

ACCUMULATING MERIT EVERY DAY

ELENA PAKHOUTOVA



Fig. 1 Prayer Wheel; Tibet or Mongolia; 17th–18th century; silver, green jadeite, rubies (or spinels), turquoise, semiprecious stones; $8\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{3}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{4}$ in. (22 × 4.5 × 9.5 cm); The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore; Gift of John and Berthe Ford, 2002; 57.2285; photograph by Alain Jaramillo, courtesy of The Walters Art Museum

PRAYER WHEEL

Tibet or Mongolia
17th–18th century

SUMMARY

Art historian Elena Pakhoutova examines the unique technology of devotion: prayer wheels, rotating cylinders full of sacred mantras that are “read” when spun. The mantras, Sanskrit syllables thought to have cosmic power when chanted, are also used in prayer beads, printed on prayer flags, or placed inside stupas or statues. The prayer wheels can be simple or ornate, powered by hand, wind, or electricity. Devotees spin them to gain merit, believed to lead to well-being and good rebirths for all.

Prayer wheels are ritual objects that are ubiquitous in Tibetan Buddhist culture.¹ A cylinder contains a tight roll of paper filled with written mantras that rotates around a central axis when turned clockwise using the spindle. The simple recurring action of turning a prayer wheel with conscious intent is believed to “recite” or “read” the mantras, activating and releasing them into the world for the benefit of all.² Depending on the size, prayer wheels can enclose anywhere from several thousand to millions of written mantras. Lay and ordained people alike spin handheld prayer wheels, called *lakkhor*, like the one from the Walters Art Museum featured here (fig. 1), while going about their daily tasks. When visiting temples or pilgrimage sites, people turn larger wheels, commonly known as *mani khorlo*, combining this practice with circumambulation and mantra recitations. It takes several people working together with effort to rotate monumental prayer wheels, called *chokhor* (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. KazPix, "Spinning the Gigantic Prayer Wheel in Shangri La," *YouTube*, October 7, 2017, 0:48, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=zh0lnvhl3do>

The most popular mantra used in Tibetan prayer wheels is the six-syllable *Om mani padme hum*, which is the mantra of the bodhisattva of compassion Avalokiteshvara, the most popular deity in Tibetan culture. Each mantra is believed to benefit the person who both recites and turns the wheel, and once released into the world through these actions, the mantra benefits countless others. Prayer wheels are designed for purposeful use, and their structure underscores the power of intention along with repetition of the mantras and visualization.³ The rolls of paper filled with written or printed mantras hold the potential for each individual mantra to be repeated thousands or millions of times (fig. 3), essentially acting as the “power cells” of the wheels.



Fig. 3 Roll of Mantras for a Prayer Wheel and Its Spindle; Tibet; ca. 12th–13th century; black ink on paper with metal spindle; $3 \frac{3}{16} \times 1 \frac{5}{8}$ in. (8 × 4.2 cm); Private collection; photograph courtesy Scientific Analysis of Fine Art, LLCs

THE POWER OF MANTRAS AND MERIT

According to Tibetan sources, the power and efficacy of these objects are tied to internal meditational practices and to ancient Indian reverence for sound and its symbolic rendering in syllables (mantras), which are recited to invoke and bring forth inner experiences.⁴ Buddhist practitioners use mantras to focus their visualization, envisioning mantras rotating in the heart center, or heart chakra.⁵ Imagined in a similar way, the mantras spin outward from the center of the prayer wheel, coming forth and emitting blessings.⁶

Tibetan sources explain that the fundamental benefit of spinning a prayer wheel with proper intention is the accumulation of merit. It ensures the removal of obstacles and offers protections, freedom from bad rebirths, worldly gains, advancement in Buddhist practices, and more.⁷

FORMS AND STRUCTURE OF PRAYER WHEELS

The physical form of Tibetan prayer wheels is thought to have originated in the revolving bookcases first documented in Chinese Buddhist monasteries and Japanese Buddhist temples.⁸ These octagonal bookcases spun around a central axis and were first used as repositories for scriptures. Over time they developed into a means to increase, with each rotation, the merit equal to reading the whole Buddhist canon. They also symbolically referenced the Buddha's first sermon, known as the Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma.

