

The Uses of the Buddhist Rosary

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Rosaries come in three forms: 108 beads, 54 beads, and 27 beads. All have at their base either a manji, representing the primal movement of the spirit within the heart; or a pagoda, representing the storehouse of the scriptures, which the turning of the rosary causes to be revolved; or a fish biting an iron ball which it can neither swallow nor spit out; or a tassel or pair of tassels, representing the roots of the Lotus, the symbol of enlightenment, with its roots in the mud of human suffering. No matter what may be at the base of the rosary, it is always a symbol of activity and movement, whether the movement of the heart, i.e. the manji; the turning of the scriptures, i.e. the pagoda; the struggle of the koan, i.e. the fish with the iron ball; or the nourishment of enlightenment from suffering, i.e. the tassel. Immediately above this symbol are three beads representing the Three Refuges: Homage to the Buddha, Homage to the Dharma, Homage to the Sangha. A 108 bead rosary is divided into 6 groups of 18 with a divider between each. A 54 bead one has 6 groups of 9 with a divider between each, and a 27 bead one, 2 groups of 6 and 1 of 15 divided by 2 dividers. All divider beads in a rosary represent points of pause for silent meditation, the putting of the hands in gassho while holding the rosary, or the putting of the brain, as it were, into gassho.

Rosaries may be used in the following ways: a) for beginning Buddhists, to quiet the mind by counting the breaths, one bead for an in-breath, one bead for an out-breath, and a gassho at the spacer. b) They may be used for the transfer of merit for sick or dying persons or any other cause whatsoever by thinking of the purpose for which the recitation is to take place when holding the symbol, reciting the Three Refuges, pausing on the center spacer for a moment of silent meditation, reciting the name of a Bodhisattva on each bead, with pauses for silent meditation at each spacer, a return to the recitation of the Three Homages at the end of one full circuit and again the thought of the purpose of the recitation on the symbol. Example: The person who wishes to transfer the merit to a dying relative would first hold the manji while thinking of turning the merit of the wheel by the love in his heart towards that person. He would then take the Three Refuges for that person and for himself, reflecting silently on the center spacer and, if his rosary were a 27 bead one, recite "Hail to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva" on each of the first beads, meditate silently for a moment on the spacer, recite "Hail to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva" on the next 15 beads,

reflect silently on the spacer, and then recite "Hail to Avalokitesvara" on the last 6, pause silently on the center spacer for thoughtful meditation, again take the Three Refuges and pause on the symbol to think on the way in which he can best transfer the merit by the movement of his heart, if the symbol be a manji, or the turning of the scriptures, if it be a pagoda. This procedure is followed for all size rosaries; obviously there are other purposes for which you would wish to transfer merit. Perhaps you would wish merit for yourself, for which it is equally permitted to recite a rosary, or to calm your own mind or to keep it from wandering while on a bus or other public transportation.

The uses of the rosary are too innumerable to give all of them here. The sincere Buddhist will discover many for himself. One more example can be given: a person who wishes to transfer the merit of wisdom on a 27 bead rosary could recite "Hail to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva" on the first 6 beads (transferring compassion), "Hail to Samantabhadra Bodhisattva" on the next 15 (transferring love) and "Hail to Manjusri Bodhisattva" on the last 6 (thus transferring wisdom which is the child of Avalokitesvara and Samantabhadra).

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