

## Japa: Mantra Recitation with a Rosary

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Mantra recitation, which is called *japa* ("muttering") in Sanskrit, has been an important aspect of Yoga practice since ancient Vedic times. It is a powerful technique for focusing the mind.

For countless generations, *mantra-japa* has been done with the aid of rosaries of various kinds. These are known as *mâlâs*, meaning literally "garlands." Such devices have been employed in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and also in spiritual traditions outside India, notably Christianity and Islam.

Hindu rosaries can be composed of a variety of materials—wood, seeds, pearls, semiprecious stones, bone, and ivory. The most widely used materials are sandalwood, *rudrâksha* seeds, *tulsi* seeds (basil), lotus seeds, bodhi tree seeds, rosewood, and crystal. Usually a *mâlâ* consists of 108 beads, but rosaries of 26, and 54 beads are also used by Hindu and Buddhist Yoga practitioners. Sometimes small spacer beads of semiprecious stones are used to separate the larger beads from each other for easier handling. In addition, every rosary has what is called *meru*, *sumeru*, or *guru* bead, which is larger than the other beads. Often a tassel is attached to this master bead.

Ideally, a *mâlâ* should be blessed by one's teacher before using it for the first time. Subsequently, practitioners should bless and empower the *mâlâ* themselves prior to each use. In general, a *mâlâ* should be treated with respect, that is, as a sacred implement. In the case of *mâlâs* with 108 beads, it is best to always wear them around the neck, with the *guru* bead behind the neck. In this way, they can be charged with one's personal energy. In any case, *mâlâs* should never be placed on the floor or on seating surfaces. Before use, it is recommended that practitioners cup their *mâlâ* with both hands and blow on it in order to infuse it with *prâna*. Some practitioners also briefly rub the beads in their cupped hands, and do so for the same purpose. In some schools, a *mantra* is spoken over the rosary empowering it further. According to the *Devî-Rahasya*, for instance, one should recite: *om mâle mâle mahâ-mâle sarva-tattva-svarûpinî catur-vargas tvayi nyasta tasmân me siddhi-da bhava svâhâ* ("Om, O rosary, rosary, great rosary, true form of all things, place in me the four goals [of human life]. Thus give me success! Svâhâ").

For most purposes, the rosary is held in one's right hand, with the beads draped either over the middle finger or the ring finger, and the counting is done with the thumb. The index finger is never used in *mâlâ-japa*. The rosary is best held at heart level, so that the beads do not drag on the ground. Alternatively, one can rest the beads in the left hand while counting with the right.

Counting or telling of beads starts with the bead right next to the *guru* bead and proceeds forward. When the *guru* bead is reached again, it should not be counted and crossed over, but instead practitioners should turn the *mâlâ* around and begin the new round with the same bead that ended the preceding round, again moving forward along

the *mâlâ*.

After each *mantra*, one moves to the next bead. In the case of *mâlâs* consisting of [108](#) beads, however, only 100 beads are allowed in the final count, so as to take into account any slips or moments of inattention during *japa* practice. In other words, ten rounds on a 108-bead *mâlâ* are reckoned as only 1,000 *mantras*. Recitation is ideally done in sets of 7, 21, 27, 54, and 108 *mantras*.

After much use, the string is bound to break, and in that case one should take great care to preserve all the beads and then restring them. The new *mâlâ* ought to be reconsecrated properly.

Traditionally, a *mantra* is a *mantra* only when given in the context of an initiation. In the West, this is not always possible, which should not discourage anyone from using *mantra-japa*. In Yoga, it is always the intent that matters. Thus, we can adopt any of the widely used *mantras* and gain benefit from practicing *japa* with it. It is advised, however, to stick with one *mantra* rather than jump from one *mantra* to another.

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