

Telling Beads: The Forms and Functions of the Buddhist Rosary in Japan

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1. Origins

The two words in the main title above bear common and by now uncommon meanings, all of which are important to the subtitle of this paper. “Telling”, when commonly used, refers to speaking and disclosure, such as we do with stories, while its uncommon meaning of enumerating one by one or counting is remembered primarily in connection with the use of the rosary. We still speak of “telling the rosary”, but we hardly “tell money” anymore. Beads, of course, are the little objects, mostly spherical, that are strung to make bracelets and necklaces, but its antecedent meaning in Middle English is “prayer” (*bede*). The objects themselves, apart from what is indicated by the English word, mean many more things in many other cultures, and historians of beads even tell of how these objects represent the very earliest concrete evidence of the human capacity for abstract and symbolic thinking (e.g. Dubin 1987: 26). Beads have meanings, especially when they are used as religious implements, and telling the rosary invites the rosary to tell.

The Buddhist rosary is very widely used in Japan, and has come to be the most common emblem of being a Buddhist or at least of participation in Buddhist activities. As it is with much of Buddhist ritual, the meanings of the objects, actions, and words are not always clear to participants; and Buddhist scholars, who understand religion to be a matter of lineage and fundamental teachings, are often critical of the ordinary person’s ignorance. Writing in 1933, Itō Kokan, a professor at Komazawa University, noted that while many people carry rosaries they cannot be called Buddhists if they do not know what the rosary means. There is also the danger, he said, of treating the rosary as a decorative art object, which, if loved, should not be used since that improper sentiment will only increase the owner’s bad karma (Itō 1933: 82-84). While Itō’s requirement of a creedal or doctrinal understanding is a reflection of the idea of religion as a set of beliefs and teachings, it would be a mistake to conclude that his understanding is narrow and limited to a concept of religion that is modern and western and therefore does not apply very well to Asian Buddhism. The Hua-yen patriarch Fa-tsang (法藏, 643-712) mentions the “four religions” (四宗教, *shishūkyō*) and the “six religions” (六宗教, *rokushūkyō*), both terms being classifications of the different Buddhist schools and their respective teachings (Nakamura 1977: 645). Indeed Buddhism is famous for its many doctrines and has long been a religion of intellectual categories and philosophical teachings. While it is true that a characteristic of religion in Japan (and perhaps of popular religion in general) is the emphasis placed upon activity rather than doctrinal understanding such that it is not necessary for an active Buddhist to know the meanings of the rosary to be a good Buddhist, teachings and meanings, though forgotten or ignored, still exist and can be recovered if for no other reason than that they exist.

The forms and functions of rosaries are defined by texts and traditions, and yet these definitions exist in great variations produced through minor innovations and major departures. Fixed rules exist, but they vary one from each other, and, besides, no

one, least of all priests, are compelled to follow them. The *The Sutra on the Yoga Rosaries of the Diamond Peak* (金剛頂瑜伽念珠經, Jp.: *Kongōchō yuga nenju kyō*, Ch.: *Chin-kang-ting yü-ch'ieh nien-chu ch'ing*), for instance, says that the rosary can be placed on the head, held in the hands, draped on the arm, or worn around the neck to good effect. When worn around the neck, the rosary will do nothing less than purify the wearer of the four serious sins of killing, stealing, carnality, and lying (T17: No. 789, p. 728a.). And yet a modern handbook on the use of the rosary in the Jōdo (淨土, Pure Land) sect shows a picture of a forlorn-looking priest wearing a rosary around his neck as if it were the sign of a condemned man. “The rosary”, the caption warns, “is not something that should be worn around the neck.” (Kishimoto (ed.) 1990): 273).

Rosaries are not listed in the Eighteen Items for Monks in the Southern tradition, and probably were not used in early Buddhism. It is widely held that the origins of the rosary are to be found in Brahmanical religion, and that they probably made their way into Buddhist circles around the second or third centuries (Morse/Morse 1995: 64; Okazaki (ed.) 1982: 328). A second century statue, for instance, of the Naga King paying his respects to the Buddha has the king wearing a rosary around his neck (Mochizuki (ed.) 1960 III: 2476). Sutras translated from the Eastern Tsin (317-419) and later periods deal with rosaries specifically, but the first mention of a Chinese priest using one is in the biography of the Pure Land master Tao-ch'ō (道綽, 562-645) in the *Hsü kao-seng ch'uan* 續高僧傳 (T50: No. 2060, p. 594a). While treatments of the rosary are to be found predominantly in Esoteric Buddhist texts in China, it is a priest of the Pure Land sect who is first mentioned, and the legacy of that tradition continues in the use and interesting innovations in Pure Land practice in Japan.

The earliest reference to rosaries in Japan is found in the inventory of treasures at Hōryūji submitted to the government in the year 747; and in a similar record for Daianji twenty-eight rosaries are listed, fifteen of which were made of sandalwood. When Emperor Shōmu died in 756, his widow, the Empress Kōmyō, donated to Tōdaiji seven rosaries that had been in his possession (Hanayama 1962: 7). Some of these have been preserved in the Shōsōin, which possesses a total of twenty-five rosaries made of amber, crystal, lotus seeds, and the so-called seeds of the Bodhi tree (*ficus religiosa*) (Harada 1932: 126-127). Hanayama Shinshō speculates that these Nara period rosaries were not used much by priests or lay persons for meditation or worship, but were (Itō's warning about art notwithstanding) “to be admired as valuable, rare gem[s].” (Hanayama 1962: 7). In the Heian period, priests returning from China often brought back rosaries, sometimes received as gifts, but they remained valuable objects that did not inspire any widespread use. Perhaps the most famous of these Chinese rosaries were the two brought back by Kūkai (空海, 774-835), who is more popularly known by his honorific name, Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師, one of which is a type represented by the rock crystal rosary in the *Object as Insight* exhibition (Morse/Morse 1995: 64). Noting, as others have, that rosaries do not generally appear in the portraits or sculpture of priests until the Kamakura period,¹

¹ An exception to this is the Heian portrait of Gonzō (勤操, d. 827). See Shimizu (1978: 128).

Hanayama concludes that rosaries came to be used as common ritual implements only from that time on.

