

Questions and Answers on Faith: What Do the Prayer Beads Signify?

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Q: What do the prayer beads mean? And is it OK to rub them?

A: First, while it's not necessarily a good idea to rub the prayer beads (also known as *juzu*) excessively while chanting, Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is not restricted by rigid formality. So it would not be correct to say that we *cannot* rub our prayer beads. But we should consider that rubbing the beads too much can become a nervous habit and can ultimately be very distracting to our concentrated prayer. Doing so may also be annoying to the people around us when we chant with others.

The prayer beads we use did not come from Buddhism but from the ancient Indian religious tradition of Brahmanism, which preceded Shakyamuni's time. If prayer beads ever played a vital role in Buddhist history or thought, there would have been some sort of description or precepts regarding them. But there are none.

Additionally, in his writings, Nichiren Daishonin makes no mention of the importance of the prayer beads, even though it is said that he, using his own prayer beads, defended himself from swordsmen's attacks during the Komatsubara Persecution of 1264. He also once asked a believer to kindly send him some magnolia seeds, which were used to make beads. And Nichiren Shoshu 26th high priest Nichikan did state that putting one's palms together during chanting with the 10 fingers touching signifies the principle of the mutual possessions of the ten worlds.

There have been various explanations of the beads' meaning. For example, it has been said that the three tassels on one side and two on the other signify parts of the human body (of the three tassels, one is the head and the other two are arms; the tassels on the other side are legs).

There are 112 total beads in the main circle, 108 of them said to represent the 108 fundamental earthly desires. The four small beads among those 112 have been said to represent the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. However, we need to understand that all these explanations evolved long after the use of the beads began. And, again, the Daishonin never said any of these things.

When the use of beads was adapted from Brahmanism by Buddhist priests, it was originally for the purpose of counting. First, priests used them to count days. Then they were used to count the number of the Buddha's names during the priests' prayers.

While President Toda was in prison, he created his own beads using milk bottle caps and used these to count how many times he chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. As he was about to reach 2 million times, he had a profound realization that enabled him to become fully aware of his mission for the spread of the Daishonin's Buddhism. (SGI President Ikeda describes the episode in detail in *The Human Revolution*, vol. 4.)

Many people continue to use the beads because they find that they help them concentrate while chanting. They use them as an aid to keep from being distracted. Excessive rubbing of the beads, in this sense, defeats their purpose.

Simply put, the beads are just a tool to help us focus on the Gohonzon. They do not have any special power, and we do not *have* to use them. Ultimately, what matters is not how we use our prayer beads but our sincere, concentrated prayer to the Gohonzon with a solid vow to work for kosen-rufu.

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