Tibetan prayer wheels retain the general purpose of the revolving scripture repositories to generate merit, as well as the functionality of rotating around the central pole, but they diverge in their structure and variable sizes. Furthermore, not only people but also wind (fig. 4), hot air from fire, and water have the power to activate them.

Contemporary versions of Tibetan prayer wheels include solar-powered wheels, electricity-powered computer screen savers, compact disc-based ones, and mobile phone apps.



Fig. 4 Wind-Powered Prayer Wheel (*mani lung khor*); Tibet; before 1920; metal, ink, paper, bamboo, string; 9¼ in. × diam. 5½ × 2¼ in. (23.5 × 14 × 5.7 cm); Newark Museum; Purchase, 1920; 20.406 A-C; photography courtesy of the Newark Museum of Art

Essential elements of the Tibetan prayer wheel forms are the same regardless of size—a cylindrical container houses prayers and mantras written or printed on paper wound around a central axle. A handheld prayer wheel has a handle that extends into the axle inserted into the cylinder, which has an attached counterweight to help perpetuate rotation. This form seems to be a Tibetan invention. Italians may have adopted it in the fifteenth century for their mechanical designs.⁹ The drum-shaped container can be made

of wood, sheet metal, conch, hollowed-out bone, or stone, as in this example from the Walters Art Museum.

The creator of this prayer wheel may have used an existing cylinder of jadeite, which would explain the small size of the container. The object is similar to another prayer wheel in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (fig. 5), which features a stone container formed by a repurposed jade archer's ring fitted with an outer decorative band, inset with semiprecious stones, and capped at the top and bottom. The tubular glass pipe that covers the axle appears to be adapted from a cigarette holder.¹⁰ The object's unusual, innovative construction is unsurprising, given the widespread use of prayer wheels in Tibetan culture. It is possible that the Walters Art Museum prayer wheel, too, was made using an archer's ring, as the dimensions of both drums are almost identical.¹¹ Whatever the case, the materials of the Walters Museum prayer wheel suggest a lavish taste, as jade, silver, and precious stones indicate status and imply a wealthy owner. The use of it in public would be a conspicuous display of wealth.



Fig. 5 Handheld Prayer Wheel; Tibet; 19th–20th century; jade, copper alloy, turquoise, glass, paper; prayer wheel height 5½ in. (14 cm); folio page 17¼ × 3¼ in. (43.8 × 8.3 cm); archer's ring height 1 1/16 in. (2.7 cm), outer diam. 1¼ in. (3.2 cm), inner diam. 7/8 in. (2.2 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Gift of Hermes Knauer, in memory of Conrad P. A. Knauer, 2013; 2013.43a-b; photograph courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The containers of Tibetan prayer wheels are often decorated with mantras in Lantsa (Ranjana) script in relief. This script is thought to have originated in the Bengal region of eastern India at the end of the first millennium, and it became widespread during the Pala dynasty (eighth to twelfth century);¹² it reached Newar Buddhist communities of the Kathmandu Valley and was used for Nepalese Buddhist manuscripts. Tibetans embraced it as their preferred script for rendering Sanskrit titles of sutras and tantras in their books, writing mantras in decorative and symbolic composite forms (the Kalachakra mantra is the best known of such symbols), representing seed syllables in mandalas, and marking relief carvings on architectural monuments.

RELATIONSHIP TO RELICS, CONSECRATION, AND CIRCUMAMBULATION

The mantras within the containers, which are also called reliquaries, relate to rituals of consecration. When Buddhist statues are consecrated to embody the Buddha or deities, they are filled with mantras and prayers in a manner similar to the prayer wheels. In this context the mantras are also the Dharma relics or Dharmakaya relics, which represent the sacred words of the Buddha. For this reason, prayer wheels conceptually connect to stupas, the ultimate and often largest repositories of these and other types of relics, as well as to the practice of circumambulation, or walking around stupas and sacred sites.

