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Faith
on a String

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Foreword

As a little boy I was always fascinated by ropes and all sort of twines with which I constructed cranes etc. I was so eager to get strings that I even gave my pocket money for enlarging my collection. One day my younger brother, who is now in the financial sector, came and offered me string which I willingly bought with my pocket money. During the next weeks this happened several times. One day I noticed that there were a lot more knots than the pieces I bought. The mystery was solved very quickly, when my brother admitted cutting pieces from my string and sell them to me again and again. During a family court the decision was taken to be reimbursed from my brother.

I started learning the art of macramé and how to tie different nautical knots. This helps me till today, as being a surgeon, my extensive knowledge in tying proves to be of benefit to a lot of my patients.

As a young adolescent I met a monk that used his “Komboskini” for his prayers. I was fascinated by this object from the technical point of view and wanted to learn more about it.

The monk told me the following story:

Saint Pachomius, founder of the first monastery in Thebes in Egypt 320 AD, tied simple knots in a rope, an instrument that helped the monks in meditation and in numbering their prayers. Unfortunately in the night the devil came and untied the knots something bemusing the monks distracting them from meditation and prayer. Saint Pachomius was desperate and prayed to God to give him a solution. In the same night Archangel Gabriel visited him in his sleep and showed him how to make Prayer Beads with a woollen string consisting of 9 crossings for each bead representing the 9 orders of the Angels. Even the devil could not unknot this prayer tool which was named Komboskini.

This story sparked my interest not only in the technical creation of the knots but also in the spiritual aspect of Prayer Beads.

I would like to give to the interested an initiation into the use of Prayer Beads, trying to facilitate the inner work on ones personality through prayer and meditation.

Introduction

Almost endless is the number of chains with beads, charms and other decorative elements that were used by mankind since the dawn of human existence. It is very difficult to speculate what was done with the charm chains but it is obvious that they were used as decorative elements. However, it is very probable that our ancestors fingered them in times of idleness and maybe at times of contemplation on an issue that worried them. This might have been the beginning of the transformation of the charm chains of being understood as a spiritual tool for meditative awareness.

The first undeniable documented use of Prayer Beads can be found around the 8th century BC in Hinduism. The next report is between the 3rd and 4th century AD from the first Christians who lived in the Egyptian Desert as hermits (see also the story of St. Pachomius in the foreword), a tradition held unchanged since then by the Greek Orthodox Christians. All major religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity use Prayer Beads with the exception of the Jewish religion.

Structure of the Prayer Beads

Prayer Beads can be found in a great variety of materials, however, they all consist of two simple components, a string and beads.

The string itself guarantees the hidden inner bond which holds the disparate parts together giving unity to apparent multiplicity.

The extraordinary for the beads, however, is the specific number and the way they are arranged on the string, transforming them from simple jewellery to a tool for spiritual symbolism. Their efficiency results in the usage of material that is carefully chosen to correspond with the divine powers we intend to evoke and in a precise position in order to concentrate in a personal communication with deity.

The beads are strung in a loop, a characteristic of great significance indicating primarily cyclic time with the point of closure of the circuit confining a beginning and an end. Further the beads can be arranged in such a way, representing different defined groups like the four elements or the four cardinal directions.

Basic principle for praying using Prayer Beads

The “Head” of the loop remains in place whilst the prayer moves away from the “Head” in order to come back to the “Head” again that binds everything in a unity and thus imitating the eternal circle of procession and return. At any point during the circle the prayer reflects without regret what passed without worry of that yet to come.

The beads contribute to the timing of the meditation together with the repetition of short prayers, also called arrow prayers, as they shoot the soul directly to the divine. Although Prayer Beads can be carried along as a talisman, it is most effective to use them in a ritual and mostly in relation to spiritual symbolism. By pulling each bead through the fingers and reciting the prayer, word and action are unified.

The colour engages the vision and the bead shape the tactile sense, whereas in some Prayer Beads the sense of hearing and even the sense of smell can be stimulated.

Having in mind all the above and with the continuous use of Prayer Beads the prayer mentally gets used to not having to keep track of the count, thus freeing the mind to meditate on the mysteries.

The Hindu and Buddhist Japa Mala

Hinduism, one of the oldest living religions has two branches, Shaivism and Vaishnavism which employ Prayer Beads called Japa Mala.