The *locus classicus* for the legendary origins of the Buddhist rosary is found in the *Soapberry Seed Sutra* (木槵子經, Ch: *Mu-huan-tzu ching*; Jp: *Mokugenshi-kyō*), a short scripture translated into Chinese (or composed as an apocryphal text) during the Eastern Tsin dynasty (317-419). The sutra tells of how a king approached the Buddha to explain the great difficulties he faced in ruling his country. His people were suffering from a serious epidemic and the high price of grain caused by a rebellion in a neighboring kingdom, and he, because of his administrative difficulties, could not put the vast and profound Buddhist teachings into practice. “All I ask of you, World-Honored One, is that you show special compassion by granting to me an essential method that will allow me during the day or night to engage easily in a practice for freeing us from all sufferings in the world in the future.” (T17: No. 786, p. 726a). The Buddha replied that all passions can be destroyed by stringing together one hundred and eight seeds from the soapberry tree and reciting the pledge to the Three Treasures. The soapberry seed rosary should be worn at all times while walking, standing, sitting or lying down, and should be used to count recitations. Chanting with a calm mind for a million times will result in the one hundred and eight passions being sundered. The king was overjoyed and had his attendants make a thousand rosaries, all to good effect (*ibid.*, p. 726a-b).

Kings, like most lay persons, are too busy to take on demanding religious practices, and the *Soapberry Seed Sutra* affirms that the rosary provides an easier alternative with no less a result than that of putting an end to passion and suffering. As a good Buddhist, the king was made to understand the true meaning of the rosary as an implement that made it unnecessary to understand the Buddha’s teachings, which were impossible for him to grasp since they were so vast and profound. The rosary is also suitable for the ordinary person who is not able to practice the teachings, and in this case telling the beads leads not to a telling of any teaching except that of how the beads can have the ritual effect of putting an end to suffering. In the *Soapberry Seed Sutra*, the religion of the rosary represents a kind of Buddhism that requires not learning and discipline, but simple practice and belief in the power of the beads to bring about the promised effect. This practical Buddhism should not be seen as a folk belief separated from the high tradition of scripture, for the *Soapberry Seed Sutra* is scripture, and its doctrine consists of the teaching of the rosary’s magical power.² The beads have virtue, understood here primarily as active potency, although the handling of the beads also requires the virtue of right conduct. The rosary consists not of any string of beads, but beads that are strung into a proper form, or many proper forms, whose parts are named as only rosary beads can be named.

² For a full discussion of the practical benefits of Buddhism, the relationship of magic and morality, and the moral and ritual meanings of virtue, see Reader/Tanabe (1998).

2. Nomenclature and Number

Rosaries exist in bewildering variety, but despite these many differences, the nomenclature of the Japanese Buddhist rosary is fairly standard. The object itself is called *juzu* (also *zuzu*) 珠数, which literally means “telling beads”, that is, beads for counting chants. Equally common is the synonym *nenju* 念珠, “mindfulness beads”, a reminder that chanting is an aid to meditation and even a form of it. The heart of the rosary is the mother bead (母珠, *boju*) or parent bead (親珠, *oya-dama*), a large bead marking the beginning and end of the main body consisting of retainer (従球, *ju-dama*) or children (子珠, *ko-dama*) beads. When there are two mother beads that divide the rosary in half, the second one is called *nakadama* (中珠), middle bead. To one of them and sometimes to both are attached tassels (房, *fusa*). The tassels on the main mother bead are at the end of two short strings of smaller beads known as recorder beads (記子珠, *kishi-* or *kisu-dama*) or disciple beads (弟子珠, *deshi-dama*), one of which is moved up the string, much as in an abacus, every time a round of recitations is completed on the main strand. A second string of recorders is used to mark off the number of times the first string is exhausted, like the column of tens of an abacus. At the end of these short strings and just above the tassels themselves are the recorder bead stoppers (記子留め, *kishi-dome*), which are shaped like teardrops and therefore go by the alternate name of dewdrop beads (露珠, *tsuyu-dama*). The string between the mother bead and the recorders can be tied into a small loop, and on one side of this tiny loop is strung a single bead called *jōmyō* 淨明, pure and bright. A homonym for pure and bright is *jōmyō* 淨名, “pure name”, which, as a proper noun, stands for Vimalakirti, the wise layman featured in the sutra that bears his name. Therefore the bead is explicitly called “Yuima koji” 維魔居士, the Layman Vimalakirti. Yet another homonym for “pure and bright” and “pure name” is *jomyō* 助明, “assisting clarity”, and the idea of assistance or supplement indicates its function of taking the place of any recorder bead that might be broken. Since it may replace a bead sometime in the future, it is also called *fusho no deshi* 補処の弟子 or *fusho bosatsu* 補処菩薩, the replacement disciple or successor bodhisattva, a name for Maitreya, the future buddha who will succeed Śākyamuni.³ Amongst the main body of retainer beads are four beads that are usually but not always of smaller size, different color, and special material. These are the *shiten* 四天 beads marking “four points”, but again through the use of a homonym, they are also called the “Four Heavenly Kings” (四天王, *shitennō*), the guardians of the four cardinal directions. These usually are placed after the seventh and the twenty-first beads on either side of the mother bead, and are also known as *kazutori* 数取り, “number markers” that indicate the seventh and twenty-first repetition of a chant.⁴

The number of beads varies greatly, but if there is a standard, it is 108, a number with many symbolic associations. It can represent the 108 meditations, the 108

³ Mochizuki (ed.) (1960 III: 2475). Itō Kokan also notes that this bead is called *fusho no deshi*, but admits that he does not know why this is the case (Itō 1933: 113).