PRAYER BEADS AND PRAYER FLAGS

Prayer beads (fig. 6), *mala* in Sanskrit or *trenqwa* in Tibetan, are implements that aid personal devotional practices related to prayer and mantra recitation. Just like prayer wheels, they are used in the context of accumulation of merit. More recitations accrue more merit, while the beads ensure the proper accounting of the chanted words and are believed to take on the accumulated power of the practice.



Fig. 6 Prayer Beads (*tengwa*); Tibet; 19th century; turquoise, bone, silver; 27 5/8 × 3 5/8 × 1 1/4 in. (70.2 × 9.2 × 3.2 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; Gift of Anne Breckenridge Dorsey; C2012.6.13

Mantras are also employed in Tibetan prayer flags, which are variously colored cloths imprinted in ink with mantras and images from carved woodblocks (fig. 7).¹³ The flags are hung on high grounds and around sacred sites, temples, and mountain passes. They are believed to disseminate the mantras with the wind to pacify local gods and bring about luck and fortune to benefit all, in a manner similar to the prayer wheels.

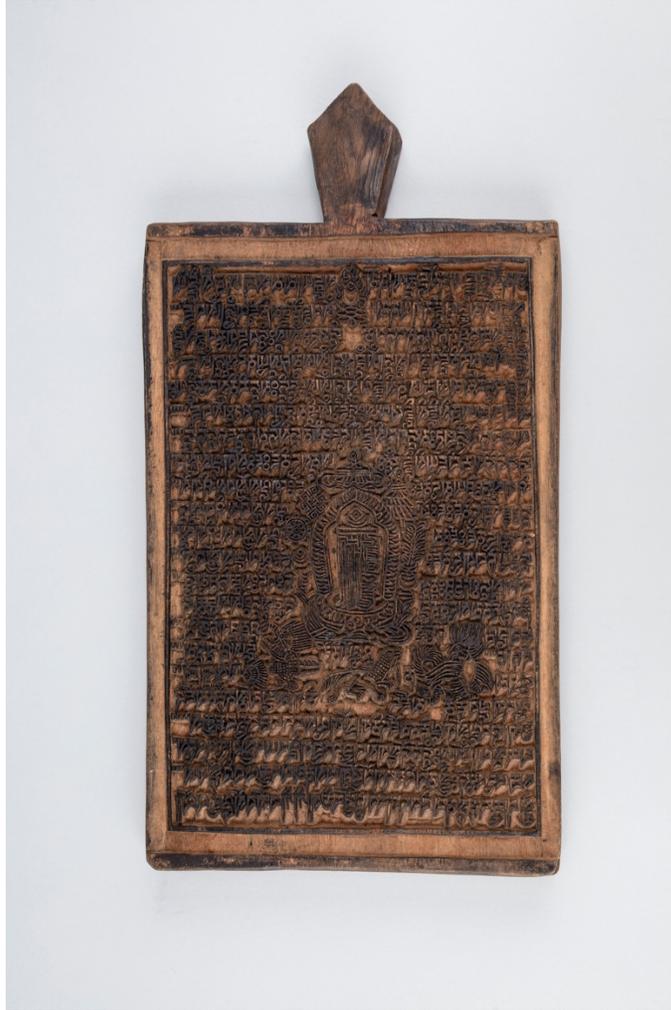


Fig. 7 Woodblock for Printing Prayer Flags with Print; Himalayan region; 15th–19th century; pigments on wood; 14 × 7 7/8 × 1 in. (35.6 × 20 × 2.5 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; C2006.75.20 (HAR 68949)

The practice of printing mantras on textiles and openly hanging them as flags does not appear to be adopted from India, and a practice of raising prayer flags may have predated Buddhism in Tibetan cultural areas.¹⁴ The use of prayer flags is as universal as that of prayer wheels in the region. It equally reflects complex cultural practices that address worldly and religious concerns and often serves as part of formal rituals and activities that support and promote participants' harmonious existence in the larger, interdependent world.

FOOTNOTES

¹ The term “prayer wheel,” along with “prayer mill,” is not a translation of Tibetan words and reflects similarities to ordinary objects found in Western culture. See Marianne Winder, “Aspects of the History of the Prayer Wheel,” *Journal of the Tibet Society* 28 (1992): 25; William Simpson, *The Buddhist Praying Wheel*, Reprint (London: Adamant Media, 1896).

