



## WEEK FOUR: TRENGWA

You may have noticed already that Tibetan Buddhism is very big on numbering things the 4 Noble Truths, the 8-Fold Path, the 7-Limb Practice, the 37 Bodhisattva Practices to name just a few ☺

Mantras definitely fall into this category of spiritual tools that are numbered, and now that you are beginning to practice saying mantras you may find that you need a way to count your recitations.

For this you can use Tibetan Buddhist prayer beads, called *trengwa* in Tibetan and *mala* in Sanskrit. We sometimes call them mala and sometimes *trengwa*. In this post we will use the Tibetan term, *trengwa*.

This week we'll explore the use of *trengwa*, and of the little figures of the Bell and Dorje/Vajra (diamond thunderbolt) that are often tied onto the beads.



*Trengwa*: Tibetan Buddhist prayer beads with Dorje and Bell counters.

## **A Spiritual Abacus**

At the most basic level, the *trengwa* is just a calculator, like a spiritual abacus. Since a common part of Tibetan Buddhist practice is repeating (mentally or out loud) mantras thousands or even hundreds of thousands of times, it is useful to have a *trengwa* to simply keep count.

On another level, even if you are not actively counting, the repeated recitation of the mantra while proceeding bead by bead through the *trengwa* serves to focus and calm the mind.

*Video: How to Use your Trengwa*

We'll talk more about all of this, but let's have a quick look at the basic use of the *trengwa*. Note that in this video, Lobsang refers to the prayer beads by their Sanskrit name, *mala*.

## **108 Beads and a Guru Bead**

The most common type of *trengwa* is a string of 108 beads, made of precious or semi-precious stones, wood, seeds, or bone. Each time you work your way around the *trengwa*, saying a mantra for each bead, you are considered to have completed 100 mantra recitations. The extra 8 beads are “spare” to make up for any miscounts or mistakes you may make along the way.

There is also a head bead, one that is larger than the others, that is often called a “guru” bead. Some believe that this bead represents one's guru. On a very practical level, this bead is the starting point for the circuit, and is not counted among the 108 total.

## **Counter Beads**

Sometimes, *trengwa* will have some extra precious stones added at various intervals, like some turquoise or coral for example. These are added at intervals you can use for counting, like after 27 beads, for example, so that you know you are 1/4 of the way through one circuit. These counter beads are extra, so your total bead count would be 111 rather than 108.

## **Wrist Trengwas**

There is also a smaller, wrist-sized *trengwa*, made of 27 beads, for example, that is commonly used for doing prostrations. In this case, the smaller size is wrapped around your hand and repeated 4 times. One can make other configurations, of 21 or 22, for example, and that is not a problem, as long as you can use your *trengwa* for counting.

## How to Hold and Count with your Trengwa

We want to say, as is often true in Tibetan culture, that there are no strict rules when it comes to *trengwa* and the way to count your mantras. Everybody does it slightly differently. There are common ways of doing things but these do not matter nearly so much as your intention and your attitude of prayer. If you are praying from your heart while using your *trengwa*, you are doing the right thing!

Although some sources recommend using the *trengwa* in your left hand, some Tibetans also hold them in the right hand. If you have a prayer wheel in one hand and a *trengwa* in the other, it is more common to hold your *trengwa* in the left hand and the prayer wheel in the right.

To use your *trengwa*, start with the first bead next to the guru bead. Hold the bead between the index finger and thumb, and recite your mantra once out loud or silently. Then move on to the next bead with a rolling motion of your thumb, recite your mantra again and repeat. When you get to the guru bead again you have completed 100 mantras without needing to count each one :-)



Starting the circuit at the “Guru bead.”

At this point, most Tibetans do not pass over the guru bead but instead reverse direction by turning the *trengwa* around, and starting a new circuit of 100, going back the way they came. We are not sure, honestly, why this is so, and we do it out of habit rather than for any special reason. (Some people believe that if you continue in the same direction and cross over the guru bead, it is like stepping over your teacher.)

