The guru bead could also be seen as separate from the main mala; symbolizing the transcendental nature of its relationship to the universe (or mala). As another symbol of respect, the guru bead is never to be crossed when counting the mantras during meditation. Rather, the mala is turned around so that the next round of counting begins and the 108th bead now becomes the 1<sup>st</sup> bead. This can also be a reference to cycle of the universe having no beginning or end and the infinite circle of life and death. In some Buddhist traditions, “The large bead at the end stands for the wisdom which cognizes emptiness and the cylindrical bead surmounting it (pictured below), emptiness itself, both symbolize having vanquished all.”



### **THE TASSEL:**

Some guru beads are carefully knotted with or affixed to a tassel; others may just have a “Tibetan snake” or “blessing” knot (pictured above). Some tassels have additional smaller counter beads on them used for keeping track of mantras (or other meditations) which are recited hundreds or even thousands of times. The tassel can also have multiple meanings such as symbolizing the lotus flower or thousand petal lotus; the universal symbol of enlightenment, or the fourth state of consciousness, called *turiya*; a transcendental state beyond three other states of waking, dream and deep sleep.

### **THE STRING:**

If the beads of the mala are symbolic of the entire universe, then string of the mala symbolizes the universal self (true self, or soul) as it holds together and supports the beads.” In some Buddhist traditions the string which holds the beads is made up of nine threads, which symbolize Buddha Vajradhara and the eight Bodhisattvas.

## **THE KNOT(S):**

A traditional mala has a knot between the beads for both practical and metaphorical purposes. The knot can signify the divine link present between all beings of this universe. It serves as a reminder that we are all strung on the thread of the Universal Self. The knot can also serve to help make the beads move through the fingers more smoothly and prevent distraction during meditation of the beads rubbing up against one another. They also preserve the integrity of the string or more symbolically it shows respect to the Universal Self by protecting it from harm.

## **CIRCULAR ARRANGEMENT OF THE BEADS:**

In a traditional mala, the 108 beads are strung together in a circle or wreath which can represent the cyclical nature of the universe; or the infinite cycle of birth and death. "The Universal Self is the only unchanging principle, just like a string in the mala."

"The circular arrangement also signifies infinite birth and death cycle. Individual Self also changes the bodies in an endless cycle. So, the highest goal of our lives is to permanently escape from this cycle by merging with the Universal Self. The beads are like different births or bodies. By contemplating the mantra of the deity continuously, we would like to access the inherent thread of the universe, the Universal Self, which is eternal and unchanging." - courtesy of rudrakshayoga.com

## **TYPES OF BEADS:**

Most beads are an average of 7 or 8mm in size, but can range. Malas can be made from many different types of beads and as with the rest of the symbolic nature of the mala; the beads themselves can have various meanings or, as some believe, carry energetic qualities. Some practitioners have several different malas; each carrying a different intention or purpose. Mala beads have been known to be made from materials such as, seeds, carved wood, bone, precious metals, and/or semi-precious stones. In the Hindu tradition those with devotion to Lord Shiva typically use malas made of Rudrakshaseeds or "tears of Shiva".



### **Rudraksha seed 108 bead mala**

Those with devotion to Lord Vishnu use malas constructed of the carved wood or seeds of the sacred basil shrub or tulsi; for Ganesh it is usually sandalwood. Others include Lotus seeds or wood from the Bodhi tree.

“Power beads”, as they have come to be called in popular culture, are typically wrist malas (usually with 21 beads) made of crystals or semi-precious stones. Crystals and stones have been known to carry certain energetic or healing qualities, so they are chosen specific to the intention or goal that one has chosen for their meditation practice. Additionally, colors are also believed to have energetic effects on the subtle body and can be incorporated into the mala as well. These types of wrist malas can sometimes be constructed with a stretchy string or cord as opposed to being knotted.



Jade mala



Lapis lazuli guru bead

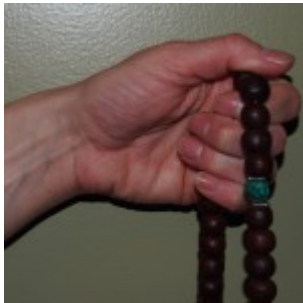
### **HANDLING AND USE OF THE MALA:**

Depending on the practitioner’s beliefs the handling of the mala can vary. In the Hindu tradition the mala is held in the right hand; as the left hand is considered impure. The mala is draped over the middle finger and the thumb is used to move each bead. The whole mantra is recited for each bead turned; not one word per bead. The thumb is used to pull the bead toward the body; (rather than pushing it away) as a means to “invite Divine energy into you” and then move to the next bead. The index finger is extended and not to touch

any part of the mala. The index finger represents the ego which is to be “put away”; especially during meditation



In the Buddhist tradition typically the left hand is used and the mala is held between the index finger and thumb.



