

Rosary as Artifact: From Religious Symbolism to Scientific Implications

Prakriti Mukherjee¹

Abstract: Prayer beads, referred to as a *Japamala* or rosary, are significant artifacts across diverse religious traditions, particularly in Hinduism and Buddhism. This paper aims to explore the importance of prayer beads in Hinduism and Buddhism, with a focus on a comparative analysis between Indian and Chinese traditions. *Japamala*, which typically consists of 108 beads, is utilized for mantra recitation, breath counting, and the enhancement of mindfulness and concentration. In Buddhism, the philosophical emphasis lies on the transformative power of mantra recitation and the development of Bodhicitta. In contrast, Chinese Buddhist prayer beads, termed “Fo Zhu” or Buddha beads, may exhibit variations in bead count and incorporate culturally significant materials such as jade. The philosophical approach within Chinese Buddhism emphasizes the integration of mind, body, and spirit, along with fostering virtue in daily life. This study explores the ontological importance of prayer beads as concrete symbols of spiritual ideas, the epistemological impacts of their usage, and the phenomenology of practices involving prayer beads. Additionally, it investigates the metaphysical aspects of prayer beads, their role in connecting the physical and spiritual dimensions, and the ethical aspects related to their use in moral growth and the cultivation of virtues. By comparing the application of *Japamala* in both Indian and Chinese Buddhism, this research seeks to elucidate similarities and differences in practice, interpretation, and philosophical foundations, thereby demonstrating how spiritual tools can be adapted to resonate with local beliefs, philosophies, and ways of life.

Keywords: Artifact, Mindfulness, Recitation, Spiritual Practices, Tactile Sensation

¹ Prakriti Mukherjee, Doctoral Candidate at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Macau, Avenida da Universidade Taipa, Macau, China. Institutional Email: yc07704@um.edu.mo

Introduction

Prayer beads, known as *Japamala* or rosary², are significant artifacts in various religious traditions, particularly in Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism. This paper examines the significance of prayer beads within the contexts of Hinduism and Buddhism, with a particular emphasis on a comparative analysis between Indian and Chinese Buddhism. The research examines the philosophical, spiritual, and potentially scientific aspects of using prayer beads in religious practices. In Indian Buddhism, prayer beads, known as malas, typically consist of 108 beads and are used for mantra recitation, breath counting, and cultivating mindfulness and concentration. Chinese Buddhist prayer beads, known as “Fo Zhu” (佛珠) or Buddha beads, may vary in bead count and incorporate culturally significant materials, such as jade. The philosophical emphasis in the use of prayer beads may differ between these traditions, with Indian Buddhism focusing on the transformative power of mantra recitation and the cultivation of bodhicitta. At the same time, Chinese Buddhism places a greater emphasis on harmonizing the mind, body, and spirit, as well as cultivating virtue in daily life. The study also examines the potential scientific implications of using prayer beads, specifically in relation to tactile sensations and their impact on the body and mind. By comparing the use of prayer beads in Indian and Chinese Buddhism, this research aims to highlight similarities and differences in practice and interpretation, demonstrating how spiritual tools can be adapted to resonate with local beliefs, philosophies, and ways of life.

Prayer beads are considered artifacts, defined as objects made, affected, used, or modified by humans. Typically small, circular, and perforated, these beads are strung together to form a loop. While the number of beads can vary, 108 is a standard count in many

² The term "rosary" is predominantly associated with Christianity, whereas "Japamala" is the term used within Indian and Buddhist traditions. The nomenclature varies with language; thus, in English, "rosary" is often employed to denote *Japamala*. In this context, "rosary" does not pertain to the Christian rosary but rather refers to a string of prayer beads or *Japamala*. The two words *Japamala* and rosary are interchangeably used.

traditions. The use of prayer beads transcends religious boundaries, serving as tools for meditation, prayer, and spiritual practice. This study aims to investigate the role of prayer beads in Hinduism and Buddhism, with a particular focus on their significance in Indian and Chinese Buddhist traditions. It seeks to understand the spiritual significance of these artifacts and explore potential connections between their tactile properties and the psychological or physiological effects they may have. The paper will examine the historical context of prayer beads, their various forms and uses across different cultures, and their evolution from purely religious objects to items with broader cultural and even fashion-related significance. By comparing the use of prayer beads in Indian and Chinese Buddhism, this research aims to highlight similarities and differences in practice and interpretation. Additionally, the study will examine whether the use of prayer beads can be viewed not only as a spiritual practice but also as a potential scientific habit, particularly in relation to tactile sensations and their effects on the body and mind.

Historical Background and Description of the Rosary

The Rosary is utilized across numerous religions worldwide. It is regarded as a widely employed religious artifact. Rosaries are acknowledged as significant artifacts in various spiritual practices. A rosary is an arrangement of beads or knots employed to enhance memory and facilitate the enumeration of prayers or recitations of the Divine name or attributes. The quantity, configuration, and material differ based on tradition; however, the concepts they represent are universal. Irrespective of belief, pausing at a bead serves to reconnect one with their center and self. The term 'bead' elucidates and fortifies the significance, as well as the transcendental purpose, of prayer beads, which derive from the Sanskrit 'buddh' (self-realisation) and Saxon 'bidden' (to pray).³ The

³ Gray Henry and Susannah Marriott, *Beads of Faith: Pathways to Meditation and Spirituality Using Rosaries Prayer Beads, and Sacred Words* (United States: Fons Vitae, 2008), 10.

beads⁴ existing in a rosary are “A small, circular, tubular, or oblong ornament with a perforated centre; usually made from shell, stone, bone, or glass.”⁵ Thus, “Prayer beads are an artifact, they are a bead or group of beads used in prayer.”⁶ A rosary, which is used during prayer, is a group of prayer beads put into a single string. The counting of the beads varies, but the most common is 108 beads in a string. To define a rosary as an artifact, there is a need to define what an artifact is. According to Barbara Ann Kipfer;

