Sacred Beads

Yogis have used malas to focus their minds during meditation for centuries. Now you can, too.

By Rolf Sovik

Like most children, I learned to pray using simple gestures. I closed my eyes, bowed my head, and sometimes awkwardly folded my hands. In rare instances, I knelt to pray, but that was the extent of my repertoire. A rosary was never part of my family's religious tradition, and I did not understand the purpose for using one. In fact, I associated beads with the string of pearls in my mother's jewelry box—not with prayer at all.

Later, when I began to study yoga, I was surprised to discover a number of students wearing strings of beads around their necks. I could see that some of the necklaces were ornate, but most were made of simple wooden beads—sandalwood or rosewood—strung with colored thread and tasseled at a prominent point on the string. The necklaces resembled rosaries, and so for a time I ignored them, since they were not part of my background. But as my spiritual universe broadened, my interest in those beads increased.

When I received a personal mantra, I was also given a string of beads, a *mala*, for my own use. My curiosity blossomed and I discovered that many students at our yoga center owned malas but simply didn't wear them. When the quiet cue to "sit for meditation" was spoken, lights were darkened, cushions arranged, and malas emerged from pockets and purses all around the room. The mala, it seemed, was an established meditation tool.

The Mala

A mala (Sanskrit for "garland") is a counting device. It is used to count the number of mantra recitations completed during a period of meditation—one repetition per bead. A mala also serves as a physical cue for reciting a mantra. As fingers slide from bead to bead, the mind quietly sustains the mantra even when other thoughts pass through the mind.

A mala usually contains 108 beads (although some malas are made with half or even a quarter of this number). An additional bead, the tasseled bead called the *meru* bead, indicates the beginning and end of each cycle. Despite the fact that the mala has 108 beads, only 100 repetitions are credited for a trip around. Thus, eight "malas" equals 800 repetitions of the mantra. Giving credit for only 100 repetitions per mala makes counting easier, and it also acknowledges the unfortunate fact that the mind is wandering for part of the meditation anyway. (Some say the extra eight repetitions are given away for the benefit of others.)

Good malas have knots between each bead. This prevents the beads from sliding into one another, abrading the string (the *sutra*), and separating as the string stretches with wear. If the knots are tied too tightly the mala will be stiff and won't hang easily in the hand. Conversely, if the knots are too far apart, the beads will slide and wear down the string. So you'll find that a well-tied mala is both a source of comfort and convenience.

Mala beads can be made of many materials. Some are specially suited for particular meditative practices or are thought to have unique properties. For example, malas made of the rudraksha ("eye of Rudra") seed, a seed found in just a few locations in the world, are said to be particularly appropriate for the practice of mantras connected to Shiva. Crystal or zirconium malas can be used for the practice of the *gayatri* mantra, a purifying mantra. Lapis is said to help remove illnesses. Wooden malas are suitable for most mantras, feel comfortable in the hand, and have the virtues of being both light and relatively inexpensive. While selecting an appropriate mala can enhance your practice, do remember that in a world in which objects take on miraculous properties through the relentless efforts of advertisers and marketers, the material of the mala is far less important than the sincerity and one-pointedness with which you bring the mantra to mind.

Using a Mala

Methods for holding and using a mala have been passed along by generations of meditators. Without being secretive, most practitioners keep their mala out of view and refrain from letting others handle it casually. Showing a mala to others is by no means forbidden—the mala is a tool, not a relic. But the mala is usually not worn on the outside of one's clothes, nor paraded for others to examine. The reason is that, after a lengthy period of practice, the association between mantra and mala becomes so strong that show-ing the mala without some purpose feels inappropriate. Among some practitioners, this feeling is so powerful that the hand used for turning the beads of the mala may even be kept in a cloth bag (a *gomukhi*) during practice. Concealing the motion of the hand is equivalent, for them, to modestly concealing the motion of the mind.

One of my meditation teachers took a somewhat more casual view. While he did not make a display of his mala, he did not mind sitting in front of others as he did his meditation practice. I remember often watching his hand turn the beads and thus being drawn into my own practice.