(photos courtesy of [kheopsinternational.com](http://kheopsinternational.com))

In some traditions it does not matter which hand the mala is held in and even suggest it is ok to switch hands when “flipping” the mala. In others it is dependent on the intention of the meditation. It is believed there are acupressure points (nadis or energy channels) on each of the fingers that work on different parts of the subtle body and when the beads press into these points on the fingers, a specific result can be attained. The points are located on the side of each finger, in the center point between the tip of the finger and the upper knuckle.

“The properties of the meridian points for each finger are as follows:

- Index Finger (Jupiter Finger): Wisdom. Knowledge. Prosperity
- Middle Finger (Saturn Finger): Patience.
- Ring Finger (Sun Finger): Health. Vitality. Strengthen the Nervous System.

- Little Finger (Mercury Finger): Communication. Intelligence.”-courtesy of spriritvoyage.com

It is important complete the full mala (108 or the specified number); rather than stopping in the middle; there are certain numbers thought to have negative effects and should be avoided. When using a smaller mala or performing more than 108 recitations, once the last bead is reached the mala is then “flipped” 180° (not crossing the guru bead or, if appropriate, not touching the index finger) and the last bead now becomes the first, and so on until the desired number is reached. The mala can be held at the heart center; however, should never touch the ground.

The mala can be considered a very personal spiritual tool and the more it is treated with devotion and respect the greater the impact it can have to cultivating one’s meditation practice and/or spiritual journey. Some believe that just as the mantra is not revealed to the public, the mala is also sacred and should not be displayed or worn publicly. There are those that adhere to these beliefs so stringently that they hide their mala during meditation. The reason, Rolf Sovik says, “... is that after a lengthy period of practice the association between mantra and mala becomes so strong that showing the mala without some purpose feels inappropriate...Concealing the motion of the hand is equivalent, for them, to modestly concealing the motion of the mind.” The *gomukhi* is a cloth bag that can be used during meditation to keep the mala, and if chosen, the hand turning the mala, in. This bag can also aid in keeping the mala from touching the ground; which should be avoided. There are many that do choose to wear their mala, especially as the popularity of yoga has grown in the West calling it “wearable yoga”; however, it is not something which should be paraded or have a great deal of attention drawn to and it is best not to have others touch or handle it. Rather its purpose should be to serve as a reminder of the journey they’re on and the constant work to be done to accomplish the goals of their practice. It is not uncommon in some Buddhist traditions for priests to wear their full 108 bead mala draped over them (lay-people typically have a lesser number depending where they are in their spiritual journey). The mala should be stored respectfully. There are many different boxes or pouches made for this purpose.





In addition, it should not be kept in a pocket below the heart and one should not shower or sleep with their mala on as it could produce unwanted energetic effects to the subtle body during sleep.

It does not seem to matter exactly which traditions or beliefs are held by the practitioner, the type of mala and/or mantra used, or the way one chooses to hold the mala. The greatest power lies in quality of the practitioner's intention, and comes from the sincere and devotional nature of their action as they cultivate their practice and give it their full and complete attention.

## Additional meanings for 108 - courtesy of Swami Jnaneshvara Bharati

**9 times 12:** Both of these numbers have been said to have spiritual significance in many traditions. 9 times 12 is 108. Also, 1 plus 8 equals 9. That 9 times 12 equals 108.

**Powers of 1, 2, and 3 in math:** 1 to 1st power=1; 2 to 2nd power=4 (2x2); 3 to 3rd power=27 (3x3x3).  $1 \times 4 \times 27 = 108$

**Harshad number:** 108 is a Harshad number, which is an integer divisible by the sum of its digits (Harshad is from Sanskrit, and means "great joy")

**Desires:** There are said to be 108 earthly desires in mortals.

**Lies:** There are said to be 108 lies that humans tell.

**Delusions:** There are said to be 108 human delusions or forms of ignorance.

**Heart Chakra:** The chakras are the intersections of energy lines, and there are said to be a total of 108 energy lines converging to form the heart chakra. One of them, sushumna leads to the crown chakra, and is said to be the path to Self-realization.

