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 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 Vishnus 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 corresponds 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 ’rGyus-pa’ and is applicable to all the gods and deities irrespectively, in Buddhist Tantric practices.

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-ka (Zhi-ba, གཟི་བ ་)
(II) Gys-pa (Gya-pa, ཡག་པ ་)
(III) Wang (dYabhang, དབྱང་)  
(IV) Ngon-chod (mNgon-spyod, མོང་གོད་)

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

II. In the service of 'Gya-pa', a rosary of gold ( བླ་ ) or Silver ( སྤ་ ) or copper ( བྲ ་) or lotus-seed ( བྲ ་) is used and one hundred and eight beads are suggested for this service.

III. In the service of 'dNyabhang', 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 ( གྲ ་) or Lungtang ( ཁྲ ་) or human bone ( ཁྲ ་) rosary is used and the number of beads in it is sixty only.

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

Bo-dhi-tse rosary can be used for any kind of ritual services and mantras. It is said that “'ཤས་ཤིང་གཉེན་པོ་'” Bo-dhi-tse does all the service and function more effectively than the other substances. A similar description of rosaries is available in Zikya Kabum (Sikyā bkā'-bum), Druk Kunchen Kabum (Brug-kut-mkhyen-bkā, 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 (དབུ་) or cotton (དབུ་) or gold (བི་) is used for tranquility and prosperity. A string of crow’s feather (དབུ་) or hair of ass (དབུ་) or camel (དབུ་) or dog (བི་) or human hair (དབུ་) found in the cemetery is supposed to drive out and subdue the evil and the enmites 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 (དབུ་) and the beads are passed between the index finger (དབུ་) and the thumb (དབུ་).

II. For 'Gya-pa' service, the rosary is held near the navel (དབུ་) and the beads are passed between the middle finger (དབུ་) and the thumb.
III. For ‘Dbang’ service, the rosary is held near the genital organ and the beads are passed between the ring finger and the thumb.

IV. For ‘mNgon-sposd’ or ‘Dreg-po’ service, the rosary is held near the knee while sitting cross-legged and the beads are passed between the little finger and the thumb.

**Symbolic Meaning**

The beads of a rosary represent the Dachampi (Gros-kömp-pa, སྣོན་པོ་). The first part of Dozin (mdo-zin, རྒྱལ་འཛིན) denotes the roundish shape representing the Dharmakaya (dzin-mchog, ཀུན་མཆོག) and the second part which is in the form of a stupa (mChod-tsha) symbolises the Dharmadhatu (dzin-rtse-ba, རྡོ་རྗེ་དབྱེན་པ།). Three-twisted-string represents the Trikaya (kun-bug, ཀུན་བུགས) of Dharma, Dharmakaya (dzin-mchog, ཀུན་མཆོག), Sambhogakaya (bcu-ba-rje, བུ་བུ་རྟ་) and Nirmanakaya (byan-mchog, བཱ་ཡུན་མཆོག). The nine-twisted-string represents the Vajradhara (bya-khams, བྱ་མཚོ) and eight Bodhisattvas, namely, Jampal Sonmur Gyupa (rgyal-mkhan-'byung-po, རྒྱལ་མཁན་འབྱུང་པོ་), Chakras-Dorje (تجزیه, ཞྭ་ཁ་རྡོ་རྨ་), Chen-res-zig (rgya-mtsho, རྒྱལ་མཚོ), Shyin-je (bya-khams, བྱ་མཚོ), Dibathum (bya-mdag-bul, བྱ་མདག་བུལ), Nunkyrel Nyingpo (mKun-kyer-bya-blo, ཨུ་ཀྲེལ་བོལ), Phags-ling (bya-rgyal-ba, བྱ་རྒྱལ་བ།) and Kandu Zangpo (mKan-du-byin-po, མཁན་འབྲིལ་པོ). As a believer in Tantra, I have given here only a general introduction, with a view to provide more authentic information to the reader. For detailed information one should study the ‘Gyur’ (Tantra) and its commentaries therein. Austin Wadell's treatise on this subject suffers from shortcoming which I have modestly attempted to reveal.