

Everything We Do in Practice Is More or Less Normal: The Practice of Mala

Garret Condon

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I'm not here as often as I should be. I work in our Hartford "office," as many of you know. We do a practice group at Trinity College and this is year 20 we're starting. And I used to have jet-black hair. So, a lot of things happen with students at Trinity College, as you can well imagine. Two weeks ago, we were going over practice forms, and one of our participants asked about malas. And I said, "Oh, malas, right malas." We have this big, plastic steamer trunk that has all of our Zen stuff in it—not the cushions—but all of the altarware. We call it "zendo in a box." Dharma Teacher John Elias is the co-coordinator of our group. He and I went through the box and found no malas. At home I have a bowl of malas and I said I'd bring the student a mala the following week.

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One of the things that happens when students ask you questions is that it makes you rethink or reframe the way you're thinking about things, and I hate that [laughter]. But, sometimes you have to do it. So, I went back and did some research on malas. And I learned a couple of fun facts. Now first of all, I grew up in what I would call an orthodox Roman Catholic home. One of the things that was more or less ubiquitous when I was growing up was rosary beads. Does everyone know what rosary beads are? We would say the rosary from time to time at some agreed-upon frequency, I can't remember—maybe monthly. And also, I went to Catholic schools for 16 years. All of my teachers had rosary beads—so beads were everywhere. Now, I remember when I took up Zen and started describing what goes on at the New Haven Zen Center 25 years ago or so, and someone said, "Isn't it kind of weird that all of your teachers walk around in robes?" And I said, "Only kind of teachers I've ever had."

I never actually knew what the word *rosary* meant. *Rosarium* is a Latin word that means "rose garden." It's interesting to me, because the Sanskrit word "mala" means "garland." It's like when we use the mala, we kind of travel, walking through the rose garden, or following this garland. The reason all of this was ironic to me is that I don't usually use a mala in meditation. I'll explain more about that in a minute. I think the reason is that I had a lot of beads before. So, I brought some malas in and I gave him a couple of malas, and we talked about this technique of using it for meditation.

In our school, we also use it to count bows. And some people use it in meditation. Now, I was not a student of Zen Master Seung Sahn. I heard him speak; he gave me my first precepts, and that sort of thing. But I never sat a retreat with him and he never taught me one-on-one. But one hears his original students use the phrase "Dae Soen Sa Nim used to say . . ." And, in this case, more than one person said to me, "Dae Soen Sa Nim used to say that using a mala is particularly effective or helpful because it's nonverbal." A mala is like a nonverbal mantra. And a lot of what we do when we sit is we run a lot of words through our heads—a lot of thinking goes on. And, no matter what the technique, we are trying to see our thoughts for what they are. If you start with something that's completely tactile, then you're not engaging with thought; it's completely tactile, so it's kind of "below your mind," as you might say. It can be helpful in that way, but it's not different from our other practices.

Sometimes, when I describe retreats to people—in just a general way—I'll say, "Well, we get up and we sit around and eat breakfast, do some work, sit around some more, go to the bathroom, do some more work." And most people say, "Well, that's what I'm going to do on Saturday anyway." The reason it's called "practice" is that everything we do as practice is more or less normal. So, using a mala to meditate is not different from sitting meditation; it's not different from walking meditation. When you go through a mala—108 beads—where do you get? Back to the beginning. Nowhere. Then you start again. When you circumambulate the dharma room for 10 minutes, you're moving, but where are you going? Nowhere. Back to the beginning. There's this tension in practice between going somewhere and going nowhere. Even in the four-bowl meal style, there is repetition. Suzuki Roshi famously said that if you lose the spirit of repetition, your practice will become very hard. We have these three poisons out there: anger, ignorance and desire. And there is a subset of desire that I think is kind of modern, and that's novelty. "What's the next thing?" "What's the next thing?" The interesting thing about mala practice is that it teaches you that the next thing is a lot like the last thing. It screws with your mind a bit if you sit with it. You're moving, but you're ending up in the same place. And that's the paradox of

practice. That's why I think the mala can be useful, and it's also practice for life, which brings me to how I use malas.

I have a little wrist mala that I use when I'm not in any kind of formal practice. I use it at work, and I use it when I'm driving. And I sometimes give them to people who are in stressful periods of their lives—not with a lot of meditation teaching. They say “How do I use this?” And I say, “One bead, one breath.” And, they get it. Later on, people will say, “That was helpful. I went 27 beads and I felt more calm.” It's not an orthodox Buddhist practice, but it's helpful. And that's what I use it for, just to come back to now. The other great paradox we deal with in practice is that there is a space between “me” and “my thoughts.” And if we're constantly engaging and attaching to our thoughts, that's one of our unhappiness machines. When you practice you're able to come back to this moment of reality, which is just this bead and everything that is happening around that bead: your breath, the sensation, who's touching the bead? Everything. Then you can get some space between you and your thoughts.

You know, sometimes Trinity students will say, “Well, is it bad to think?” And since they all got to Trinity by thinking, the answer is no. But, when we talk about a mind that's clear like space, we're talking about a mind that doesn't attach to everything that pops up. It's that backseat-driver mind that Zen Master Seung Sahn used to talk about all the time: can you just quiet it down so that you don't attach to everything that pops up? A mala can be helpful for that—and in any setting. You can get them anywhere. Sometimes they're called “power beads,” like when my daughter—she's 28 now—when she was 14 or something that was a thing, “power beads” in various colors. But I noticed when I was up in a Tibetan store in Northampton, they had a bowl of “power beads.” Anything to market them! Then we had a big discussion about their various uses.

