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BEADS OF FAITH: Pathways to Meditation and Spirituality Using Rosaries, Prayer Beads and Sacred Words

BY GRAY HENRY AND SUSANNAH MARRIOTT. FONS VITAE (WWW.FONSVITAE.COM), 2008. PP. 120. INCLUDES DVD. \$29.95

REVIEWED BY SAMUEL BENDECK SOTILLOS

The Name pronounced even once is a benefit, whether one is aware of it or not. Prayer is not verbal, it is from the heart. To merge into the heart is prayer.

RAMANA MAHARSHI

This new book BEADS OF FAITH, which comes with a DVD of the documentary film that was previously released under the same title, examines both the “outer” and “inner” meanings of the use and function of prayer beads that have been

instrumental in prayer, recitation, invocation, and meditation found throughout all of the world religions. The book begins by confirming that prayer beads have their origin in the divine, and simultaneously acknowledges the uses of prayer beads across spiritual traditions: “The use of prayer beads is not a practice recently invented or introduced, but is archetypal in nature, and common to every great faith tradition.” It will interest readers to learn that the etymology of the word “bead” reinforces the transcendent function of prayer beads, taken from the Sanskrit *buddh*, which means “to awaken,” referring to the Buddha or “The Awakened One,” and simultaneously connected to the Saxon verb *bidden*—“to pray.”

This work acknowledges the universal and perennial uses of prayer beads and

guides the seekers of varied spiritual methods through the path of prayer beads. The allegory of the ladder of ascent is likened to God to a drowner who is pulled up by the “rope” of prayer beads. This spiritual domain is a method acting as an *umbilicalis* or *umbilicus* for the practitioner—“from Heaven to Earth”—is from the Divine. The myriad practices are as diverse as the paths that lead to the center or points of a circle, yet they all converge at the center, the purpose of sapientia is the Self or the

This “summit” is analogous to the divine, is immanent, desire pertains to prayer, the act of pausing or returning back to the center and *who* you are. The DVD are filled with contemplative practices in diverse ways that have been employed by spiritual seekers in all traditions. The goal of both mediums is to gain understanding of the wisdom found

The book begins with the “Rosary” and then moves to the different uses of the world religions: “Orthodox Rosary,” “Hindu Mala,” “The American Bead,” and “Meditation.”

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guides the seeker into the sacred dimensions of varied faiths by introducing the spiritual methods employed with prayer beads. The allegory of terrestrial existence is likened to “a rope thrown by God to a drowning man,” much like this “rope” of prayer beads comes from the spiritual domain and offers a spiritual method acting as a sacred *funiculus umbilicalis* or umbilical cord connecting the practitioner to the divine via revelation—“from Himself to Himself”—that is from the Divine to the Divine. The myriad practitioners are said to be as diverse as the paths leading up a mountain or points around the circumference of a circle traveling like radii to the center, yet they all converge at the summit or the center, confirming the true purpose of sapiential existence—union with the Self or the Divine.

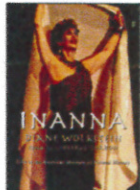


This “summit,” which is transcendent, is analogous to the “center” that is immanent, described in the text as it pertains to prayer beads “...the very act of pausing on a bead brings you back to the centre of where you are and *who* you are.” Both the book and the DVD are filled with beautiful and contemplative imagery depicting the diverse ways that prayer beads are employed by spiritual practitioners of all traditions. The comparative approach of both mediums assists the reader in understanding each tradition via the wisdom found in the other.

The book begins with “The Universal Rosary” and then continues to explore the different uses of prayer beads through the world religions: “Catholic Rosaries,” “Orthodox Rosaries,” “The Jewish Tefillin.” “Hindu Malas,” “Buddhist Malas.” “The Muslim Tasbih,” “Native American Beads.” And “Amulets and Meditation.”

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Prayer beads known as rosaries have been integral to the act of prayer within the Christian West or the Roman Catholic Church since the Middle Ages. Some possible origins of the Catholic rosary, from the Latin *rosarium* or “rose garden,” date back to the twelfth century during the Holy Crusades or in Moorish Spain and stem from Islamic uses of prayer beads. Another origin is thought to be connected to St. Dominic, who received the Holy Rosary from the Blessed Virgin Mary, as affirmed by Pope Leo XIII. It was during the sixteenth century that rosaries took their current form that they are known today by. The rosary allows the practitioner to pray throughout the day no matter what activity is being engaged in, thus creating a divine precinct within the heart. St. Augustine writes, “Do thou all within. And if perchance thou seekest some high place, some holy place, make thee a temple for God within.” The text also explains the recitation of Hail Mary (Latin: *Ave Maria*), meditating on the Mysteries of the Rosary, and other key prayers.