An artifact is “Any object (article, building, container, device, dwelling, ornament, pottery, tool, weapon, work of art) made, affected, used, or modified in some way by human beings. It may range from a coarse stone or a needle to a pyramid or a highly technical accomplishment— and these objects are used to characterize or identify a people, culture, or stage of development. The most common artifacts are pieces of broken pottery, stone chips, projectile points, and tools. The environment may play a part in the nature of an artifact if it has been seriously altered by man through fire, house and road construction, agricultural practices, etc. Therefore, the line is sometimes hard to draw between a natural object and one used by man, but there is no doubt when it can be shown that man shaped it in any way, even if only accidentally in the course of use. Artifacts are individually assignable to ceramic, lithic, metal, or organic, or other lesser-used categories. A sociotechnic artifact is a tool that is used primarily in the social realm. A technomic artifact is a tool that is used primarily to deal with the physical environment.”⁷

Rosaries are ubiquitously accessible. They are commonly recognized as being associated with religious and spiritual practices. Nevertheless, the concept of rosaries is not a recent development.

⁴ For more details about history of beads please refer to papers like Kenoyer, Jonathan Mark, “History of stone beads and drilling: South Asia,” *Stone beads of South and Southeast Asia: archaeological, ethnographic and global connections* (2017): 127-150.

⁵ Barbara Ann Kipfer, “Beads,” in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Archaeology* (United States: Springer US, 2013), 147.

⁶ Barbara Ann Kipfer, “Prayer Beads,” *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Archaeology* (United States: Springer US, 2013), 1092.

⁷ Barbara Ann Kipfer, “Artifacts,” *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Archaeology* (United States: Springer US, 2013), 92.

While the specific design of a string comprising a series of beads may not be particularly old, the utilization of prayer beads has a long-standing history, with numerous examples documented throughout human history, readily available in various museums.⁸ In Sanskrit, rosaries are referred to as “*Japa-mala*,” or muttering chaplet⁹ where the term “*mala*”¹⁰ signifies ‘garland.’ This denotes a loop of beads utilized to chant or count mantras in various religions, especially in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. These beads are employed for the explicit purpose of counting the recitations (*japa*)¹¹ of mantras, prayers, or other sacred phrases. Furthermore, they are utilized to ward off malevolent forces and to tally repetitions within other forms of sadhana (spiritual practice), such as prostrations before a holy icon. In addition, *Japamalas* function as symbols of religious identity.¹²

The one mostly used in the above-mentioned religions consists of 108 beads, with a distinctive one big in the middle and a tassel to mark the beginning and end of the cycle, as rosaries are circular. This big bead can be called by different names in different religions and cultures. In Hinduism, it can be called a “*guru bead*” or “*meru bead*.” The term “*guru bead*” is more often used in Buddhism as it represents not a guru or a teacher but Buddha himself. The term “*meru*” brings to mind the legendary sacred mountain that stands at the heart of the Hindu cosmic universe, serving as the divine throne of Lord *Vishnu*. In Hinduism, the number 108 holds spiritual significance, representing the twelve astrological houses and the nine planets within the solar system.¹³ This bead in a rosary (*guru* or *meru* bead), can be made out of

⁸ Monier Monier-Williams, *Modern India and the Indians. Being a Series of Impressions, Notes, and Essays* (United Kingdom: Trübner and Company, 1879).

⁹ John Desmond Miller, *Beads and Prayers: The Rosary in History and Devotion* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2002), 78.

¹⁰ Please concern Apte, Vaman Shivaram, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* for the Sanskrit word explanation and meaning.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Henry and Marriott, *Beads of Faith: Pathways to Meditation and Spirituality Using Rosaries, Prayer Beads, and Sacred Words*. Moss Michel, “Prayer Beads in Japanese Sōtō Zen,” in *Zen and Material Culture* (United States: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹³ Henry and Marriott, *Beads of Faith*, 62 and 79.

various materials, including wood, stone, gems, bone, and precious metals. The *meru* bead marks the end of the counting of one round. In Buddhism, the rosary serves a function analogous to that in Hinduism. However, the central bead, as previously mentioned, is designated as the “guru” bead. This designation underscores its role as a reminder to practitioners of the significance of having a spiritual teacher. In the Sanskrit language, “gu” translates to “dark” and “ru” translates to “light.” The guru guides practitioners from spiritual darkness towards enlightenment, or the Light. This symbolism holds particular relevance in Buddhism, where the Buddha occupies the role of a teacher.¹⁴ However, at times, rosaries utilized in Buddhism may comprise various forms of beads in addition to the *guru* bead and the principal mala beads. According to Gray Henery and Susannah Marriott, the sequence of regular mala beads may be interrupted with accent beads of another material, perhaps at bead numbers 21 and 27. The jyuzu features four equally spaced, smaller beads representing the four virtues of the Buddha’s life. There are also two larger mother and father beads, both representing the Buddha. Cylindrical, jar-shaped beads act as receptacles for storing benefits accrued through chanting, and in some traditions, they signify knowledge or emptiness.¹⁵ The rosary in Buddhism may feature tassels on one end, adorned with additional beads hanging out. These elements primarily serve a decorative purpose and are not integrated into the practice of chanting. Occasionally, the aesthetic appeal is enhanced when the rosary is worn on the hand for safekeeping, with the excess portion hanging out; its appearance resembles that of a two-layered bracelet.

In addition to these religions, the use of the rosary is a common practice in other major religions, such as Christianity. While traditionally associated with spiritual and religious activities, it has now also become a fashion accessory. The use of the rosary has transcended the boundaries of theism and atheism. Just as religious discourse has evolved, so too has the discourse surrounding the use and connection with rosaries. The appearance and usage of everything have undergone significant changes.

¹⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Although the reasoning behind modern usage may not be entirely new, contemporary thinking has transformed it into a new pattern of use. Historically, beads were associated with the planets and the human body, with the belief that wearing specific beads could confer particular benefits. This belief persists, but the manner and style of wearing them have evolved over generations. This paper aims to trace the journey from the spiritual and religious reasoning behind using a rosary to its scientific application, akin to a bracelet. It seeks to establish a connection between the historical, spiritual, and religious justifications for rosaries and the current scientific rationale related to the tactile properties of stones. Thus, the rosary and prayer beads are presented as artifacts here, necessitating an explanation of what prayer beads are. This will illustrate how the rosary is also considered an artifact. Since the paper focuses on a comparative study of the Indian and Chinese use of rosaries, its scope will be limited accordingly. However, in doing so, it will also provide necessary descriptions and details about other religious practices involving the rosary, as history encompasses more than a single perspective.

