PRAYER BEADS

A Free Guide from Mayu Sanctuary



Mayu
1804 S. Pearl St.
Denver, CO 80210
www.MayuSanctuary.com

Prayer beads, also called malas, worry beads or meditation beads, have been used for centuries as a device to assist with meditation or contemplative prayer. There are a variety of ways in which the beads are used, whether for developing concentration and focus, or as a counting device, or both.

Meditation Techniques

Prayer beads can be used while reciting, chanting, or mentally repeating an affirmation or mantra, performing prostrations, for counting breaths, or to provide a point of focus without counting.

Number of Beads

The number of beads varies by religion or use. Islamic prayer beads usually have 99 or 33 beads. Buddhists and Hindu strands usually have 108 beads, or 27 which are counted four times. Baha'i prayer beads consist of either 95 beads or 19 beads strung with the addition of five beads below. The Sikh mala also has 108 beads. The secular Greek "komboloi" has an odd number of beads—usually one more than a multiple of four, e.g. (4x4)+1, (5x4)+1. Roman Catholics use the "Rosary" containing 54 with an additional five beads, whereas Eastern Orthodox Christians use a knotted "Rosary" with 100 knots, although "prayer ropes" with 50 or 33 knots can also be used.

Sizes

Prayer beads come in many different lengths depending on the tradition of practice and manner of use. The length of a strand of prayer beads will depend on the material used. A mala made of 108 large bodhi seeds may be three times longer than one made of 108 small tulsi seeds.

Handling

Some traditions encourage prayer beads to be worn around the neck or wrist, while other traditions forbid the beads to be worn at all. (Ornate bags and boxes are often used to store beads when they're not in use.) Prayer beads that are worn around the wrist are often called wrist malas or hand malas. Wrist malas are helpful when you don't have time to recite a full-length mala. Wearing prayer beads can serve as a constant reminder of your commitment to practice, allowing you to practice at any time during the day.

Marker Beads & Counters

Marker beads may be interspersed within a strand to indicate when to do a specific technique or prayer, or to keep track of where you are numerically in the strand. They are typically of a different material or stone from the rest of the strand. They may have a different texture or be separated by smaller decorative elements.

Counters keep track of the number of repetitions performed with a mala. They may hang from the strand itself, set on an altar, or held in the opposite hand of the practitioner.

Material of Beads

Beads can be made from a wide range of materials, from nuts and seeds to rock and bone or semi-precious stones. The material you select for your prayer beads depends on how they will be used.

Prayer beads used for simple counting or chanting can be made of whatever material feels good in the hand and slides easily through the fingers. Some people prefer the unique texture of seeds, the warmth of wood, or the smooth coolness of gemstones. Beads used in conjunction with prostrations should be made of wood, nuts or seeds so they won't break or chip on contact with the floor.

Oftentimes the material of the bead is chosen to enhance a particular style of practice. Wood, nuts and seeds are said to be "absorptive" materials, good for receiving a practitioner's energy thus becoming infused with a specific vibration.

Gemstones are said to be "activating" materials, good for generating energy thereby assisting with techniques such as purifying the mind, connecting with divine power, removing mental disturbances, etc…

Benefits of Meditating with a Mala

- Improved concentration & mindfulness
- More patience
- Skillful sense of effort
- Decreased worry, regret and anxiety
- Increased sense of tranquility & peace

By committing to a pre-determined number of prayer or mantra recitations, or to returning to the breath over and over, a meditator gains great insight.

Mindfulness of this nature reveals the ever-changing, imaginary, impermanent, and unreliable qualities of the ordinary mind. It reveals the clinging we have to our thoughts, as well as our habitual and reflexive response to moods and emotions.

By seeing how the ordinary mind functions, we gradually seek more skillful mind states. By returning to the breath or to our mantra when we become distracted, we break the habits of our ordinary mind. This reveals and encourages the positive transcendent qualities of our True Nature, bringing freedom from suffering and the attainment of peace.

A Recommended Way To Use Prayer Beads

Cultivating mindfulness, peace, and compassion through breath awareness:

1. While holding the first bead next to the guru (large) bead, inhale and exhale, placing your attention on the feeling of the breath. If your mind was completely distracted during the breath, come back to the sensation of the bead between your fingers and the feeling of the inhale and exhale.
2. Don't worry about thoughts coming and going, leave your mind relaxed while keeping most of your attention on the feeling in your fingers and in your nose or mouth while you breath.
3. After completing one mindful breath, move to the next bead and repeat the mindful breath. Every time you become distracted in thought, gently return to the feeling of the bead and the breath, coming back over and over with a sense of peace and non-judgment.
4. Your breath can include your emotional state in the moment; you can take this is an opportunity to feel how you truly feel in an authentic way. Please don't use this as a method to reject or ignore difficult mental or emotional states. This is your opportunity to become intimate and honest with yourself, which is very caring, compassionate and generous.
5. You could make a daily commitment to complete a full mala of mindful breaths, depending on how much time your schedule allows.
6. You could practice while in sitting meditation, or also try it while walking or lying down.
7. As your practice progresses, questions about one's mind, thoughts, and emotions will come up. It can be helpful to share one's experience with a guide, teacher, or fellow meditators to gain new and helpful perspectives. You might seek out a community or sangha of meditators or spiritual aspirants to share with.

Mayu Meditation Sanctuary is your community resource
for meditation supplies, instruction and guidance.

The staff at Mayu is committed to helping you navigate your personal journey through meditation. We welcome your questions and invite you to visit our sanctuary for inspiration.

We offer:

- drop-in meditation with audio guided meditations & teachings
- Colorado's largest selection of meditation supplies
- classes, workshops & retreats in a variety of traditions
- foot baths for complete mind-body relaxation
- private retreat space for solitary practice
- memberships
- and much more!

