

What Are Prayer Beads?

The History and Meaning of Prayer Beads

Over two-thirds of the world's population employ prayer beads as part of their religious practices. Prayer beads have a variety of forms and meanings, but the basic purpose is the same: to assist the worshiper in reciting and counting specific prayers or incantations. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism are the major religions that use prayer beads in important ritualistic roles.

Beads have long been linked with the act of prayer. The English word bead is derived from the Anglo-Saxon words *bidden* ("to pray") and *bede* ("prayer"). The use of beads in prayer appears to have originated with Hindu religious practices in India, possibly around the 8th century B.C.E. Buddhism, which developed from a sect of Hinduism, retained the use of prayer beads as it became established in China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet. It is thought that Islam adopted prayer beads through contact with Buddhism and Hinduism. Prayer beads, in the form of the Catholic rosary, were common throughout Europe by the late Middle Ages.

Hindu and Buddhist *Mala*

Hinduism, one of the oldest living religions, is the major religion of the Indian subcontinent. The two main branches of modern Hinduism—Shaivism and Vaishnavism—employ different types of prayer beads, or *mala*. Shaivists, who are devotees of the god Siva, carry strings of 32 to 108 rudraksha beads made from the seeds of a tree unique to the island of Java in Indonesia. These rough seeds represent the difficult and rigid life required of the worshippers of Siva. Each seed is segmented into five sections, which represent the five faces and personalities of Siva. Vishnu mala consist of carved wooden beads from the sacred basil shrub, or tulsi, and are usually found in strands of 108.

Buddhist mala also typically consist of strands of 108 beads, reflecting the religion's historical connection to Hinduism. In Buddhism, the 108 beads represent the impurities or lies that one must overcome in order to reach Nirvana. Most monks wear 108 beads for use in counteracting their 108 impurities, whereas lay people tend to wear only 30 or 40 beads. The difference in the number of beads used is a result of the spiritual differences in what different people must overcome or how far they have come on the path to enlightenment. Buddhist prayer beads have traditionally been made from the wood or seeds of the sacred Bodhi tree. As Buddhism spread throughout China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet, it was influenced by

the various cultures of those areas and several new materials such as bone, amber, and semi-precious stones began to be used for prayer beads.

Muslim *Subha*

It is not clear exactly when Muslims adopted the use of prayer beads. Known as *subha* ("to exalt"), Muslim prayer beads usually occur in sets of 99 counting beads and an elongated terminal bead. The counting beads are used to recite the 99 attributes of God, with the terminal bead reserved for reciting the name of Allah. Though the number of beads is important, the type of beads used does not hold the importance it does in Hinduism and Buddhism.

Catholic Rosaries

Christian use of beads for reciting prayers began in medieval European monasteries and came into more widespread use to assist the often-illiterate worshippers in keeping track of their prayers. Although they were commonplace by the late Middle Ages, prayer beads were not officially accepted by the Catholic church until Pope Leo X gave the rosary approbation in 1520.

The term rosary is derived from the Latin word *rosarium*, or rose garden, and refers both to the religious exercise of reciting prayers and to the string of prayer beads used to assist in this practice. In Catholicism, the rose is a symbol of perfection; thus the rosary expresses the idea of a permanent garden of prayer. It is used to count the prayers recited in honor of the Virgin Mary while one meditates on scenes of the life of Christ and his mother. This exercise is traditionally repeated three times a day. The "typical" rosary contains 59 beads—six large and 53 small. They are arranged into five decades of 10 small beads and one large bead each plus a pendant of one large and three small beads that terminates in a cross.

Various forms of prayer beads are used in Eastern Orthodoxy, but these are almost exclusive to monastic practices. Eastern Orthodox more commonly use knotted prayer ropes, which serve the same purpose as prayer beads; prayer ropes were common in other religions as well before the introduction of prayer beads.

In the 1980s, a group of clergy melded the Catholic rosary and the Eastern Orthodox prayer rope to create Protestant prayer beads that have seen some popularity. However, Catholicism remains the only branch of Christianity to see widespread adoption of prayer beads in religious practices.

Protestant Prayer Beads

A Form of Contemplative Prayer



Protestant Prayer Beads are a relatively new form of prayer, blending the Orthodox Jesus Prayer Rope and the Roman Catholic Rosary. The thirty-three beads design was created by the Rev. Lynn Bauman in the mid-1980s, through the prayerful exploration and discovery of a contemplative prayer group.

The use of the rosary or prayer beads helps to bring us into contemplative of meditative prayer—really thinking about and being mindful of praying, of being in the presence of God—by use of mind, body, and spirit. The touching of the fingers on each successive bead is an aid in keeping our mind from wandering, and the rhythm of the prayers leads us more readily into stillness.

Symbolism of the Beads

The configuration of the Protestant Prayer Beads relate contemplative prayer using the Rosary to many levels of traditional Christian symbolism. Contemplative prayer is enriched by these symbols whose purpose is always to focus and concentrate attention, allowing the one who prays to move more swiftly into the Presence of God.

The prayer beads are made up of twenty-eight beads divided into four groups of seven called weeks. In the Judeo-Christian tradition the number seven represents spiritual perfection and completion. Between each week is a single bead, called a cruciform bead as the four beads form a cross. The invitational bead between the cross and the wheel of beads brings the total to thirty-three, the number of years in Jesus' earthly life.

Praying with the beads

To begin, hold the Cross and say the prayer you have assigned to it, then move to the Invitatory Bead. Then enter the circle of the prayer with the first Cruciform Bead, moving to the right, go through the first set of seven beads to the next Cruciform bead, continuing around the circle, saying the prayers for each bead.

It is suggested that you pray around the circle of the beads three times (which signifies the Trinity) in an unhurried pace, allowing the repetition to become a sort of lullaby of love and praise that enables your mind to rest and your heart to become quiet and still.

Praying through the beads three times and adding the crucifix at the beginning or the end, brings the total to one hundred, which is the total of the Orthodox Rosary. A period of silence should follow the prayer, for a time of reflection and listening. Listening is an important part of all prayer.

Begin praying the Prayer Beads by selecting the prayers you wish to use for the cross and each bead. Practice them until it is clear which prayer goes with which bead, and as far as possible commit the prayers to memory.

Find a quiet spot and allow your body and mind to become restful and still. After a time of silence, begin praying the prayer beads at an unhurried, intentional pace. Complete the circle of the beads three times.

When you have completed the round of the prayer beads, you should end with a period of silence. This silence allows you to center your being in an extended period of silence. It also invites reflection and listening after you have invoked the Name and Presence of God.