Importance of Japamala in Hinduism

Most authors who have written about rosaries and their origins, along with their history, mention that the use of rosaries likely originated in India within Hinduism and was subsequently adopted in other religions.¹⁶ Monier-Williams suggests that *Japamala*, like the invention of the *Sutras*—concise memorial rules for the proper execution of complex rituals—arose out of necessity. No other country in the world requires such aids for religious practices as this one does. *Vaishnavas*, *Shaivas*, Buddhists, Jains, and Muhammadans rely on these devices to ensure the precise fulfillment of their endless daily repetitions.¹⁷

¹⁶ Henry and Marriott, *Beads of Faith*, 59. Monier-Williams, *Modern India and the Indians: Being a Series of Impressions, Notes, and Essays*, 110. Michel Mross, "Prayer Beads in Japanese Sōtō Zen," 102. John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2003), 118.

¹⁷ Monier-Williams, *Modern India and the Indians: Being a Series of Impressions, Notes, and Essays*, 110.

The probable rationale for this is that it facilitates mindfulness and meditation, a topic that will be explored in detail in the subsequent sections of this paper.

The *Japamala* is used to repeat mantras or Divine names through *japa yoga*, a devotional act. Sculptures illustrating this practice have been found dating back to the Mauryan Shunga dynasty (185–73 BCE) in northern India.¹⁸ These works of art showcase humanity’s enduring quest to overcome temporal attachments. By repeating sacred names on malas, sin is cancelled out, and worldly distractions are minimised. Constant invocation of holy names and syllables brings devotees closer to God, revealing the true nature of humankind: pure, eternal, and free.¹⁹ In Hinduism, liberation and self-realisation, or moksha, is the final union with the Supreme. This is achieved through service, devotion, and total self-surrender. Devotees on the *Japamala* recite sacred formulae, mantras, or the names of deities. *Mantra*²⁰ or a combination of word recitations is believed to erase sin from within and sanctify the worshipper. Chanting the holy names of Divine incarnations, such as *Rama* or *Krishna*, is believed to transform the physical body into a spiritual one, enabling the believer to reach *ananda*, a state of transcendental bliss where the ego merges with the Divine.²¹ Through sadhana, or devotional meditation and prayer, the exterior world of duplicity and separateness is left behind. While the mind and body are occupied with the movement of beads and the repetition of a single word or phrase, one withdraws into a place of stillness and completeness. Dualities, such as inside and outside, male and female, presence and absence, body and soul, begin to dissolve. An attempt is made to achieve samadhi, the realisation of the interconnectedness of all things,

¹⁸ Henry and Marriott, *Beads of Faith*, 60.

¹⁹ Ibid., 59. Monier-Williams, *Modern India and the Indians: Being a Series of Impressions, Notes, and Essays*, 110.

²⁰ The Sanskrit word “mantra” derives from “manas” (mind), and “traī” (to free from), “deliver” or “protect.” A mantra literally protects the mind and frees it from the world. It is not an end in itself, but a way to approach the ultimate truth. Henry and Marriott, *Beads of Faith: Pathways to Meditation and Spirituality Using Rosaries, Prayer Beads, and Sacred Words*, 64.

²¹ Henry and Marriott, *Beads of Faith*, 60. Monier-Williams, *Modern India and the Indians: Being a Series of Impressions, Notes, and Essays*, 110-112.

which are part of the same Divine Essence.²² This knowledge enables the faithful to comprehend how *Brahman*, the all-pervading God, is also manifest in *Atman*, the self, and every other thing, as expounded in the *Upanishads*. The rosary used by *Vaishnavas* is crafted from the wood of the *Tulsi*, also known as holy basil, a shrub venerated in the context of *Vishnu* and considered a manifestation of *Rama's* wife, *Sita*. This *Japamala* is traditionally composed of 108 smooth beads. In contrast, the *Japamala* worn by *Shaivas* comprises either thirty-two or, at times, sixty-four berries from the *Rudraksha* tree (*Elaeocarpus ganitrus roxburgii*).²³ These seeds possess a rough texture, unlike the smoothness of *Tulsi* beads, and are typically characterized by five distinct lines. The rough texture is believed to represent the austerities associated with the worship of Lord Shiva, with the five lines symbolizing the deity's five faces or distinct attributes.²⁴ *Rudraksha* beads, also known as the “eye of Lord Shiva,” as the Sanskrit word “*rudra*” denotes Shiva and “*aksha*” refers to the eye, thus the “eye of Shiva.”²⁵ However, some scholars may refer to *Rudraksha* as representing the tears of Shiva.²⁶ The Shiva legend²⁷ mentions that *Rudraksha* is the tears of Rudra (or Shiva), which he let fall in a rage (some say in grief) and which crystallized into this form.²⁸ The meaning of which is that use of it will end your sorrows and heal your ailments (Which refers to any illness, mental and physical). *Rudraksha* beads evoke the austere lifestyle of an ascetic or *sannyasi*, who forsakes worldly possessions for a life of wandering. Semi-precious stones are also deemed appropriate for malas, as they connect deities with planets in

²² Ibid.

²³ Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, *Genealogy of the South-Indian Gods: A Manual of the Mythology and Religion of the People of Southern India, Including a Description of Popular Hinduism* (India: Higginbotham, 1869), 27. Monier-Williams, *Modern India and the Indians: Being a Series of Impressions, Notes, and Essays*, 110.

²⁴ Monier-Williams, *Modern India and the Indians: Being a Series of Impressions, Notes, and Essays*, 110. Henry and Marriott, *Beads of Faith*, 63.

²⁵ John Desmond Miller, *Beads and Prayers: The Rosary in History and Devotion* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2002), 79.

