

NOTE

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ROSARIES

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Various kinds of rosaries are freely used in Tibet by the Lama and laity alike, in ritualistic performances and while saying mantras and prayers. As Buddhism has strongly influenced the ways of Tibetan life, the rosary is adopted as an ornamental article, if we put it in a very loose way.

These, unlike rosaries of other Buddhist countries, drew great attention of the Westerners. An explorer in the sphere of Tibetan Buddhism has written an account of the Tibetan rosaries including mode of telling the beads. But even this lengthy account does not elucidate the truth and his interpretation has strayed away from the point at issue by description of each different type of rosaries are meant for the different gods and deities and even of the Buddhist Sects in Tibet. A peculiar reason was given why a rosary has one hundred and eight beads. The Explorer 1 says, "The rosary contains 108 beads of uniform size. The reason for this special number is alleged to be merely a provision to ensure the repetition of the sacred spell a full hundred times, and the extra beads are added to make up for any omission of beads through absent-mindedness during the telling process or for actual loss of beads by breakage." and adds "This number (108) is perhaps borrowed, like so many other Lamaist fashions, from the Hindus, of whom Vaishnabs possess a rosary with 108 beads." But such information is not available in canonical and non-canonical Buddhist teachings and in Tibetan literature.

The reason for extra eight beads is neither to cover up any omission during telling process of hundred times, nor does it correspond to the rosary of any Hindu deity, whose number of beads might be one hundred and eight. On the contrary the one hundred and eight beads of rosary is essential for the service of 'rGyas-pa' and is applicable to all the gods and deities irrespectively, in Buddhist Tantric practices.

1. A.L. Waddell: The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism, London, 1895. See pp. 150-151 & 202-211.

Similarly, the substance and number of beads of a rosary entirely depends on the ritual-services; but not of the gods or deities to whom worship or service is conducted or of the worshipper. Each god or deity is having four different ritual-services which determines the substance and number of beads. The four services are:

- (I) Shi-wa (Zhi-ba, शान्ति)
- (II) Gyas-pa (rGyas-pa, पुष्टि)
- (III) Wang (dBang, वंशं)
- (IV) Ngon-chod (mNgon-spyod, अभिचार (हृद्र))

I. In the service of 'Zhi-ba', a rosary of crystal (མེལ་) or Oyster Shell (རྩུ་མ་) or pearl (ལྷ་ཉིག་) and other white substances are needed and its number of beads is only one hundred and one.

II. In the service of 'rGyas-pa', a rosary of gold (གཞིང་) or Silver (དུལ་) or copper (རྩང་མ་) or lotus-seed (པདྨ་མ་ཐོན་) is used and one hundred and eight beads are suggested for this service.

III. In the service of 'dBang', the number of beads is usually fifty and for special purpose, a twenty-five-bead rosary is also recommended and the beads of this rosary are made of saffron and any other like fragrant substances.

IV. In the service of 'mNgon-spyod', Raksha or Rudraksha (རྩུ་མ་) or Lungtang (ལུང་ཏང་) or human bone (མིའི་རྩུ་མ་ལ་) rosary is used and the number of beads in it is sixty only.

The extract below is given from Kanjur (bKa'-'Gyur) not from Lamaic Scripture.¹

ཤེལ་དང་ཉ་ཕྱེས་ལྷ་ཉིག་དང་། བམས་ནི་དཀར་པོ་ལ་སོགས་གཞན།
 ཞི་བའི་ལས་ལ་བྱད་པར་དུ། རྩང་བ་ལི་ནི་མཚན་ཉིད་དོ།
 གསེར་དང་དུལ་དང་རྩང་མ་ལ། པདྨ་མ་ཐོན་བྱད་པར་དུ།
 ལྷ་ཉིག་ལ་ནི་ཕྱེང་བ་ཉིད། རྩུ་མ་ལ་མཐས་པས་བབྱང་བར་བྱ།

1. A.L. Weddel: The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism, London, See pp-204.

བྱུང་བྱས་ལ་སོགས་དྲི་སོགས་ཀྱིས། དྲི་ནི་ཐམས་ཅད་ཁྱད་པར་དུ།
 བསྐྱབས་ཤིང་རིལ་བྱ་བྱས་ནས་ནི། དབང་ལ་ཡོངས་སུ་རབ་དུ་བྱགས།
 ཅུད་ཀྱང་ལྷང་དང་དང་། དེ་བཞིན་སྐྱེས་པའི་ཅུས་པ་ཉིད།
 དྲག་པོ་འི་ལས་ལ་སྦྱར་བར་བྱ། མངོན་སྲོད་ལ་ནི་ཡོངས་སུ་བྱགས།
 སྐྱབས་ཀྱི་བསྐྱབ་པ་ལྟ་བུ་ལྟེ། དབང་ལ་དེ་ཡི་ཕྱིད་ཉིད་དོ།
 བརྒྱ་སྐྱབ་གཅིག་ནི་ནི་བ་ལ། དེ་བཞིན་རྒྱས་ལ་རྒྱག་པར་བརྒྱད།
 མངོན་སྲོད་ལ་ནི་དུག་ཅུ་ཉིད། ཁྱད་པར་དུ་ནི་ལས་ལ་སྦྱར།
 རི་ལྟར་ལས་ཀྱི་ཕྱེ་བྱག་གིས། ཕྱིང་བ་ལ་སོགས་བྱ་བའོ། །