You can't just have a mala; you have to be receptive to the mala. You have to receive on that wavelength. Part of what we do in practice is fine-tune our tuning, if that makes sense, so that we can be receptive. There are countless stories. John Elias reminded me of the story of a ninth-century Zen master named Xiangyan (Hyang Eom in Korean), who was a bit of a wisacre. He was a very talented Zen student, like all of you. And he had been given all of the teachings and he was kind of fed up with all the teachings. He went to his Zen master and said, “What's the deal?” And his Zen master said, essentially, “Yeah, that's not how it works.” Xiangyan said, “You told me this, you told me that, I attained this, I attained that, but I don't really get it. What's the deal?” So Xiangyan left the temple and he started doing odd jobs and travel-



ing around—you know, the traveling monk thing. There are all of these “traveling monk” stories. One day, he was sweeping a walk with a broom and little rock hit a piece of bamboo—smack!—and he woke up. He had this incredible experience of understanding everything he had been demanding to understand before. And so, pebble-against-bamboo was his mala.

The lesson is that anything can be your mala, if you're ready to hear it. There are countless stories like that. You guys probably know a dozen more like that, where the Zen master holds up a broom. Boom. Broom as mala. So, all kinds of things in the world are like that. I was driving down here this morning and there was this beautiful hawk up in the sky and that was my mala for the morning. If your mind is ready—that's why we call it “practice”—anything can be your mala.

I do think that there is a Big Mala. And I think there is a First Mala. Would anyone suggest what might be the first mala in Buddhism? I'm going to go with Earth. There is the story of Buddha's enlightenment experience. What does he do at that moment of enlightenment? What mala does he touch? He touches the ground. He says, “Earth is my witness.”

Now, we have this massive mala. When at Trinity I brought the student his mala, it still had a price tag on it, which was a little tacky. John, fortunately, has a tiny box cutter on his keychain, and I borrowed it and started cutting off the price tag, but I nearly sliced the mala itself, and there would have been beads all over the floor. And I was thinking of that because yesterday was Earth Day. I was thinking about how we're taking care of our primary mala—our primary source of enlightenment, our reminder of what's on the ground, what's real—this place where we live. It plays into this

whole idea of ignorance. We say we shouldn't destroy the earth. Well, we can't destroy the earth. The earth will outlive us, undoubtedly. But we can destroy the earth as a place for us to live. So, we are actually destroying ourselves. Talk about anger, ignorance and desire. We're destroying ourselves, but we think we're just squirting something into a river somewhere. So, we have to take care of our mala. Look at your basic mala: The beads are earth elements. Sandalwood, stone—they all come from the ground. Every time you touch a mala bead, you're touching the earth. And, helpfully, each bead is shaped like our planet! Each bead is a little earth. To talk about "engaged Buddhism" is another whole academic conference somewhere. I'm not going to get into it today. I'm just going to say that I was rereading *The Compass of Zen* recently and I came across some of Zen Master Seung Sahn's thoughts. When he talks about enlightened people—and he has various phrases for people who have attained something—he writes that it's not that the desires vanish, but that we get a handle on them. Going forward, what's important is: Are you using those desires for all beings? So, if you have a desire or anger around what's being done to your primary mala bead, it can help as long as it's for all beings. Does it help you fulfill your vows? Or is it just "I, me, mine?"

So, taking care of the mala, we come to understand that we need to be ready—ready for that touch, ready for whatever it might be. A mala could be a sound. It could

even be a "serene sound." A mala could be a sensation, a word, anything. Thich Nhat Hanh has this whole thing about making things into mala. If you're at the office and the phone rings, you take a breath. If you're at a stop-light, you take a breath. If you start thinking about all of these opportunities, it's clear that the universe wants you to wake up; it's waiting for you to wake up. It's tapping you on the shoulder. It's ready. It's reminding you; it's touching you.

When I shared a boiled-down version of this with the student I mentioned earlier at Trinity College, like you he was not too impressed. He said an interesting thing, of course. He asked, "Could you become attached to your mala?" I said, "Sure, you can become attached to anything. Trungpa Rinpoche wrote a whole book about being attached to various spiritual things, so yeah. That's why the technique with your mala should be your technique for life: Hold it lightly. Hold everything lightly. Firmly, but not too firmly. Hold it lightly. Just because something is ultimately empty, that doesn't mean you don't need it. That's a famous Alan Watts quote along the lines of "Just because it's illusion doesn't mean you don't need it." That's very true. We need all of the elements of our relative existence.

Be ready, hold it lightly, understand that everything can be a mala—and build that into your whole life. Everything we do here is practice, so that we can go to the marketplace with helping hands, to use that image from the ox-herding pictures. It's not for us. It's for all beings. ♦

I Had a Dream . . .

Yesterday I had a dream . . .
 Master! Master! Where have you gone?
 I woke up and felt relieved when . . .
 Your laugh I found in the children's laugh
 Your wide mind in the vast blue sky
 Your determination in the thunder fall
 Your meticulous action in the spider weaving its web
 Your compassion in a flower offering its pollen to a bee
 Your wisdom in the baby trying to walk, falling and
 standing up countless times
 I remember . . . You and me
 Sitting together in front of a font near Majorca Cathedral
 How much I enjoyed being with you!
 Just in silence listening the water fall . . .
 I find this silence still present
 In the fall of a single leaf from the plane-tree

—Eduardo del Valle Pérez
In memory of Zen Master Seung Sahn, April 24, 2017

I hope tomorrow

I hope tomorrow
 And tomorrow
 And the day after
 I'll do things right
 So that Liam
 Will smile often
 Commentary:
 Does the tree worry, "Will my offspring be happy?
 Am I blowing in the wind correctly?"
 Happiness or smiles.
 Sadness or frowns.
 Behind it all,
 Liam's luminous mind
 Will always remain eternally pure.
 But does he know that?

—Jerome Moore