²⁶ Henry and Marriott, *Beads of Faith*, 63.

²⁷ Please refer to *Shiva-Purana* for the descriptions and use of *Rudraksha*.

²⁸ Miller, *Beads and Prayers: The Rosary in History and Devotion*, 79.

Jyotish, the Indian astrological system. For example, ruby is associated with the Sun and *Brahma*. Consequently, the *Japamala* is consistently accorded special care and respect. It is not permitted to come into contact with the ground, nor is it to be treated as an object of idle curiosity. The role of the mala is to create a devotional focus and concentration of attention. It involves the body with finger movements and the mind with invocations. The object and its accompanying rituals prepare the soul to leave the everyday and enter a sacred dimension. Counting beads measures out the immeasurable, where dualities and a sense of the horizontal dimension cease.²⁹

Importance of Japamala or Chinese FoZhu 佛珠 in Buddhism

In India, Buddhist rosaries appear to exhibit minimal variation from those utilized by Hindus. Certain *Japamalas* are crafted from more expensive materials than others, with the most valuable composed of turquoise, coral, amber, silver, pearls, or additional gemstones. Individuals of lower socioeconomic status typically possess *Japamala* beads made from wood, pebbles, berries, or bone, and they often content themselves with merely 30 or 40 beads.³⁰ Following the introduction of Buddhism to China,³¹ the *Japamala* were also introduced, undergoing gradual development in form. In Chinese Buddhism, prayer beads—more precisely referred to as Buddha beads or *fozhu* (佛珠)—serve as both essential religious instruments and carriers of Buddhist cultural heritage. The term "recitation beads" or "prayer beads" or "*nianzhu*" (念珠) is more general. The recitation beads are described as tools to assist with chanting practices, or as "mindfulness beads", implying that "chanting supports meditation and can even be considered a form of it."³² To distinguish among the different names, the recitation or

²⁹ Henry and Marriott, *Beads of Faith*, 63.

³⁰ Miller, *Beads and Prayers: The Rosary in History and Devotion*, 80.

³¹ For the history of Buddhism traveling from India to China and then traveling to Japan establishing the Zen Buddhism please read Smart, Ninian. *The World's Religions*, 124-152.

³² Michel Mross, "Prayer Beads in Japanese Sōtō Zen," *Zen and Material Culture* (United States: Oxford University Press, 2017), 106.

prayer beads utilized in Chinese Buddhism are consistently referred to as Buddha beads or *fozhu* (佛珠), indicating their purpose in venerating the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The evolution of prayer beads was closely associated with the practice of *nianfo* (念佛) or Buddha-recitation, as well as the dissemination of Pure Land Buddhism. Transitioning from mental contemplation to counting with beans and eventually using beads, Buddha beads became widely adopted by the populace. In early Indian Buddhism, *nianfo* originally denoted the contemplation of the great deeds, supreme virtues, and majestic forms of the Buddha, guiding practitioners toward introspection and purification to ultimately attain Nirvana. Initially, *nianfo* was a meditative practice akin to *guru yoga* in Tibetan Buddhism,³³ except its focus was directly on the Buddha or Bodhisattvas rather than a guru. A Tibetan mala, or *trengwa*, may be adorned with ghaus prayer boxes and appears more ornate than its Hindu precursor. The “eternal knots” symbolically acknowledge the interconnectedness of all things. Two separate cords of 10 beads or discs terminate in thunderbolt pendants, known as dorjes, or small bells. These permit the counting of 20 rounds, forwards and backwards, of the 108 beads, making 10,080 repetitions of a single mantra theoretically possible in one go!³⁴ In Buddhism, chanting is not limited to a small number. The suggested count for chanting varies, with some suggesting a million or even more. Consequently, the concept of beads also changes. A simple rosary of 108 beads is insufficient for completing such a large number of chants. Therefore, the significance of the beads plays a role in this. While the number of beads can vary significantly, the standard is often 108, a number rich with symbolic meanings. It can signify the 108 meditations and the 108 passions

³³ The paper primarily examines the role of rosaries in Hinduism and Chinese Buddhism. Historically, however, rosaries accompanied Buddhism as it spread to different countries. This historical context makes it difficult to clearly differentiate the various Buddhist practices involving rosaries. Although their usage varies across countries based on local customs and rituals, making precise distinctions is challenging. Consequently, it is sometimes necessary to discuss the use of rosaries in other Buddhist traditions to bolster the paper's argument.

³⁴ Henry and Marriott, *Beads of Faith*, 79.

recognized in Buddhism, which arise from the six senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and consciousness. Each sense is linked to feelings that are either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, resulting in a total of 18 distinct feelings. These can be further categorized as either attached to or detached from pleasure. By multiplying these 18 feelings by the two categories, we get 36 basic passions that manifest over time. Multiplying 36 by the past, present, and future results in 108 passions.³⁵

Fifty-four beads correspond to the fifty-four stages of practice, which include the ten faiths, abidings, practices, transferences, groundings, and four roots of good. Rosaries may have fifty-four beads or two strands of fifty-four each. Forty-two beads represent the first forty stages plus two enlightenment stages. Twenty-seven beads symbolize the eighteen learned and nine unlearned individuals. Beads of that number represent the fourteen fearless qualities of a Bodhisattva.³⁶ The number of beads holds doctrinal significance, categorizing the teachings. While this complexity may not be suitable for the average layperson, these meanings persist due to enumeration. The rosary functions as a catechetical tool for those who choose to employ it in this manner. However, with the evolving world and the increasing challenges in people's lives, changes have also occurred in the use of rosaries by laypeople.

Meditation In Hinduism and Buddhism

The preceding discussion has illustrated the significant role that the *Japamala* plays in meditation. Philosophically, within the realm of spirituality, meditation has consistently been regarded as an essential path. Furthermore, in the context of modern life, meditation represents the most compelling path for individuals seeking peace. Consequently, in addition to its importance in spirituality, the *Japamala* has become an indispensable component of contemporary life, even in the absence of spiritual connectedness.