The mala is usually suspended from the ring finger. The middle finger is drawn back slightly to create a small "V" between it and the ring finger. As the mala rests in that V, the thumb pulls the mala bead by bead. Sometimes the thumbnail is needed to hook the bead and pull the mala along. Some practitioners use the tip of the middle finger to help turn the bead as well.

Recently I experimented with changing hands—holding the mala with my non-dominant hand. The experiment reminded me of how clumsy I felt when I first began using a mala. I sometimes lost hold of the beads, found them sliding uncontrollably through my fingers, or dropped them altogether. With patience you can get through this awkward phase, and it's worth the effort. The movement of the mala in the hand is not only a good method for counting mantra repetitions—it also relieves physical tension and helps sustain concentration as meditation sessions increase in length.

When I finish using my mala I often place it in a small ceramic bowl near my meditation seat. My wife and I have enjoyed selecting containers for our malas, and changing the containers from time to time gives new pleasure to the ritual of using them. For traveling, I have a small silk bag that draws tight around the mala. Often I keep the bag or my loose mala in my pocket so that I can use it in the car or on an airplane. I keep a spare mala in what was meant to be the ashtray of our car for use during unexpected lulls. Lately I've begun storing one in my shaving kit as well, because occasionally my mala is accidentally left at home.

Too Laborious?

All this might sound a bit tedious to you, especially if the idea of repeating a mantra itself is also new. But these ritualistic-sounding details simply streamline your concentration effort. The point is to enlist the mala in the service of your practice. Once you have done that, the mala itself is much like your finest writing pen—an implement, yes, but also a symbol. Just as the pen symbolizes your aspiration to communicate good and well-articulated thoughts, the mala symbolizes the subtlest form of yoga practice, the silent prayer or mantra repetition known as *japa*.

The word *japa* means the repetition of a mantra, and therefore another term for the mala used in meditation is *japa-mala*. The two elements of the mala—beads and thread—represent the goals of japa. The beads are the seeds that will grow into a mature knowledge of the Self. The thread is the force joining all beings together and linking each individual to the universal consciousness in which life has its source.

Because of this association with the goals of practice, the mala is sometimes held at the heart center when it is used. There it engenders a feeling of devotion. Others rest the hand using the mala on the thigh. This reduces strain in the arm, especially during longer periods of meditation. In this case, placing a cloth beneath the mala to keep it off the floor is a symbolic way of showing respect for it. You can decide whether such ritualism is helpful to you.

The Meru Bead

The tasseled bead called the *meru* bead is symbolic as well. It represents the state of transcendental consciousness, the central goal of practice. Because of this symbolism, even the person constructing the mala gives special attention to the meru bead. The knot linking it to the other beads is more elaborate than the knots connecting each bead to the next, and the tassel attached to the meru (sometimes called the "guru" bead) is reminiscent of the crown chakra, the peak of spiritual attainment.

By convention, after completing a circuit around the entire mala you do not cross the meru bead. Instead, reposition the mala and return in the other direction. Just like Penelope, the devoted Greek wife of the hero Ulysses, who cleverly wove and then unwove her cloth while waiting for her husband to return from war, the meditator weaves the mala first in one direction and then the other, never fully completing the task. Thus the mind loses its artificiality and haste, but not its determination to reach the goal.

In practice, it is a bit of a trick to negotiate this change in direction without using two hands. You may find the mala slipping from your grasp from time to time. But by holding the last bead with your thumb and third finger and then sliding the ring finger out and reversing the mala's direction before replacing it, you can handle the change quite smoothly. The last bead now becomes the first, and japa begins again.

String of Pearls

In the end, the movement of the mala follows the mind and not the other way around. As you recite your mantra, you will learn to synchronize the reverberation of the sound in your mind with the telling of the beads so that the two flow effortlessly together. Soon the gliding of the mala across your fingers will become automatic, mind and hand moving together in perfect harmony. Then, each bead will mark the mental pulsing of an eternal sound. Each sound is the real pearl.+

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