Shaivism Mala consist of 27, 32, 56 or 108 rudraksha beads, the seeds of a tree found in Indonesia. The rough seeds represent the difficult and rigid life required of the Siva worshippers.

Vaishnavism Mala consists of carved wooden beads from the sacred basil shrub and is usually found in strands of 108 or any number divisible by 9. **Buddhism**, developed from a sect of Hinduism and retained the use of prayer beads.

Buddhism Mala consists of strands of 108 beads traditionally made from the wood or seeds of the sacred Bodhi tree, reflecting the religion's historical connection to Hinduism.

The 108 beads represent the impurities or lies that one must overcome in order to reach Nirvana.

The 109th bead on a Mala closing the loop is called the Sumeru, Bindu, Stupa, or Guru.

Tibetan Buddhism Mala consists of 108 beads, whereas the first 100 count for reciting 100 mantras and the 8 extra are meant to be dedicated to all sentient beings.



Buddhist Jaba Mala, 108 Coral beads

The Muslim Misbahah, Tesbih, Subha

It is thought that Islam adopted Prayer Beads through contact with Buddhism and Hinduism. Muslim Prayer Beads occur in sets of 99 counting beads and an elongated terminal bead and are called Misbahah, Tesbih and Subha.

The practice of reciting the “Name of God” began when Muslims followed Allah’s proclamation to remind people of Allah’s greatness.

Usually the way the Tesbih is prayed by beginning with the first 33 beads reciting, God is the greatest, followed by the next 33 beads reciting, Praise be to God, ending with the last 33 beads reciting, Glory be to God. After these repetitions the Imam is reached when the final prayer is said, May God forgive me, in addition the 99 beads symbolize the ninety nine attributes of Allah as referred in the Qur'an.

Aside from the Tesbih being a reminder of Allah glorification, many Muslims believe regular prayer using it provides them salvation from world destruction.



Islamic Tesbih, 33 Black Amber beads

The Catholic Rosary

After an apparition of the Virgin Mary to Saint Dominic, he introduced the Rosary in the 13th Century. It came into a more widespread use as a way to assist the often illiterate worshippers in keeping track of their prayers. It was not officially accepted by the Catholic Church until Pope Leo X gave the Rosary approbation in 1520.

The term Rosary is derived from the Latin word *rosarium*, or rose-garden and is used in the sense of rose crown.

The classic rosary contains six large and 53 small beads arranged into five decades of 10 small beads and one large bead each plus a pendant of one large and three small beads that terminates in a cross making the total number 59. One Rosary equal to one recitation composes of prayers arranged in sets starting with a Pater Noster, three Gloria and a Pater Noster followed by the set of ten Ave Maria with each set preceded by one Pater Noster and followed by one.

Devotion to the rosary is one of the most notable features of popular Catholic spirituality.

The Anglican Prayer Beads

The Anglican prayer beads were developed in the 1980s by a group of Episcopalians within the Episcopal Diocese of Texas. In the last decades this Anglican devotion has spread to other Christian denominations, including Lutherans, the Reformed, Methodists and nowadays is also named Christian Prayer Beads.

The basic feature is the division into four groups separated by four large beads called Cruciform beads, which form a cross when the Prayer Beads are opened into a circular shape. In between them are seven smaller beads called Week beads signifying the days of creation and the seasons of the Church year. Below the last Cruciform bead, the Invitatory bead completes the number of 33, representing the number of years that Christ lived on earth. A cross is attached to this last bead.

Anglican Prayer Beads are used as a tactile aid to prayer and as a counting device for the basic prayers of Christianity unlike the catholic Rosary which focuses on the relevant events in the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary.

The Greek Orthodox Komboskini

The first Christians used knots on a rope and it is more than unambiguous that they wanted to separate a religious tool from anything that might be considered a jewel. It is called Komboskini (Knot-rope) and its main characteristic is that it consists of a single woollen black string that is knotted in a way that creates woollen beads in an unmovable position. The number of knots is either 33, representing the years of Christ's mortal life on earth or 25, 50, 100, 150, or 300 or any number in steps of 50.