⁴ E. Dale Saunders uses the term *kazutori* to refer to the recorder beads. He identifies the opposite loop that does not have the Vimalakirti bead as being the *fusho no deshi* (Saunders 1960: 175). The nomenclature of the beads is obviously not entirely standardized.

deities in the Diamond Realm,⁵ and, most commonly, the 108 passions. Hanayama Shinshō explains the derivation of the 108 passions:

Six feelings are recognized in Buddhism, viz., feelings arising from sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and consciousness. Now, each of these 6 sensations is associated with pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent feelings, making a total of 18 feelings. Furthermore, each of the pleasant, unpleasant and indifferent feelings has two classifications: those feelings that are either attached to pleasure or detached from pleasure. When we multiply the 18 kinds of feelings with the 2 classifications, we arrive at the figure of 36. These 36 are the basic passions of man that are manifested in time--past, present and future. Thus, 36 multiplied by past, present and future will give us the total of 108 passions.⁶

When there are fifty-four beads, they stand for the fifty-four stages of practice consisting of the ten faiths, ten abidings, ten practices, ten transferences, ten groundings, and the four roots of good. Rosaries can contain fifty-four beads, or the 108 strand can be divided, as mentioned above, into two strands of fifty-four each, a type that is associated with Kōbō Daishi and the rosaries he brought back from China. Forty-two beads represent the first forty of the fifty-four stages plus the two enlightenment stages of sublimity and equality. Twenty-seven beads symbolize the eighteen learned persons and the nine unlearned persons. The fourteen fearless qualities of Kannon are represented in the rosaries with beads of that number.⁷ The numbers of beads are filled with doctrinal meanings, and it is precisely in enumerating them that they tell the doctrines in formal categories. Itō (1933: frontispiece) contains a diagram of the doctrinal identities of the beads illustrating that they present a surfeit of meaning, an overload of categories that threatens to reduce the rosary to a mere listing of terms, each one of which requires considerable study to master. This is hardly suitable for ordinary lay persons, and indeed such a telling invests the beads with the vast and profound teachings that the *Soapberry Seed Sutra* said could be divested from the concerns of busy kings. Nevertheless these meanings exist by virtue of having been enumerated one by one, and the rosary thus provides for those who so wish to use it in this way a catechism in the beads.

⁵ Sawa (ed.) (1975: 556). Morse and Morse (1982: 64) mistakenly cite Mikkyō Jiten Henshūkai (ed.) (1979 IV: 1782) as saying the number refers to the Womb World deities. The Womb World has 414 deities.

⁶ Hanayama (1962: 5). 108 is an auspicious number with many other meanings attached, and is important for Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism as well. See Saunders (1960: 255 note 6). *Mikkyō daijiten* notes that the double application of 108 to both deities and passions expresses the Shingon idea that passion is enlightenment (Mikkyō Jiten Henshūkai (ed.) 1979 IV: 1782).

⁷ Sawa (ed.) (1975: 556). Itō has other explanations of the symbolic meanings of the numbers (Itō 1933: 129-141). Rosaries are also made with 1,080, thirty-six, twenty-one, eighteen, and other numbers of beads.

3. Materials and Making

Meaning resides not only in numbers but in the materials used for making rosaries as well. The materials cover a wide range from pearls to plastic, but the best objects are those that are precious and valuable, or have some association with Buddhism. Although the sutras and sectarian traditions disagree on the ranking of materials, there is consensus on the superiority of the seeds of the Bodhi tree. Modern Buddhist authors still proclaim the supremacy of these seeds since they are from the tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment (e.g. Hiro (ed.) 1986: 386.). The Bodhi tree, however, like the magnificent specimen planted in Honolulu by Mary Foster,⁸ a devout Buddhist who obtained a cutting from the Bodhi tree in India that is reputed to be the direct descendant of Śâkyamuni's tree, produces tiny fruits about a quarter of an inch in diameter containing even tinier seeds that cannot be pierced and strung. The so-called Bodhi tree seeds (菩提球種, *bodaijushi*) actually are the seeds of the Bodhici tree that grows in the Himalayan mountain region. Oda Tokunō (織田得能, 1860-1911), the erudite author of what many still regard as the best one-volume dictionary of Buddhism, even challenged the existence of Bodhi tree seeds with his own personal observation in India that the Bodhi tree produces neither flower nor fruit (Oda 1954: 987a). Despite the botanical fact that Bodhi tree seeds either do not exist or exist in miniscule form, the popular understanding is innocently maintained, and the "seeds of the Bodhi tree" retain their preeminent reputation.

The important difference between the various materials have to do with their reputed abilities to produce beneficial blessings (利益, *riyaku*). The *Sutra on Comparing the Virtuous Power of Rosaries in Mañjuśrī's Storehouse of Mantras* (曼殊室利呪藏中校量数珠功德經, Jp.: *Manjushiri juzōchū kyōryō juzu kudokkyō*; Ch.: *Man-shu-shih li chou- ts'ang-chung chiao-liang shu-chu kung-te ching*) rates various materials according to the relative power they are said to have to produce blessings for a given number (one) of chants:

Iron	5
Red copper	10
Pearl, coral	100
Soapberry seed	1,000
Lotus seed	10,000
Indra tree seed	1,000,000
Crystal	10,000,000,000
Diamond tree seed	100,000,000,000
Bodhi tree seed	Infinite ⁹

⁸ This tree can be seen in the Foster Botanical Garden in Honolulu. A scion of this tree is growing at the site of a former Sōtō Zen temple in the hills of Kawaihoa on the north shore of Oahu. Another Bodhi tree was planted on the campus of the University of Hawaii by the first graduating class in 1912.

⁹ Quoted from T17: No. 787, p. 726a-b.

Just as the sutra is careful to make this comparison of material virtue against a constant number of chants, it also rules out the number of beads as a variable by saying that it does not matter whether the number is 108 or, if materials are difficult to obtain, fifty-four, twenty-seven, or fourteen. The important point is that the seed of the Bodhi tree is best, and the proof of that is given in a story about a past Buddha who, having achieved enlightenment under a Bodhi tree, was challenged by a nonbeliever to demonstrate his power. The nonbeliever brought his dead child, placed it under the Bodhi tree, and told the Buddha, “If this tree is sacred, then let my child live again.” After the Buddha chanted for seven days, the child came back to life, and the skeptic, amazed by this miracle, converted to Buddhism. When the other non-believers heard about this, they too hailed the unexplainable power of the Buddha and the Bodhi tree and committed themselves to seek the mind of enlightenment. They gave the Bodhi tree two names: the tree of enlightenment, and the tree of extended life.¹⁰