³⁵ Shinshō Hanayama, *The Story of the Juzu* (United States: Bureau of Buddhist Education, Buddhist Churches of America, 1962), 5.

³⁶ George Joji Tanabe, "Telling Beads: The Forms and Functions of the Buddhist Rosary in Japan," *Publikationen.unituebingen*, 2012, 5.

Chanting a particular sound consists of vibrational energy. Similarly, in the Indian *Vedic* tradition, mantras possess a unique blend of sounds³⁷ that, when repeated, whether aloud or silently, release vibrational energy. This energy establishes a pattern of reactions in the mind and body, potentially facilitating spiritual transformation and drawing individuals closer to God. There are three main types of mantras: abstract sounds, such as *Om*, which represent the Absolute; invocations of specific deities; and seed mantras derived from Sanskrit sounds. A *mantra* should be chosen and bestowed upon an individual by a *guru* or *mantrakara* (mantra-maker). This sacred transmission is passed down through generations from the original ancient *rishi*, the seer who first received it. The strict rules governing the sound's pronunciation, duration, pitch, and intonation ensure that a *mantra* remains in its vibrant, original form.

Chanting "Om", regarded as the primordial sound from which the universe is said to originate, holds significant reverence. Pronounced as Om, it is believed to be the original source of all language, the eternal syllable that simultaneously encompasses past, present, and future. No mantra is considered more powerful than this; all other sounds are derived from it, akin to how the pantheon of Hindu deities represents various aspects of a singular Supreme Being. On a physical level, chanting Om exerts profound effects, such as clearing the mind, opening energy channels, and enhancing awareness. Spiritually, Om provides a direct pathway to a profound state of understanding, liberated from human failings such as ignorance, desire, and delusion. Om embodies the three aspects of God in its three audible syllables: "A" represents Brahma, the Creator; "O or U (the sound)" signifies Vishnu, the Preserver; and "M" denotes Shiva, the Destroyer, as Om is pronounced "Aah-ooo-mmm." Each repetition brings the practitioner into the presence of these Divine principles and into union with the three energies, or *gunas*, that underlie everything in the universe. These

³⁷ Each tradition can be characterized by a distinct auditory profile, setting it apart from others. For instance, the sounds associated with Buddhism differ from those of other Indian traditions. This distinction arises from the specific set of words chanted, which produce unique sounds. These varied sounds generate different vibrational energies.

syllables also symbolize the three states of time - past, present, and future - and the three states of consciousness - waking, dreaming, and sleeping - from which humankind seeks liberation. The profound meaning of Om facilitates a permanent meditation practice. In addition to chanting Om, individuals may chant the name of the deity they believe in. This practice again represents sound as the name of the deity embodies the essence; the name is merely a vibrational energy of the essence. The constant repetition of the name eventually brings the devotee into union with these divine qualities, initiating the necessary process of self-dissolution.

In contrast to other religious traditions, the usage of a rosary in Buddhism is not linked to the worship of any deity. Nevertheless, the sound "Om" is also present in Buddhism. While its meaning may differ, the sound holds equal significance within the Buddhist tradition. Buddhists focus their attention not on a divine figure, but rather on attaining a supreme state of existence: enlightenment or nirvana. In one of the most widely practiced forms of Buddhism in China and Japan, this ultimate reality can be attained through the recitation of the name of Amitabha Buddha. This chant, repeated three times in reference to the Buddha dharma (spiritual teachings) and the sangha (the Buddhist community), conveys the remembrance invoked with mala beads, which guides the devotee towards this elevated state of being. The phrase translates to "I take refuge in the Buddha of Infinite Light."³⁸ Chanting with a string of 108 prayer beads helps the Buddhist faithful to reach an interior state of supreme reality beyond time and place. In his silent flower sermon, Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha (563-483 BCE), when asked to shed light on Buddhist laws, merely held up a flower and gazed at it in silence.³⁹ This silence corresponds to the mystic calm reigning within the supreme state of nirvana. The word derives from the Sanskrit verb nir-va, meaning "to blow out", very like a candle. It suggests the extinguishing of ingrained thought and behaviour patterns based on human attachment to sensual pleasures, which bring with them hatred, jealousy, anger, and delusion.

³⁸ Henry and Marriott, *Beads of Faith*, 76.

³⁹ Ibid., 75.

Meditating with mala beads on this present state of samsara, or the cyclical nature of attachment and suffering, enables you to become aware that, as everything you desire and cherish must end, so attachment to it is futile. By confronting this truth, Buddhists come to terms with the transience of all things, gradually learning to surrender the illusion of permanence and attain release from temporal bondage.⁴⁰ The use of a rosary in Buddhism, which entails the act of pushing and pulling the beads, is believed to serve the purpose of warding off evil and inviting good fortune and salvation. As a ritualistic instrument, it fills the gap where human effort concludes, transcending the law of karma without contravening it. Ritual, in essence, represents a form of virtuous human conduct; however, the outcomes it engenders surpass what can be attained through moral actions alone. Were the law of karma adequate for salvation, the rosary and its ritualistic potency would not be deemed necessary.⁴¹ Rituals can serve as moral actions that generate karmic outcomes, or they can transcend the karma law, resulting in effects beyond mere retribution. For instance, chanting, which involves reciting scriptures or repeating formulas and phrases, primarily aims to create karmic merit. This is often done, particularly in structured services, without any specific request other than accumulating merit, although chanting can undoubtedly be used to seek something specific.

On the other hand, prayer is typically a form of supplication, a request for some benefit, rather than a means of accumulating merit, although it is also a virtuous act with positive outcomes.⁴² The benefits of chanting and prayer lie in their combination of virtuous behaviour and ritual power. The third role of chanting and prayer is to express reverence or piety. In everyday practice, this is perhaps the most common way the rosary is used, as people place it around their hands as a sign of reverence rather than for merit accumulation or invoking ritual power. For many, praying or showing reverence without a rosary feels incomplete, akin to trying,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Tanabe, "Telling Beads: The Forms and Functions of the Buddhist Rosary in Japan," 14-16.