Bo-dhi-tse rosary can be used for any kind of ritual-services and mantras. It is said that “ བདྲི་ཅུས་ནི་ལས་ཀྱན་མེད་ ” Bo-dhi-tse does all the service and function more effectively than the other substances. A similar description of rosaries is available in Sakya Kabum (Sakya bKa’-’bum), Druk Kunchen Kabum (’Brug-kun-mkhyen-bka, bum) and in other texts.

The String

The material and composition of the string is another important factor, normally a string or thread of wool (བལ་) or cotton (རས་) or gold (གཞེར་) is used for tranquillity and prosperity. A string of crow’s feather (ཐ་རྟག་མུ་) or hair of ass (བོང་ལུས་མུ་) or camel (ར་མོང་མུ་) or dog (ཕྱི་མུ་) or human hair (ཏར་མུ་) found in the cemetery is supposed to drive out and subdue the evil and the enemies etc. The twisted-string consists of three or nine strands and the inner significance of the string is explained below.

The manner of holding the rosary would be different in a different ritual-service.

I. For ‘Zhi-ba’ service, the rosary is held near the heart (ཉིང་ག་) and the beads are passed between the index finger (མཇུ་བ་མོ་) and the thumb (མཐེ་བོང་).

II. For ‘rGyas-pa’ service, the rosary is held near the navel (ཉེ་བ་) and the beads are passed between the middle finger (བྱང་མོ་) and the thumb.

III. For 'dBang' service, the rosary is held near the genital organ (གསང་གནས་) and the beads are passed between the ring finger (རྩིན་ལག་) and the thumb.

IV. For 'mNgon-spyod' or 'Drag-po' service, the rosary is held near the knee (ལུས་མོ་) while sitting posture is cross-legged (རྒྱལ་གུང་) and the beads are passed between the little finger (མཐེན་ཚུང་) and the thumb.

Symbolic Meaning

The beads of a rosary represents the Dachampa (*dGra-bcom-pa*, **अहंत्**). The first part of Dozin (mDo-'zin, the union holder), the roundish shape represents the Dharmakaya (ཚམ་གྱི་རྒྱུ་) and second part which is in the form of a stupa (mCHod-rten) symbolises the Dharmadhatu (ཚམ་གྱི་དུམ་མ་). Three-twisted-string represents the Trikayas (རྒྱ་གསུམ་), that is, Dharmakaya (ཚམ་གྱི་རྒྱུ་), Sambhogakaya (མངའ་ས་ལུང་ཚོགས་པའི་རྒྱུ་) and Nirmanakaya (རྒྱལ་རྒྱུ་). The nine-twisted-string represents the Vajradhara (རྡོ་རྗེ་འཆང་) and eight Bodhisattavas, namely, Jampal Shonnur Gyurpa (འཇམ་དཔལ་ལོ་གོ་ན་རུང་རུང་པ་, **मञ्जुश्रीकुमारभूत**), Chakna-Dorje (ཕྱག་ན་རྡོ་རྗེ་, **वज्रबाणि**), Chen-res-zig (ཐུན་རམ་གཟིགས་, **अवलोकितेश्वर**), Sayinyingpo (སའི་རྗེ་པོ་, **क्षितिगर्भ**) Dibpathumchednampaselwa (འབྲེལ་པ་ཐམས་ཅད་རྒྱམ་པར་སེལ་བ་, **सर्वतीव्रणविहङ्गमी**), Namkhyei Nyingpo (ནམ་མཁའི་རྗེ་པོ་, **आकाशगर्भ**) Jampa (འཇམ་པ་, **मैलय**) and Kundu Zangpo (ཀུན་ཏུ་ཕམང་པོ་, **समन्तभद्र**).

As a believer in Tantra, I have given here only a general introduction, with a view to provide more authentic information to the readers. For detailed, information one should study the "rGyud" (Tantra) and its commentaries therein. Austin Waddell's treatise on this subject suffers from shortcomings which I have modestly attempted to reveal.