**Sanskrit alphabet:** There are 54 letters in the Sanskrit alphabet. Each has masculine and feminine, shiva and shakti. 54 times 2 is 108.

**Pranayama:** If one is able to be so calm in meditation as to have only 108 breaths in a day, enlightenment will come.

**Upanishads:** Some say there are 108 Upanishads, texts of the wisdom of the ancient sages.

**Sri Yantra:** On the Sri Yantra there are marmas where three lines intersect, and there are 54 such intersections. Each intersection has masculine and feminine, shiva and shakti qualities. 54 times 2 equals 108. Thus, there are 108 points that define the Sri Yantra as well as the human body.

**Pentagon:** The angle formed by two adjacent lines in a pentagon equals 108 degrees.

**Marmas:** Marmas or marmasthanas are like energy intersections called chakras, except have fewer energy lines converging to form them. There are said to be 108 marmas in the subtle body.

**Time:** Some say there are 108 feelings, with 36 related to the past, 36 related to the present, and 36 related to the future.

**8 extra beads:** In doing a practice of counting the number of repetitions of the mala, 100 are counted as completed. The remaining are said to cover errors or omissions. The 8 are also said to be an offering to God and Guru.

**Chemistry:** Interestingly, there are about 115 elements known on the periodic table of the elements. Most of those, around or higher than the number 100 only exist in the laboratory, and some for only thousandths of a second. The

number that naturally exist on Earth is around 100.

**Astrology:** There are 12 constellations, and 9 arc segments called namshas or chandrakalas. 9 times 12 equals 108. Chandra is moon, and kalas are the divisions within a whole.

**River Ganga:** The sacred River Ganga spans a longitude of 12 degrees (79 to 91), and a latitude of 9 degrees (22 to 31). 12 times 9 equals 108.

**Planets and Houses:** In astrology, there are 12 houses and 9 planets. 12 times 9 equals 108.

**Goddess names:** There are said to be 108 Indian goddess names.

**Gopis of Krishna:** In the Krishna tradition, there were said to be 108 gopis or maid servants of Krishna.

**1, 0, and 8:** Some say that 1 stands for God or higher Truth, 0 stands for emptiness or completeness in spiritual practice, and 8 stands for infinity or eternity.

**Sun and Earth:** 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.

**Moon and Earth:** The average distance of the Moon from the Earth is 108 times the diameter of the Moon.

**Silver and the moon:** In astrology, the metal silver is said to represent the moon. The atomic weight of silver is 108.

**Numerical scale:** The 1 of 108, and the 8 of 108, when added together equals 9, which is the number of the numerical scale, i.e. 1, 2, 3 ... 10, etc., where 0 is not a number.

**Meditations:** Some say there are 108 styles of meditation.

**Breath:** Tantra estimates the average number of breaths per day at 21,600, of which 10,800 are solar energy, and 10,800 are lunar energy.

Multiplying 108 by 100 is 10,800. Multiplying 2 x 10,800 equals 21,600.

**Paths to God:** Some suggest that there are 108 paths to God.

**Smaller divisions:** The number 108 is divided, such as in half, third, quarter, or twelfth, so that some malas have 54, 36, 27, or 9 beads.

**Hinduism:** 108 is said to refer to the number of Hindu deities. Some say that each of the deities has 108 names.

**Islam:** The number 108 is used in Islam to refer to God.

**Jain:** In the Jain religion, 108 are the combined virtues of five categories of holy ones, including 12, 8, 36, 25, and 27 virtues respectively.

**Sikh:** The Sikh tradition has a mala of 108 knots tied in a string of wool, rather than beads.

**Buddhism:** Some Buddhists carve 108 small Buddhas on a walnut for good luck. Some ring a bell 108 times to celebrate a new year. There

are said to be 108 virtues to cultivate and 108 defilements to avoid.

**Chinese:** The Chinese Buddhists and Taoists use a 108 bead mala, which is called su-chu, and has three dividing beads, so the mala is divided into three parts of 36 each. Chinese astrology says that there are 108 sacred stars.

**Stages of the soul:** Said that Atman, the human soul or center goes through 108 stages on the journey.

**Meru:** This is a larger bead, not part of the 108. It is not tied in the sequence of the other beads. It is the quiding bead, the one that marks the beginning and end of the mala.

**Dance:** There are 108 forms of dance in the Indian traditions.

**Praiseworthy souls:** There are 108 qualities of praiseworthy souls.

**First man in space:** The first manned space flight lasted 108 minutes, and was on April 12, 1961 by Yuri Gagarin, a Soviet cosmonaut.