⁴² Ibid.

as Rennyo described, to grasp the Buddha with bare hands.⁴³ The rosary primarily serves as a tool for the hands, and its meanings are intertwined with the significance of reverent hand gestures. However, in the contemporary global landscape, the utilization of the rosary in its traditional form may be perceived as less significant by lay believers, as well as by non-believers who adopt it ceremoniously. Consequently, it is sometimes worn on the wrist. Adherents may don the rosary with genuine faith and a profound understanding of its significance. Conversely, non-believers may choose to wear rosaries in the form of bracelets to establish a tactile connection, often believing that it will bestow good fortune upon them, which can be interpreted as a form of material value of a rosary.

Throughout history, the function of the rosary has undergone substantial transformation. John Kieschnick elucidates the changes during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), during which court beads underwent significant modification.⁴⁴ The reminders, previously attached to the central bead, were repositioned to extend from the sides of the bead string, ascending upwards.⁴⁵ This modification implies that they were no longer utilized to count the number of times a devotee circled the rosary. Despite Qing officials' awareness of the rosary's Buddhist origins and functions, they repurposed it for entirely different objectives. Within the court, the rosary evolved from a symbol for Buddhist laypeople or monks to a representation of political status. Ritual specialists at the court meticulously differentiated between the rosaries of the emperor, empress, civil officials, military officials, and others, thereby reinforcing its significance as a political emblem. Concurrently, these figures enhanced the rosary's symbolic power by attributing various meanings to it, thereby associating it and its owner with a broader cosmology that diverged from its Buddhist origins.⁴⁶

In a similar vein, when ritual specialists at the Qing court embraced the rosary as a symbol of court rank, they did not invoke Buddhist recitation and promptly redefined the significance of the

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*, 137.

⁴⁵ Lois Sherr Dubin, *The History of Beads* (New York: Abrams, 1987), 70.

⁴⁶ Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*, 137.

beads for their own objectives.⁴⁷ However, to suggest that the rosary possessed an inherent significance would be misleading. There was no intrinsic meaning to the rosary that persisted despite attempts by others to alter it. Historically, the beads themselves possessed no inherent meaning; significance is attributed to them solely through the efforts of various social groups—whether monks, connoisseurs, or emperors—who endeavor to imbue the beads with meaning.⁴⁸ Consequently, as the rosary transitioned from one group to another, its meaning evolved from a sacred devotional object with specific symbolic content to an aesthetically pleasing curio, and finally to a marker of rank within a clearly defined bureaucratic hierarchy. Currently, this diversity has expanded, and the rosary is used by individuals with varying interpretations. Often, the stones or materials used in the beads are associated with astrological and medicinal values, which is why individuals wear them in their traditional 108-bead form or shorter versions on their hands. The aesthetic value has also captured the interest of the present generation. In addition to believing in its traditional and scientific value, they appreciate it for its aesthetic appeal. The values of a rosary cannot be precisely defined, as they hold different meanings for different individuals. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the rosary, in its modern form, has endured throughout history. Moreover, it holds significant value in countries such as India and China. In every region of these countries, different types of rosaries, particularly those worn on the hands, are prevalent among the current generation, facilitating a connection between mind and body in general. Most religious traditions use prayer beads, but this paper specifically focuses on the comparative studies between Indian and Chinese practices regarding the contemporary use of rosaries. It examines the significance of prayer beads within these faiths, their philosophical and spiritual connections, and whether they can be considered scientific practices due to their tactile sensations. This exploration has led to the modern trend of wearing rosaries as bracelets. Such bracelets can symbolize different aspects, including philosophical beliefs, religious faith, astrology, or personal aesthetic preferences. While using prayer beads for prayer

⁴⁷ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

is recognized as a spiritual practice, it raises an intriguing question: can it also be deemed a scientific habit due to the tactile sensations involved, which connect the body and mind? This question is fascinating yet challenging to answer. Currently, the use of *Japamala* is more closely linked to various astrological meanings.

The Scientific connotation of Japamala

The *Japamala* encompasses various scientific dimensions, particularly concerning the acoustic properties and medicinal applications of the seeds employed. Both *Rudraksha* and *Tulsi* possess notable medicinal value and utility. The beads, crafted from stones and other materials, also exhibit medicinal properties, with tactile sensation being a standard feature. During typical use of the *Japamala*, individuals engaged in meditation or religious practices utilize their fingers for counting. Consequently, the sensory experiences involving the eyes, fingers, and the entire body, mediated through the mind, become crucial in these activities. Each participant may derive a unique significance from this practice. Numerous studies conducted globally reveal diverse outcomes across different cultural contexts. Nonetheless, it is sufficient to assert that the impact of *Japamala* is profoundly significant, occasionally benefiting patients with severe conditions such as cancer, heart disease, and acute anxiety.⁴⁹

The prayer beads consist of 108 beads per string, with a central Guru Bead serving as the 109th, as previously noted. A pertinent question arises regarding the rationale behind selecting the number one hundred and eight instead of a simple one hundred,

⁴⁹ For additional reading on the numerous studies conducted regarding the connection between the mind and body, particularly in relation to meditation, please refer to works such as: Jain et al., "A Randomized Controlled Trial of Mindfulness Meditation Versus Relaxation Training: Effects on Distress, Positive States of Mind, Rumination, and Distraction." Hari Sharma, "Meditation: Process and Effects," *AYU (An International Quarterly Journal of Research in Ayurveda)* 36, no. 3 (2015). Mark Blows, *The Relevance of the Wisdom Traditions in Contemporary Society: The Challenge to Psychology* (Netherlands: Eburon, 2004). Jai Paul Dudeja, "Scientific analysis of mantra-based meditation and its beneficial effects: An overview," *International Journal of Advanced Scientific Technologies in Engineering and Management Sciences* 3, no. 6 (2017): 21-26.