The rosary within the Christian East known as the Eastern Orthodox Church is a woolen rope of knots that is used to recite the Jesus Prayer or the Prayer of the Heart. Quintessential to the Prayer

of the Heart is the command of St. Paul, “Pray without ceasing” (I Thessalonians 5:17). The text also describes how to enact the Jesus Prayer—“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.”—which is continuously repeated while integrating the breath and can also incorporate prostrations that resemble yogic postures or *asanas*. In the film, one can observe a monk of Mount Athos performing this practice of the Prayer of the Heart.

The Jewish tradition uses prayer straps known as the *tefillin*, rather than prayer beads, which are worn on the head and the arm. The *tefillin* contain passages from the Torah that when worn on the forehead and the arm closest to the heart sublimate the desires of the heart, body, and mind as mandated by King Solomon, “Bind them upon thy fingers, write them upon the table of thine heart” (Proverbs 7:3). The text also explains the methods of praying with the *tefillin* in order to bind the words of God to man.

In Hinduism (*sanatana dharma*) prayer beads are known as *malas*, and are used to repeat a *mantra* or Divine names, which is a devotional practice known as *japa mala*. The purpose of repeating the Divine names is articulated by Swami Ramdas, “Om tunes the entire



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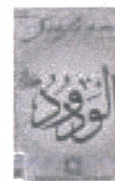
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human being with the eternal music of the Divine, bringing the soul in direct contact with the in-dwelling and all-pervading Reality.” The book elucidates the spiritual method of japa mala as used by three spiritual masters of the Vedanta: Ramakrishna (1836–86), Swami Ramdas (1884–1963), and Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950). The DVD takes one into the presence of some of the great spiritual masters and sannyasin of India, including the sounds of that world.

The book describes how prayer beads or malas and chanting are used by the different schools of Buddhism known as the three “vehicles” or *yanas*—Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana. The text provides details on how one of the most widely used invocations is practiced: *Om Mani Padme Hum*—“O, thou Jewel in the Lotus, Hail”—and how constant repetition of this invocation offered

to the *bodhisattva* Avalokitesvara or Chenrezig can release the practitioner from the clutches of *samsara*—the cycles of birth and death leading to liberation. There is also an introduction to Jain Malas at the end of the section. Some of the exquisite footage in the DVD takes us on a visit to Burma—to Pagan, a city of temples, and to the great *stupa* of Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon, and it also invites the viewer to enter the world of a Burmese Buddhist master, among other sacred sites.

The Islamic tradition as well as Sufism, its mystical expression, refers to prayer beads as the *tasbeih*, which is reaffirmed in the prophetic traditions, “Repeat the Tasbeih a hundred times, and a thousand virtues shall be recorded by God for you, ten virtuous deeds for each repetition.” In Sufism this process of remembrance or *dhikr* allows the seeker of truth to reside with God whenever and wherever



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God is remembered. A common recitation is: *la ilaha il-Allah*, "There is no divinity but the Divinity," illuminating the quintessential Sufi doctrine of the "Unity of Being" (*wahdat al-wujud*). Found at the end of the section are useful pointers for praying with the tasbeeh. The DVD takes us into the world of remembrance (*dhikr*), sound, and imagery of some of the great Sufi saints as well.

The uses of beads have a primordial origin for the indigenous peoples of the Americas. The Huichol Indians of Mexico, the Ojibwin of Canada, and the Iroquois of North America (Turtle Island) use beads as a spiritual vocation, which is similar to the use of the rosary. Beading allows the artist to experience the "heartbeat of creation" while simultaneously participating in the craft or sacred art that connects the individual

with the spiritual realm. The various forms of traditional prayer are described, such as: the sweat lodge (*Inipi*), the vision quest (*Hanblecheyapi*), and the act of praying with the sacred pipe (*Chanupa*).

The last section devoted to amulets and meditation draws attention to the ancient uses of beads not only as a form of religious devotion, but as a way of centering and quieting the mind to assist with worldly concerns and dispel fear.

The film concludes with a demonstration showing step by step how to make a rosary from rose petals by Brother Paul Quenon, a monk from the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky, who was a novice under Thomas Merton.

We welcome BEADS OF FAITH as an addition to other works dedicated to inter-religious dialogue in order to better understand the world's religions in an age where diverse traditions are asked to peacefully coexist. It is through the "transcendent unity of religions" that an authentic understanding and mutual respect for different spiritual traditions can take place, which this book acknowledges.

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos received an M.A. in Integrative Education from Norwich University and an M.A. in Transpersonal Psychology from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. He has gained extensive training in both transpersonal and humanistic approaches in psychology. He has travelled throughout the world to visit sacred sites, and had contact with noted spiritual authorities. He currently works as a mental health clinician in California.