The *Sutra on the Yoga Rosaries of the Diamond Peak* has a slightly different list of materials and ratings, but the Bodhi tree seed is still the best, and a rosary of 1,080 beads is better than those of a lesser number (T17: No. 789, p. 727c). The *Sutra of Collected Darani* (陀羅尼集經, Jp.: *Darani jukkyō*; Ch.: *T’o-lo-ni chi-ching*) prefers precious metals and gems: gold, silver, copper, and crystal. Those who recite the sutras or chant the *nembutsu* 念仏 while telling a rosary will fulfill the Ten Perfections¹¹ and will in “their present body attain the highest, unsurpassed enlightenment.” Crystal is the best material to use because it is radiant and impervious to impurity. Those who chant with a crystal rosary will be cleansed of all their sins and will, like the crystal itself, become impervious to bad karma. The instructions for making rosaries call for the bead craftsman to purify himself and the work place, make offerings to the buddhas, and use seven lanterns while working at night. After fashioning the 108 beads, he should make the mother bead out of gold and ten recorder beads out of silver. The protective power of the Three Treasures is to be invoked by reciting the names of the Three Treasures, and subsequent rituals carried out with the rosary will all be efficacious because of the “divine power of the Three Treasures.” Wearing the rosary on one’s body will give protection from all evil and harmful spirits, and the power to secure blessings will be complete. This is called “the mysterious function of the rosary” (T18: No. 901, pp. 802c-803b).

The *Sutra of Mañjuśrī’s Fundamental Ritual of the Great and Extensive Storehouse of Bodhisattvas* (大方廣菩薩藏文殊師利根本儀軌經, Jp.: *Daihōkō bosatsuzō Monjushiri konpon giki kyō*; Ch.: *Ta-fang-kuang p’u-sa-ts’ang Wen-shu-shih-li ken-pen i-kuei ching*) repeats most of the instructions above and adds further details that begin with how to pick seeds from trees. First purify yourself, select a tree, bless it, concentrate with a sincere mind, and recite a mantra thirty-seven times. Sleep beneath the tree for one night and seek a divine response by which you will be able

¹⁰ T17: No. 787, pp. 726c-727a. The *Sutra on the Buddha’s Teaching on Comparing the Virtuous Power of Rosaries* (仏説校量数珠功德經, Jp.: *Bussetsu kyōryō juzu kudokkyō*; Ch.: *Fo-shuo chiao-liang shu-chu kung-te ching*; T17: No. 788) is another translation of the same text.

¹¹ These are the Six Perfections of charity, the precepts, forbearance, diligence, meditation, and wisdom; plus skilfull means, vows, strength, and knowledge.

to see the good and bad in your previous life. If in your dream an outcast appears, examine the tree again the next day, and if you do not see a bead that you would like to take, then this is a bad sign. Leave that tree, and find one in another place that has an auspicious sign. Upon finding such a tree, have a companion climb the tree. If you do not have a companion, then climb the tree yourself and pick the seeds from the highest branch. Recite a mantra and bless them. The seeds from the best branches at the top will make superior beads. A middle level branch will yield average beads, and the low branches will give beads of the lowest quality. The ritual results will likewise be commensurate with the respective quality of the beads. Do not use seeds that are rotten or worm-eaten. If you gather seeds from a branch facing the west and chant with a rosary made from those beads, you will be able to perfect your practice and become wealthy. Seeds from branches facing north will gain you the favor of the bodhisattvas, the destruction of the demons, and prosperity in all worldly matters. By using the seeds from the eastern branches you will not only succeed in all of your work, but will gain long life. Do not, however, take beads from the southern branches. When you come down from the tree, it is essential that you recite a mantra and purify your mind. Bless the seeds, and at a place that has been purified, polish the seeds while reciting a mantra, and pick out 108 good seeds of equal quality. A young girl free of sin should twist threads of the five colors to make the string. The beads must be strung tightly.¹²

The beads should also be round. At least that is what Hōnen (法然, 1133-1212) insisted on, citing a certain *Sutra of the Bodhisattva Mahāsthāma-prāpta* (大勢至菩薩經, Jp.: *Dai Seishi bosatsu kyō*), which listed the use of flat beads as one of the five transgressions that lead to rebirth in hell. According to this sutra, those who use flat beads are the disciples of heretics, while followers of the Buddha all use round beads in their rosaries.¹³ There are, of course, several examples of flat beaded rosaries. One of the smaller rosaries in the Shōsōin is made of thirty-six saucer shaped beads. Shugendō priests use a type of rosary called *irataka* 刺高, literally meaning “high in thorns” but also suggesting something very irritating (*ira-ira*), which is exactly the nature of the sound produced when the flat-sided square beads are rubbed together (Mochizuki (ed.) 1960 III: 2475). Carmen Blacker describes the *irataka* rosaries of the blind mediums of Osorezan as being made of soapberry beads interspersed with stag horns, boar tusks, bear claws, falcon claws, cow horns, fox jawbones, and cowrie shells (Blacker 1975: 148). The magnificent Rosary for One Million Recitations in the *Object as Insight* exhibition has wafer shaped beads that are not entirely round (Morse/Morse 1982: 128.), and modern Tendai rosaries freely use flat or wafer shaped beads. Obviously, prescriptions, as I have already noted, need not be followed, not even one’s own, for the best example of a flat beaded rosary is one that belonged to Hōnen himself. The justification for this heretical rosary is that a divine child gave it to Eikū 叡空, the teacher of the precepts against whom Hōnen argued and who later became Hōnen’s disciple. Eikū gave the rosary to his new master, saying that one of the gates to the Pure Land contained flat-beaded rosaries (Itō 1933: 145).

¹² T20: No. 1191, p. 873a-c. See also Itō (1933: 146-151).

¹³ *Mida hongan gisho* 弥陀本願義疎 in Ishii (1974: 949).

There are other materials and shapes that are used in this creative craft that produces stringed beads that nevertheless cannot be mistaken for anything other than rosaries. Modern rosaries are made from precious metals, semi-precious stones, and a wide variety of hard- and softwoods. Still popular are the woods that are associated with India: sandalwood (梅檀, *sendan*), white sandalwood (白檀, *byakudan*), red sandalwood or rosewood (紫檀, *shitan*), ironwood (鉄刀木, *tettōboku*), and, still preeminent, various types of wood identified as coming from the Bodhi tree (菩提樹, *bodaiju*).