as well as the importance of counting mantra repetitions with the rosary. Veena Minocha⁵⁰ provides compelling insights into these inquiries. The number 108 holds cosmic significance; by summing the digits one and eight, we arrive at nine, which signifies the 'completion' of the single-digit series. Progressing from one to nine suggests that all numerological sequences have been encountered and the vibrations of each number have been assimilated. This circle of beads represents the elliptical trajectory of the sun and moon across the sky. Ancient Indian astronomers divided this elliptical path into 27 equal segments, known as 'nakshatras'. The 27 nakshatras are subdivided into four segments each, referred to as 'padas', resulting in a total of 108 steps that the sun and moon traverse to complete their elliptical path. Notably, this number is not coincidental, as the Universal mathematics operates on a Base 12 system, and 108 is the product of twelve and nine, the latter symbolizing completion. Consequently, each step represents a blessing that has been perpetuated through time, and as we turn the 108 beads, we align ourselves with the Universe's complete blessings.⁵¹

After completing the entire rosary cycle and reaching the 109th bead, called the Guru Bead, we attain a mastery of the Mantra we've been chanting. Upon reaching the Guru bead, we must turn the Mala around and start again from the last bead we stopped at. This act symbolizes retracing our journey of realization and carries spiritual significance, harmonizing with the universe's natural rhythms. Consequently, it is considered to be highly scientific. Similarly, Buddhism offers a narrative that underscores the repetitive practice of actions to achieve alignment with one's mind and transcend worldly concepts. This approach facilitates transcendence beyond the material realm. In addition to utilizing a rosary for prayer, the creation of a Mandala represents a comparable concept and significance. The process entails constructing the Mandala without attachment, subsequently

⁵⁰ Veena Minocha, "The Science Behind 108 Beads of the Mala," *Hindustan Times*, February 24, 2004. This newspaper article is cited to shed light on the contemporary perceptions and understanding of rosaries. This analysis provides insights into the current use of modern rosaries and the choices related to their beads.

⁵¹ Minocha, "The Science Behind 108 Beads of the Mala."

followed by its destruction, which serves as an exercise in mental discipline. The regulation of the mind is a crucial, if not central, theme in Buddhism, particularly within the Yogacara school.

Moreover, the Guru Bead serves as a symbol for the summer and winter solstices, during which the sun appears to pause in its elliptical trajectory and subsequently reverses its course. This phenomenon signifies that the sun, having reached its maximum extent in one direction, now retraces its path in the opposite direction. Similar to the oscillation of a pendulum, the sun's movement demonstrates a reciprocal action. Therefore, the practice of inverting the Mala at its conclusion represents the microcosm's imitation of the macrocosm's movements and patterns. This method serves as a poignant reminder of our profound interconnectedness with nature, offering a symbolic representation of the cosmic cycles that govern the Universe.⁵²

Japamala is more than just a simple counting tool for mantras; it is a sacred instrument steeped in spiritual meaning, with its materials and appropriate usage playing vital roles in the practitioner's spiritual path. In Hinduism, Buddhism, and various spiritual traditions, *Japamala* is revered as a sacred device that aids in meditation, focus, and fostering inner peace. The action of sliding through the beads while reciting mantras is believed to synchronize the practitioner's mind and spirit, enhancing their connection with the divine. Moreover, malas often symbolize religious identity and commitment. They are thought to possess a source of sacred power, enhancing the soul's energy, referred to as *Shakti*, which transforms negativity into positivity. This practice helps transcend the duality of the surrounding world, guiding one toward unity and becoming a divine channel. Each mala embodies a potent energy that leads to enlightenment, guiding the wearer from ignorance to knowledge. The universe consists of five elements: earth, fire, water, sky, and air. The five fingers that engage in the movement of the *Japamala* also symbolize these elements. When combined with the sound of mantras, one cultivates a new relationship with the emerging energy, gradually

⁵² Ibid.

transitioning towards positivity, spirituality, and transformation. However, it is essential to follow the correct prescribed methods during this process. The choice of material for a *Japamala* is believed to influence its spiritual potency. For example, *Rudraksha* beads are associated with Lord Shiva, and *Rudraksha malas* are believed to offer protection and promote spiritual growth. *Malas* made with Tulsi beads, derived from the sacred basil plant, are revered for their purifying qualities and are commonly utilized in Vaishnavite practices. Sandalwood *malas* are renowned for their calming aroma and are believed to facilitate meditation and promote tranquility. Quartz crystal *malas* are believed to amplify energy and intentions and are used for various spiritual purposes. These materials are selected not only for their physical properties but also for their symbolic associations within spiritual traditions and scientific reasoning. Using a *Japamala* involves Finger Counting, which has several advantages compared to manual counting. The tactile interaction with the beads aids concentration during mantra recitation and boosts focus. The mala's structured design enables accurate tracking of recitations, which is crucial for practices that require specific numbers. This contributes to consistent repetition for mental development. Additionally, physically handling the mala can strengthen the practitioner's bond with their spiritual practice and the sanctity of the mantras.

The aforementioned discussion encompasses profound philosophical dimensions that merit further exploration in future work on rosaries. Specifically, the ontological significance of prayer beads as physical manifestations of spiritual concepts invites deeper inquiry, while the epistemological implications of using them as tools for understanding Buddhist principles could enhance scholarly dialogue. Additionally, examining the phenomenology of prayer bead practices can provide insight into the subjective experiences of practitioners. There is also a need to consider the metaphysics of prayer beads, focusing on their connection to reality and their role in bridging physical and spiritual realms. The ethical implications surrounding the use of prayer beads as a means of moral development warrant further consideration, alongside the concept of intentionality and its relationship to consciousness and mindfulness. Future studies could explore the aesthetics of prayer

beads and how their beauty reflects spiritual truths, as well as delve into the philosophy of language related to mantras recited with prayer beads. Investigating the roles of time and temporality, including cyclical versus linear perspectives in prayer bead practices, could offer valuable insights. Moreover, the philosophy of mind in relation to meditation practices involving prayer beads, as well as the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) associated with their materiality, warrants attention. The aspects of philosophy of religion, particularly in understanding devotion and faith expressed through prayer beads, should also be examined. The interplay of causality in Buddhist philosophy and its connection to karmic purification via prayer beads can provide fertile ground for future research, as can the analysis of symbolism in how prayer beads represent complex concepts. Lastly, focusing on the philosophy of practice, especially how the repetitive nature of prayer bead use cultivates wisdom and compassion, can significantly contribute to the ongoing academic conversation.