Each part of the Komboskini has a symbolic meaning:

- ❖ The wool reminds the members of the Church that they are considered as the sheep of the Good Shepherd.
- ❖ The black colour symbolizes mourning about our sins.
- ❖ The cross at the top is considered as the reminiscence of Christ's crucifixion.
- ❖ The tassel has the purpose of wiping the tears

The main recitation is the so called Jesus Prayer which is traditionally prayed on each bead: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*



Christian Orthodox Komposkini, 100 woollen beads

Armenia Tzbex

Armenian Christians use two different types of Prayer Beads one consisting of 14 flat beads in order to pray while following the 14 Stations of the Cross and the one closer to the orthodox tradition consisting of a loop of 33 beads in Komboskini form.

The Coptic Mequtaria

In the Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition, Prayer Beads are used similarly to the Greek Orthodox Komposchini. They are called Mequtaria and consist of 41, and 64 beads. In the 41 version, 39 beads represent the 39 lashes

Christ was given before the crucifixion whilst the remaining two beads symbolize the Crown of Thorns and the piercing of Christ's side on the cross. In the 64 version the beads symbolize the age of the Holy Mary at her Assumption.



41 Mastix beads

The Greek Komboloi

The origin of the Komboloi goes definitively back to the monastic Komboskini, however, using beads instead of knots. Today the Komboloi has no religious significance and comes in all shapes, sizes, colours and materials.

The word Komboloi, is the combination of the word «Kombos» (knot) and «Leo» (narrate) indicating the original use of narrating the prayers and counting them with the knots.

The Komboloi has an odd number of beads usually one more than a multiple of four or 23 beads. The reason for the reduction of the number is most probably to allow the beads to slide on the string.

This Greek Komboloi manifestation adds two important features to the classical Prayer Beads of all religions and transforms it to a personal secular possession. The eyes alone are not sufficient to decide which Komboloi is the best. An agreement has to be made together with the fingers and the ears. Whatever the shape of the beads, whether flat,

spherical or oval, whether translucent or opaque, whether made of stone, gems, wood, amber, bone, or even kernels the soul of the Komboloi is its voice



Greek Komboloi, 23 Black coral beads

Epilog

Although the major religions in the world use Prayer Beads with the main purpose to assist the worshiper reciting prayers, different concepts are behind them.

The concept of Prayer Beads came from the East where they were used primarily in Buddhism. Buddhist Prayer Beads made of Rudraksha seeds, with a very rough surface, reflect Buddha's tough life journey giving a great importance to the material the Prayer Beads are made of. The number of beads is of less importance. Praying with Japa Mala beads seems to be meditation for the sake of self-betterment.

Muslim prayers are much less formal and the number of beads is important whereas the type of beads used does not hold the importance as it does in Hinduism and Buddhism, however, it developed to a status symbol of the owner and to an art for extravagant materials and designs. Christianity seems to have copied the eastern religions in the issue of meditation through repetition. The Greek Orthodox Komposchini inspires through its simplicity and more or less independence on

numbers. The main issue is to repeat as many times as possible a simple prayer that makes you think of the relation of yourself to the divine.



Once on Mount Athos I was talking to an elderly monk about my hobby of collecting Prayer Beads of different religions. He was very interested and wanted to know more as he was not even aware that other religions have Prayer Beads. I willingly gave my knowledge and explained the religious idea behind the Prayer Beads of the other religions. After we finished he looked at me and said: *“Son you have to be careful not to drift away from our komposchini tradition which is the right way of praying”*. I looked at his face that was not as convincing as the words he just expressed. I took all my courage and said: *“Father but they all want to communicate with the Divine, so how do you at least evaluate their trial to do this”*. He looked at me and said: *“I think you’re on to something, all of these practices you’ve described involve repetition and by repeating something so often the words aren’t important anymore.”* He

paused. *“It seems that the prayer beads or knots are helping us to listen to each one’s own Divine.”*

Although I consider myself as a practicing Greek Orthodox, I now have a better understanding of how beads can be used to listen to God. In times when I feel I need to hear God, I find a short phrase that could be “Be still and hear” and repeat it with each bead. This helps taking away the focus off my words and I do not have to worry if my prayer was sufficient, the focus is placed on what God has to say to me.

Our world grows more and more connected through technology, however, we seem to be growing more disconnected by trusting less and judging more. We are afraid of the people that differ from us and yet we are all so much alike looking for safety through the structure that comes with commandments, we seek repentance and the opportunity to overcome our vices, we long to know that we are loved and blessed, we yearn for peace.

It seems that three major faiths use Prayer Beads as an aid for repetitive prayer in which the goal is at least to keep track of the number of prayers prayed but even more important to have an access to meditation despite different understandings of the Divine.