4. Functions and Meanings

4.1 Counting Chants

Various meanings of the rosary, as we have already seen, are inextricably tied to nomenclature, number, materials, and making; but they are also part of the rosary's functions, which are determined largely by sectarian traditions. A Chinese Zen text,



for instance, says that rosaries are not even necessary since chanting sutras should be done silently.¹⁴ Sutra chanting, whether done silently or not, does not require counting, and Zen practice originally did not rely on repetitive chants such as the *nembutsu* or mantras. Modern Zen rosaries therefore do not have recorder beads on the tassels (photo left, author's collection). Zen meditation, however, does use the technique of counting breaths, and another Zen text says that a rosary can be formed with each inhaled and exhaled breath.¹⁵ Using breaths as beads, the practitioner thus forms a rosary in the mind. The modern Sōtō Zen rosary is used for purposes of worship, and generally does not have recorder beads since repetitive chanting is not important.

While Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land sect) builds its religion around the chanting of the *nembutsu*, quantity is unimportant since recitation is not a means for gaining salvation but for giving thanks to the salvation that Amida gives freely to all regardless of their practice or lack thereof. It makes no difference whether one utters the name of Amida once, a million times, or not at all. Shinran (親鸞, 1173-1263) and Rennyo (蓮如, 1415-1499) are both portrayed with rosaries, and the Muromachi period portrait of Rennyo owned by Seiganji shows him to be telling the rosary using both hands. Nevertheless, as the patriarch who repeatedly insisted that ritual practice was not a means for salvation, Rennyo looked upon the rosary only as an emblem of one's conviction that Amida's grace has already been granted. In one of his letters he wrote,

¹⁴ *Ch'an-yüan ch'ing-kuei 2* 『禪苑清規』 cited in Zengaku Daijiten Hensanjo (ed.) (1978: 507).

¹⁵ Cited in Itō (1933: 197).

From what I have observed of the ways of nenbutsu people on this mountain over the past three or four years, there is indeed no sign of [anyone] having undergone a decisive settling of the faith (*anjin*) that is Other Power. The reason for [my saying] this is that there is no one who even carries devotional beads (*juzu*). It is as if they grasped the Buddha (*hotoke*) with bare hands. The master certainly never said that we should venerate the Buddha by discarding the beads. Nevertheless, even if we do not carry them, all that is necessary for birth in the Pure Land is simply Other-Power faith.¹⁶

Since faith did not require enumerated chanting, Rennyo is said to have tied the tassel above the recorder beads to make counting impossible. Rennyo gave to one of his disciples a rosary that did not have the Four Guardian Kings or the Vimalakirti bead, though it did have a single tassel of the twenty recorder beads tied into a knot in the center (Itō 1933: 203). This is called Rennyo's Knot (蓮如結び *Rennyo musubi*), and is now a decorative knot, often with two loops, found on the secondary tassel, the primary one having recorder beads (cf. Itō 1933: frontispiece). This style, incidentally, is reminiscent of one of the rosaries Kūkai brought back from China, even in terms of the double looped knot. Modern Shinshū rosaries for lay persons do not have recorder beads and have braids or tassels instead (photo right, author's collection).

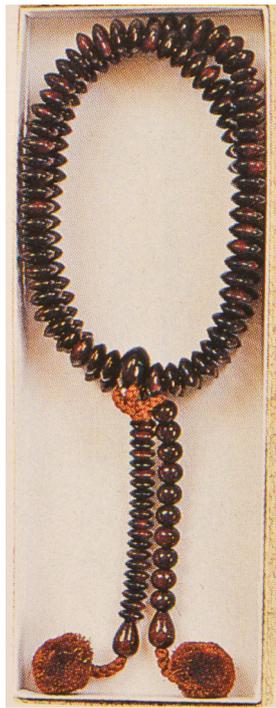


The Shingon, Tendai, Nichiren, and Jōdo schools teach the merits of repetitive chanting, and their rosaries therefore retain recorder beads. Modern Shingon and Nichiren rosaries usually have four strands of recorder beads, two each from the mother beads. The Tendai ones tend to have two strands attached to the main mother bead, one strand having twenty small beads, the other with ten slightly larger ones (photos below, author's collection).

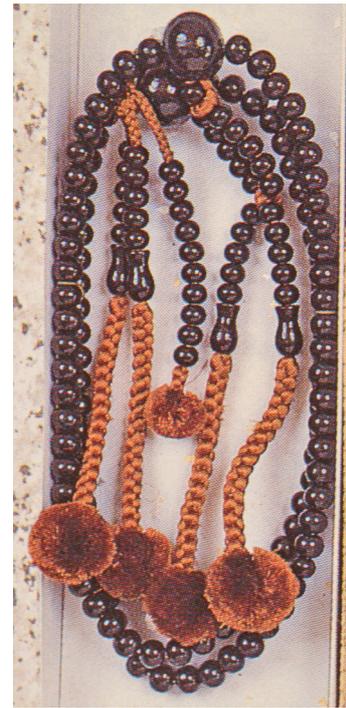
¹⁶ Translation in Rogers/Rogers (1991: 179).



Shingon rosary



Tendai rosary



Nichiren rosary

The Jōdo sect has the most innovative kind of rosary, the origins of which go back to Hōnen's time. Converted by Hōnen, a diviner by the name of Awanosuke 阿波介 was extremely assiduous in his recitations of the *nembutsu* and became concerned about how he was wearing out the strings of his recorder beads. After completing one round of recitations using the main beads of one rosary, he counted off that round with the recorder bead on a second rosary. Only after using all the recorder beads of the second rosary did he use the ones on the first, thereby saving on the wear and tear of the strings. Although Awanosuke was “an extremely dull man and lacking in wit”, Hōnen praised him for his innovation (Coates/Ishizuka 1925: 373f.). In the Eiroku period (永禄, 1558-1569) a monk named Shōnen 称念 took Awanosuke's idea to make what he called the *wanuki* 和抜き rosary of “intersecting rings”. He made one ring with thirty-six beads and strung a separate strand of thirty beads through the first. Two tassels had six and ten recorder beads respectively, but they were not attached to the mother beads. Instead they were fixed to a small metal ring linked to a larger metal ring through which the second rosary was strung (Mochizuki (ed.)