Moreover, the philosophical significance attributed to the utilization of prayer beads may vary considerably. Indian Buddhist traditions frequently emphasize the transformative power inherent in mantra recitation and the cultivation of *bodhicitta* (the aspiration to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings). Conversely, Chinese Buddhist practices, influenced by Taoist and Confucian ideologies, tend to place greater emphasis on harmonizing the mind, body, and spirit, alongside the cultivation of virtue in daily life.

These distinctions in the application and interpretation of prayer beads underscore the dynamic nature of Buddhist practice as it disseminated across diverse cultures. They illustrate how spiritual tools and concepts may be adapted and reinterpreted to resonate with local beliefs, philosophies, and lifestyles, all while preserving their fundamental purpose as aids in daily life, fostering wellbeing, the pursuit of enlightenment, and inner peace.

Conclusion

This paper explores the significance of prayer beads, particularly the *Japamala* or rosary, across various religious traditions, with a

focus on Hinduism and Buddhism in India and China. The study delves into the historical, philosophical, and spiritual aspects of these artifacts, including their potential scientific implications. Key findings highlight the importance of prayer beads in meditation, emphasizing the symbolic significance of the number 108, which holds both spiritual and astronomical connotations. The evolution of prayer bead usage from strictly religious functions to broader cultural and fashion-related significance is also examined. Additionally, the research discusses the tactile sensations associated with prayer bead use and their effects on the body and mind. Differences in the philosophical approaches of Indian and Chinese Buddhist traditions regarding prayer beads are noted, underscoring how spiritual tools can be adapted to resonate with local beliefs while maintaining their fundamental purpose of aiding in spiritual practice and fostering inner peace. Ultimately, the *Japamala* or rosary serves not only as a religious artifact but also as a bridge between spiritual practices and potential scientific benefits, illustrating the complex interplay between tradition, culture, and modern understanding. This comparative study also reveals similarities and differences between Indian and Chinese Buddhism regarding prayer beads, emphasizing their historical and cultural significance, and the philosophical nuances that may emerge in their usage. Materials used for these beads, such as Rudraksha or Tulsi in Hinduism, carry symbolic weight in practice. Furthermore, the tactile nature of using prayer beads may yield psychological advantages, aiding concentration and mindfulness. Their contemporary relevance extends beyond religion, finding roles as fashion accessories and stress management tools. This study illustrates the adaptability of spiritual practices across cultures, while suggesting avenues for future research into the scientific basis of prayer beads' effects, as well as deeper philosophical inquiries into their enduring significance.

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There are various YouTube videos that demonstrate the usage of *Japamala*; some of them include:

<https://youtu.be/OEfecEbdgjY?si=pOQHNLN xuunWF81Z>, accessed on 18th May 2025.

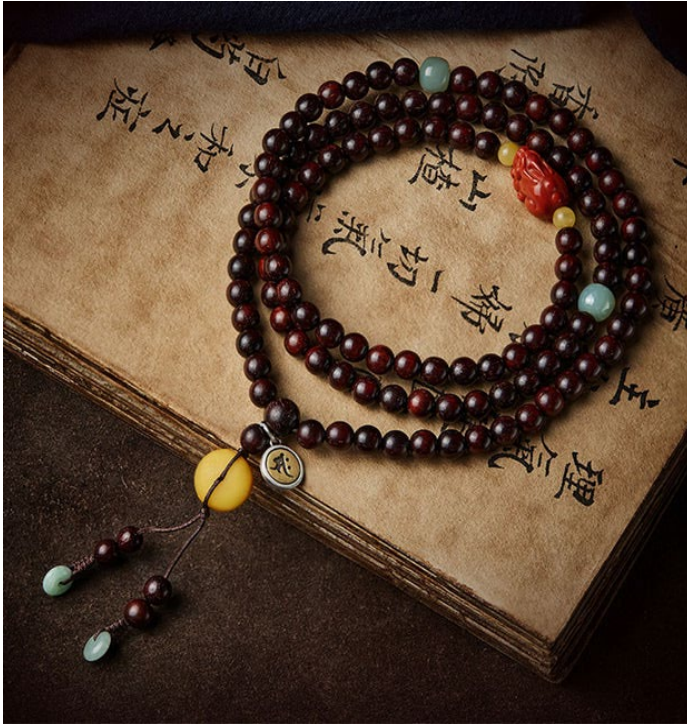
<https://youtu.be/op68neAjiZg?si=v52mAL7oSL-TTpzG>, accessed on 18th May 2025.



Example of a Rudraksha *Japamala*. These are the seeds of the plant Rudraksha. <https://rudrakshayoga.wordpress.com/2013/10/22/spiritual-symbolism-and-significance-of-mala-beadsjapa-mala-in-meditation/>. Accessed on 19th May 2025.



This illustrates a *Tulsi Japamala*. In contrast to the *Rudraksha Japamala*, these mala beads are crafted from the stem of the *Tulsi* plant. <https://images.app.goo.gl/r4R41WcW2FarPGzT8>. Accessed on 19th May 2025.



This image serves as an example of a simpler Buddhist rosary that was used. <https://images.app.goo.gl/VKbDfqdBz5xLf57f7>. Accessed on 19th May 2025.



This image serves as an example of a simpler Buddhist rosary that was used.

<https://images.app.goo.gl/cbSUVsM87ZKmpV6>.

Accessed on 19th May 2025.



The contemporary utilization of *Japamala*, as well as the practice of wearing them on one's hand, presents considerable diversity. The size of the beads, the materials used, and their colors vary according to individual preferences.

<https://images.app.goo.gl/Ho8LUxMqNJBW6qk9>.

Accessed on 19th May 2025.



This is an example of the Japamala that could be worn on the hands with faith in a spiritual connotation or also worn due to its aesthetic beauty.

<https://images.app.goo.gl/E3UB2RETdQvACHdM6>.

Accessed on 19th May 2025.