² Karma chags med., “Thugs Rje Chen Po’i ’khor Lo’i Phan Yon [Benefits of Avalokiteshvara’s Prayer Wheel],” in *Gsung ’bum Karma Chags Med* [Collected Works of Karma Chakme], vol. 35 ([Nang chen rdzong]: Gnas mdo gsang sngags chos ’phel gling gi dpe rnying nyams gso khang, 2010), 597–600, <https://library.bdrc.io/show/bdr:W1KG8321>.

³ *Khor lo dang jo dar gyi phan yon* [Benefits of prayer wheels and prayer flags] (’Bum nyag chos sgar lnga rig bsam gtan chos gling, n.d.), <https://library.bdrc.io/show/bdr:MW1KG11869>, 3; *Ma Ni ’khor Lo’i Phan Yon* [On the Benefits to Be Derived from the Use of the Prayer Wheel and the Recitation of the Avalokiteshvara Formula (Gangtok: Dzongsar Khyentse Labrang Palace Monastery, 1985), 3–13] <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/W27609>.

⁴ Dan Martin, “On the Origin and Significance of the Prayer Wheel According to Two Nineteenth-Century Tibetan Literary Sources,” *Journal of the Tibet Society* 7 (1987): 16–18; *Khor lo dang jo dar gyi phan yon* [Benefits of prayer wheels and prayer flags] (’Bum nyag chos sgar lnga rig bsam gtan chos gling, n.d.), 2, <https://library.bdrc.io/show/bdr:MW1KG11869>.

⁵ Dan Martin, “On the Origin and Significance of the Prayer Wheel According to Two Nineteenth-Century Tibetan Literary Sources,” *Journal of the Tibet Society* 7 (1987): 17.

6 *Ma Ni 'khor Lo'i Phan Yon* [On the Benefits to Be Derived from the Use of the Prayer Wheel and the Recitation of the Avalokiteshvara Formula] (Gangtok: Dzongsar Khyentse Labrang Palace Monastery, 1985), 13–14, <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/W27609>.

⁷ Dan Martin, “On the Origin and Significance of the Prayer Wheel According to Two Nineteenth-Century Tibetan Literary Sources,” *Journal of the Tibet Society* 7 (1987): 16, 18; *Khor lo dang jo dar gyi phan yon* [Benefits of prayer wheels and prayer flags] ('Bum nyag chos sgar lnga rig bsam gtan chos gling, n.d.), 4–12, <https://library.bdrc.io/show/bdr:MW1KG11869>.

⁸ L.C. Goodrich, “The Revolving Book-Case in China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 7 (1942-43): 130–61.

⁹ In addition to the vertical axis windmill and the hot air turbine, thought to be inspired by Tibetan prayer wheel technologies, the ball and chain counterweight/governor design directly references Tibetan construction. Lynn White, *Medieval Religion and Technology: Collected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 47–50.

¹⁰ Donald J. La Rocca, “Recent Acquisitions of Tibetan and Mongolian Arms and Armor in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Part 2,” *Waffen-und Kostümkunde: Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Historische Waffen-und Kostümkunde* 56, no. 2 (2014): 195.

¹¹ Each is about 1 3/8 inches (3.5 cm) in diameter. Email communications with the Walters Art Museum’s Curator of Asian Art Adriana Proser and the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Armorer and Conservator Edward Hunter, May 19, 2021.

¹² Jens-Uwe Hartmann, “The Rañjanā Script,” in *The Fifth Seal: Calligraphic Icons*, ed. Andreas Kretschmar (Kathmandu: Radheshyam Saraf Art Collection, 1998), 37.

¹³ The term “prayer flag,” like “prayer wheel,” is an English invention that emphasizes prayer over the meaning, intent, and ritual function of these objects and their indigenous terms. See Katherine Anne Paul, “Words on the Wind: A Study of Himalayan Prayer Flags” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2003), xvii–xix.

¹⁴ Katherine Anne Paul, “Words on the Wind: A Study of Himalayan Prayer Flags” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2003), 226–30.

FURTHER READING

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