1960 III: 2475; Itō 1933: 103f.). The entire set, therefore, consisted of four intersecting rings (photo left, author's collection). The number of beads, as might be expected, can vary, but the standard today is either forty and twenty-seven or twenty-seven and twenty. A complete round of both strands of the 40/27 version cycles through 1,080 chants (40x27), while the multiplying effect of the recorder beads takes the total to 64,800 recitations (40x27x6x10). The 27/20 version yields half that amount. For

being the invention of a dull and witless man, the intersecting rosary is a very clever

device that uses the efficiency of multiplication to miniaturize the 1,080 bead top-of-the-line rosary into a set using only sixty-seven. The rosary of intersecting rings is also called the daily rosary (日課数珠, *nikka juzu*), and, while few use it to count *nembutsu* recitations, it is the standard and unique form for the Jōdo sect today.

The very name of the Rosary for One Million Chants tells of the importance of counting. The *Amida Sutra* promises that a million recitations of Amida's name will result in rebirth in paradise (Itō 1933: 102f.), and, as Samuel and Anne Morse point out in their excellent catalogue (1982: 128), the communal practice of reciting Amida's name a million times over a period of seven days goes back to Tao-ch'o 道綽 in China and the Pure Land abbot Kūen 空円 in fourteenth century Kyōto, when the city was suffering from an epidemic. The practice is still popular in Japan and involves a group of people sitting in a large circle to manipulate a gigantic rosary that can have beads as large as oranges strung into a ring reaching a hundred feet in diameter. The beads are moved from left to right, one bead being passed to the next person with each chant of the *nembutsu*. The officiating priest sits in the center, and the mother bead is identified as Amida. The rosaries used in this ritual are extraordinary, certainly in terms of size, but also in design. The example in this exhibition is remarkable for its hollowed out beads, within which are placed miniature images that include eminent monks and Shintō gods as well as the expected Buddhist deities. This eclectic flexibility is similarly exemplified in the Eight Tasseled Rosary, which was used for a million communal recitations. The story of its origins tells of man who received an oracle from the Shaka image at Seiryōji during the reign of Emperor Gohorikawa (後堀河, r. 1221-1232), and was told that his deceased mother was now a certain cow in a certain place. The man found the cow, took it under his care, and treated it like his own mother. When the cow died, he took the axle from the cart it used to pull and used the wood from it to make a large rosary with the main mother bead identified as Amida. In all there were eight mother beads, each with its own tassel, representing two buddhas (Śākyamuni and Amida), three bodhisattvas (Kannon, Jizō, and Seishi), two patriarchs (Shan-tao and Hōnen), and one chant (Namu Amida Butsu) (Oda 1954: 987).

While the purpose of this communal ritual is to perform a million recitations, the recitations are not ends in themselves. The ritual emphasizes the merit of surfeit – the more, the better – but quantity still aims at other objectives such as bringing an end to an epidemic. The matter of ritual action raises the interesting question of whether or not ritual effects are produced according to the law of karma. It is clear that ritual can cancel karmic effects from past actions (滅罪, *metsuzai*), and in this we see how karma is not fixed and deterministic, and is even subject to ritual powers that supercede it. Ritual can override karma produced by ordinary actions, and thus creates effects by some law other than that of karma. When used ritually, the rosary has efficacious virtue (功德, *kudoku*), which is the merit of magical power, not karmic action. Certain soteriological benefits are not morally earned, but ritually produced. The notion of virtue with its double meaning of moral propriety and efficacious power encompasses the two laws that govern spiritual progress: human karma based on moral conduct and divine action that is most often but not always invoked through ritual.

4.2 Purification and Protection

It has already been mentioned that the *Soapberry Seed Sutra* speaks of the power of the rosary to destroy the passions. The *Sutra on the Yoga Rosaries of the Diamond Peak* speaks of dispensation from the most serious of sins and purification of the three actions (三業, *sangō*) of the body, speech, and the mind. Here again can be seen the subordination of karma to the greater power of ritual. There is an underlying assumption that wrong action cannot be corrected by right conduct, and is therefore in need of the purifying virtue of the rosary. The beads, when placed on your head, will purify you of the five sins of killing your mother, murdering an arhat, killing your father, shedding the blood of a buddha, and destroying the harmony of the sangha. Placing the rosary on your arm will purify you of all sins (T17: No. 789, p. 728a). No amount of good conduct can achieve the same dispensation.

Beads have commonly been used as amulets in many cultures, and the Buddhist rosary likewise is a powerful implement for warding off evil. Evil spirits and forces exist beyond the boundaries of karmic sowing and reaping, for perfectly good people can still be plagued by angry spirits, hungry ghosts, or just plain bad luck; and the remedy to their predicament does not lie in continued but obviously ineffectual moral goodness. Morality is seldom ruled out completely, but given the extra-karmic reality of evil, moral action cannot prevent bad things from happening to good people. The solution to this Buddhist version of the problem of theodicy is found in the appropriately extra-karmic power of rituals that utilize implements such as the rosary, which, since it can purify and even destroy bad karma, can also defeat evil spirits or ward off ill fortune. As we have seen specified in the *Sutra of Mañjuśrī's Fundamental Ritual*, beads taken from north-facing tree branches can subdue demons. After an exorcist fails to dispel the spirit possessing Princess Aoi in the Nō play *Aoi no ue*, a Buddhist priest is called in and he readily drives out the spirit by reciting the mantra of Fudō 不動 and rubbing the beads of his rosary together (cited in Blacker 1975: 20).

Rosaries that are specifically made as amulets are in popular use today. The “bracelet rosary for warding off evil” (厄除腕輪念珠, *yakuyoke udewa nenju*) has a tassel made of the five colors that stand for several sets of meanings, one of which has to do with the amuletic functions of destroying the bad and nurturing the good:



(A)

green and red are for subduing evil (降伏, *gōbuku*), yellow increases benefits (増益, *sōyaku*), white stands for avoiding disaster (息災, *sokusai*), and black defeats evil (調伏, *chōbuku*) (Sawa 1975: 211.). This tassel is thus known as the tassel for warding off evil (厄除房, *yakuyoke fusa*). As amulets of good fortune, bracelet rosaries can also bring you success, help you find a job, keep you healthy, heal your illnesses, maintain domestic harmony, keep you from having a traffic accident, and fulfill all your wishes (photo left, author's collection).