### **Counting with Dorje and Bell**

When counting very high numbers of mantra recitations, it is helpful to have some additional counters attached to your *trengwa*. These are 2 shorter strings of 10 small beads, called *chupshay* in Tibetan. One of the strings has a miniature dorje at the end, and the other a miniature bell. The *dorje* (Sanskrit: *vajra*) and bell (Tibetan: *tribu*), are the most common Tibetan Buddhist sacred ritual objects.

Where these strings are placed on the mala is up to you. We have ours after the 6th bead on either side of the guru bead, but that is for no special reason and you can put them wherever you like.

Use the *dorje* counter to keep count of each circuit of 100 that you make on the *trengwa*. So each time you finish one circuit, you will pull forward one bead on the *dorje* counter. After 10 circuits of the *trengwa*, you will have moved all 10 beads on your dorje counter, and you will have recited 1000 mantras.

At this point, you will move one counter forward on the bell counter, to symbolize 1000 mantras counted. Then you begin again with a new circuit on your *trengwa*, and once you have made a new circuit, you move one of the *dorje* counter beads forward, and continue like this. With a *dorje* and bell counter, you can count up to 10,000 mantra recitations.

If you need to count more than that, you can use anything that you wish. When counting 100,000, we have used stones to mark each 10,000 (making a pile of stones in which each one represents 10,000), or you can make a note on a piece of paper. The basic idea at this point is that you can use whatever is practical, and not get too concerned about any ritualistic rules or objects.



Holding your *tremgwa* while sitting.

### **Types of Tremgwa**

There are many types of *tremgwa*, from ivory and bone to sandalwood and lapis lazuli or crystal or “Bodhi seed” (actually made from Rudraksha seed) or “lotus seed” (actually made from rattan seed). Although we’ve seen and read a lot of theories about what kind of *tremgwa* is best for this or that kind of prayer, we do not think that it matters so much what kind of *tremgwa* you use. And we think that most other Tibetans don’t make big distinctions about types of *tremgwa*, either. (If you are interested, here is a good explanation on Dharmashop.com about Bodhi seed and wood tremgwa.)

Tibetan monks and nuns generally use very simple and inexpensive *tremgwa*, like wooden ones.

You can use any *tremgwa* you like. It is better to focus on the spiritual practice of praying and reciting mantras rather than on the looks or value of your *tremgwa*.

### **Caring for your Tremgwa**

In general, your *tremgwa* will grow in spiritual significance as you use it for mantra recitations and bring it to teachings and possibly have it blessed by your lama. And while it is not in itself as sacred as a statue or a piece of Buddhist scripture, it is something we usually treat with respect. This means that you wouldn’t put it on the floor or put mundane objects on top of it or throw it.

When not using their *tremgwa*, Tibetans wrap them around their wrists or hang them around their necks. No one uses it for counting while around the neck, and perhaps we should add that the *tremgwa* is not to be used like jewelry or to “show” your Buddhism.

When you don't need it for a while, or are sleeping, for example, you can hang it on a clean, highish place, maybe near your altar. We actually keep ours in a special bookshelf under our altar. It's all up to you and your intention to treat it with care and respect while maintaining a practical, non-extreme attitude. That's how Tibetans tend to do it anyway :)

## **WEEK FOUR PRACTICE**

This week you can use a *trengwa* to count your mantras (or use the handout below to find a good *trengwa*). Practice saying the mantra of your choice at least one circuit of the *trengwa* each day. (You can say the same mantra each day or change it up and say different ones.)

We'd really love to see a picture of your favorite *trengwa*, and the reason it is especially meaningful to you, on our Facebook group page. :-)

## **PRACTICE TOOLS FOR WEEK FOUR**

- Handout: Mantra practice (From Week 2)

A good source to buy a *trengwa*/mala, where your purchase helps support Tibetan nuns:

- Tibetan Nuns Project Store