In contemporary Shingon Buddhism, the tassel is also seen as an invitation to the salvation offered by the divine Kōbō Daishi. In the portrait of him sitting in a platform

chair, an example of which is in this exhibition (Morse/Morse 1982: 56f.), Kōbō Daishi, who is sitting in a three-quarter position, holds a rosary in his left hand. Taking note of the fact that one pair of tassels hangs at the very forefront of the painting, a modern handbook for Shingon believers points out that the rosary represents compassion and that Kōbō Daishi “lets the tassel of his rosary hang in our direction so that it will be easy for us to grab on to the power of his compassion. It also manifests Odaishisama’s vow to embrace all and not abandon anyone when he saves us as we recite, “*Namu Daishi Henjō Kongō*”, in times of sorrow or trouble.” (Arai 1988: 137).

Pushing and pulling, the beads keep evil at bay and draw in good fortune and salvation itself. As an instrument used in ritual, it takes over where human effort leaves off, and supercedes the law of karma without violating it. Ritual, after all, is a form of good human conduct, but the results it causes are still greater than what can be achieved by moral action alone. If the law of karma were sufficient for salvation, the rosary and its ritual power would not be needed.

4.3 *Prayer and Piety*

Ritual performances can be moral acts that produce karmic effects, or they can supercede the law of karma and produce effects that are more than a matter of just desserts. Chanting, for example, which I take here to be the recitation of scriptures or repetitions of formulas and phrases, aim for the most part at the making of karmic merit. This is often carried out, especially in set services, with no particular request for anything except the accumulation of merit, although one can most certainly chant for the purpose of acquiring something. Prayer is more often for supplication, a request to get some kind of benefit, not so much for the accumulation of merit, although prayer too is a good act with good consequences. The virtues of chanting and prayer combine both the goodness of conduct with the power of ritual.

The third function of chanting and prayer is the expression of reverence or piety. In common practice, this may be the most prevalent way in which the rosary is used when people place it around their hands as a gesture of reverence rather than for the accumulation of merit or the invocation of ritual power. For many, placing the hands together in prayer or reverence without a rosary is like being improperly dressed, or like trying, as Rennyō put it, to grab the Buddha with bare hands. The rosary is mostly an instrument for the hands, and its meanings are tied in with the significances of reverent hand gestures.

Ritual hand gestures or mudras form a complex system of signs with myriad meanings. Secular hand gestures can also be stylized and carry powerful messages to greet, command, indict, instruct, praise, or damn with satisfying vulgarity. One of the most common of gestures is the placing of the palms together to greet, respect, revere, or supplicate. *Gasshō* 合掌, the Japanese term for this gesture, has many meanings, and is a word that is even used at the end of letters for the equivalent of “sincerely yours”. As mudra, the *gasshō* are of twelve kinds (Saunders 1960: 40-42), only the first two of which need concern us here. The *kenjisshin gasshō* 堅実心合掌

is formed by pressing the fingers and palms firmly together to form the common gesture of prayer. *Kenjisshin* means firm and sincere heart, and indicates the ideals of reverence, humility, piety, singlemindedness, and commitment, all of which are intentional attitudes (有心, *ushin*). The second *gasshō* is called *koshin* 虚心, empty mind, and is appropriately formed by keeping the fingertips touching each other but separating the palms a bit to create an empty space between them. Unlike the first gesture, which requires effort to keep the palms pressed together, the second one is natural, relaxed, and formed without the use of pressure. This is indicative of the empty mind, or no-mind (無心, *mushin*), which is devoid of intentions or any purposeful function such as reverence or supplication. This hand formation, seemingly simple, cannot be fully perfected unless one is an enlightened being who has the perfect no-mind free of thought and intention. Like all mudras, both of these hand formations express an even more sublime meaning, namely that the teaching of the Buddha is to be found in dignified physical deportment (威儀即仏法, *igi soku buppō*), and that ritual performance is identical with doctrinal meaning (作法即宗旨, *sahō soku shūshi*) (Itō 1933: 26-29).

As it is with the structure of the rosary, the hands and fingers can be exegeted for a host of doctrinal lessons. The following chart gives just a selected list of meanings (Itō 1933: 49-50):

	LEFT HAND		RIGHT HAND	
	Human world		Buddha world	
	Principle		Knowledge	
	Blessings		Knowledge	
	Concentration		Wisdom	
	Cessation		Insight	
	Provisional		True	
	Inner		Outer	
	Original endowment		Attainment by practice	
	Meditation		Liberation	
	Matrix Realm		Diamond Realm	
THUMB	INDEX	MIDDLE	RING	BABY
Meditation	Diligence	Forbearance	Precepts	Charity
Human	Asura	Beasts	Hungry ghost	Hells
Space	Wind	Fire	Water	Earth

To the catechism of the beads can now be added that of the hands and fingers; together they form a matrix of some of the most fundamental doctrinal and cosmological teachings in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Most worshippers, however, are not aware of these layers of meanings, and signify a more simple piety when they put their hands together and pray with their rosaries. The rosary is an indispensable part of the etiquette of reverence and, like a necktie for a businessman, makes for proper attire and presentation. Style and design are important, and ordinary rosaries are more often distinguished on the basis of style appropriate to gender as they are according to sect. There are generic men's, women's, and children's rosaries that differ in bead size, color and refinement. Rosary vendors advise that attention be paid to matching colors of the beads with the seasons.¹⁷ There is also an etiquette of handling: always carry it grasped in your left hand, and never place it directly on the floor. The beads should not be rubbed too much, as the sound may be irritating to others. These injunctions carry little in the way of teachings, but define proper deportment in circumstances requiring precise behavior. The doctrinal lessons remain mostly silent, but the protocols of piety are clearly set forth. Inherently eloquent, homiletic in nature, the rosary cannot be kept from telling.

5. The Bodhisattva Path and Virtue

When rubbing the beads together with proper moderation, the gesture should end with both hands thrust slightly forward and away from the body. This symbolizes the spreading of merit and one's prayers to others. The most important piece of etiquette – and this is true also in Hindu practice – is that counting should never occur past the mother bead. Upon reaching the mother bead in completing a cycle, the direction of counting must be reversed so that counting goes from and to the mother bead but never over it. Herein lies another sermon.

The *Sutra on the Yoga Rosaries of the Diamond Peak* says that the string running through the beads is Kannon, and the mother bead represents infinite life and the dharma. To go past the mother bead is to commit the sin of transgressing the dharma (T17: No. 789, p. 727c.). The Shingon Buddhist elaboration of this centers on the mother bead as infinite life, which is the characteristic associated with Amida, who is also the master of preaching and destroyer of doubt. The rosary itself, therefore, is a sermon disclosing wisdom and enumerating chants. Since the mother bead is the dharma, and Amida is the main deity in the dharma section of the mandala, the identity of both is further assured. To tell the rosary a full cycle is to traverse the bodhisattva stages on the string of Kannon's compassion, beginning and ending with Amida, the buddha of infinite life and master of the dharma. To move in one direction from mother bead to mother bead is to achieve one's own enlightenment (自証, *jishō*), and to turn around and go back is to carry out the bodhisattva's vow to return to the world to influence others (化他, *keta*).¹⁸

When there are two mother beads dividing a 108 bead chain in half, the first fifty-four beads represent, as we have seen, the fifty-four stages of the bodhisattva path, but it

¹⁷ See, for example, p. 255 of the fall 1995 catalogue of the Izutsu Company, a major supplier of Buddhist implements and accessories.

¹⁸ Mikkyō Jiten Henshūkai (ed.) (1979 IV: 1782). The same explanation is also given in Itō (1933: 181).

also expresses the virtue with which all beings are originally endowed (本有, *honnu*). This idea is reminiscent of the notion of original enlightenment, a complex subject about which a great deal has been written from ancient times to our present age in which there is in Japan a lively debate that is spilling over into western academic circles (see Hubbard/Swanson (eds.) 1997). The homiletics of the rosary, however, are relatively simple; and there is little tension between the first fifty-four beads of original virtue with the second fifty-four of deliberate practice (修生, *shushō*) which literally means to create through practice. Creation here is not out of nothing, and simply means the bringing forth of the virtue that one already possesses. The famous conundrum that questions why practice is necessary if one is already enlightened is not an issue with the virtue of the rosary, which literally joins the two ideas on a single thread, and urges practice in order to manifest what one has, not to acquire what one has not.¹⁹

There is another level of even greater simplicity and efficacy that does not require a reading of messages in the structure of the rosary. The act of possession itself is sufficient. The *Sutra on the Buddha's Teaching on Comparing the Virtuous Power of Rosaries* says:

Furthermore, if a person holds a rosary in his hands but is unable to recite the name of a buddha or a mantra as prescribed, then all this good man need do is hold it in his hand or place it on his body; and in so doing the words he utters while walking, standing, sitting or lying down, whether they are good or bad, will enable him to obtain blessings accordingly because he carries the seeds of the Bodhi tree. The blessings he obtains will be infinite and no different from those acquired through recitation of mantras and the name of all the buddhas.²⁰

The rosary, especially one made from the Bodhi tree, is full of potency, and contact with it is sufficient to produce blessings.

The idea that Buddhism is not just a teaching of putting an end to desire but a powerful mechanism for the acquisition of blessings and the fulfillment of desire, such as that for the end of suffering, echoes many times over in the history of Japanese Buddhism. The first note of this can be heard in the letter that the King of Paekche sent to the Japanese court to introduce Buddhism officially to Japan in the 6th century:

This doctrine is amongst all doctrines the most excellent. But it is hard to explain, and hard to comprehend. Even the Duke of Chou and Confucius had not attained to a knowledge of it. This doctrine can create religious merit and retribution without measure and without bounds, and so lead on to a full appreciation of the highest wisdom. Imagine a man in possession of treasures to his heart's content, so that he might satisfy all his wishes in

¹⁹ Itō (1933: 110-112). Itō also notes that this interpretation cannot be found in the sutras. The Shingon interpretation of *honn'u* and *shushō* is applied to the two strings of recorder beads with the further elaboration that the ten beads in each string are equal to the Ten Paramitas. See Mikkyō Jiten Henshūkai (ed.) (1979 IV: 1783).

²⁰ Quoted from T17: No. 788, p. 727b.

proportion as he used them. Thus it is with the treasure of this wonderful doctrine. Every prayer is fulfilled and naught is wanting.²¹

The religion of the rosary bids the practitioner to return to or stay in the world and work for worldly satisfactions that it promises to help deliver. There is little in the way of world denial, for even the destruction of the passions can be accomplished through the power of ritual that does not require much in the way of austerities. Being the most ubiquitous implement among lay persons and clergy, men and women, adults and children, the rosary and its affirmation of the world signify a vast common ground on which Buddhism thrives in Japan.

6. Conclusion

Buddhist beads are packed with uses and bursting with meanings. Blessings, long life, health, wealth, success, enlightenment, going to nirvana, returning to the world, the bodhisattva stages, discipline, compassion, salvation, dispensation from sin, chanting, prayer, piety, reverence, sectarian teachings, sermons, and more are strung together in an unbroken circle manipulated by the hands, which themselves represent overlapping meanings. There is an important observation that we might make of this circle of meanings, and that is that most of these diverse elements are defined in sutras or by fairly high ranking priests. If we recognize in many of these elements characteristics of folk religion, then it may be that since these aspects are explicated at the levels of high tradition, sutra and priestly Buddhism is as much a folk religion by nature as it is a sophisticated philosophy. We need to revise the view that the high tradition of Buddhism is an analytical philosophy free of superstition, and that any magical beliefs found in actual practices and institutions are the results of a creeping popularism that is allowed to infect a so-called pure Buddhism for the sake of making it more palatable for ordinary folk. Taken as a whole, the literature on the rosary does not make a distinction between high and low religion, philosophy and power, metaphysics and magic. The rings intersect, the beads are strung tightly together, and the recorders, whether they are used or not, remind us that the garland of beads enumerate and disclose much more than numbers.

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²¹ Quoted from Aston (1956 II: 66).

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