

The Meaning of Malas

Five top mala makers share the spiritual significance of their jewelry

By **Kristin Vukovic**

A mala necklace and bracelets from Satya Jewelry

My Indian husband and I were on an Ayurvedic retreat in Kerala, southern India, when I purchased my first mala. It hung on a Buddha statue in the corner of a dark store on a dirt road. Etched in Sanskrit on each round seed was Om Mani Padme Hum, a sacred mantra that means, “Hail to the jewel in the lotus.”

Often used during meditation, a mantra is a sound, word or phrase capable of creating transformation. I later learned that the jewel represents the attainment of full enlightenment while the lotus symbolizes the process—a reminder to strive to find the best within ourselves and live life with compassion.

Mala means “garland” in Sanskrit. These strings of prayer beads—typically made from wood, seed, bone or stone—help to focus one’s awareness and concentration. The traditional full mala has 108 beads, with a larger “guru bead” to keep track of the repetitions of 108 and to evoke your connection to your teacher. Malas are also made from divisions of 108 (18, 27, 36 and 54). “The number 108 represents the universe as one thing (1), nothing (0), and everything—infinity (8),” says Mala and Mantra founder Judith Compton.

Here’s how five of our favorite mala makers found their inspiration.

Mala and Mantra

Mala and Mantra necklaces and bracelets are made from sustainable wood and stone beads. The brand’s most popular collection, Mantra Gemstone, features 108-bead stone necklaces with a stone-specific mantra and a pewter-based metal guru bead engraved with Om Mani Padme Hum. “We are about the spirituality and mindfulness messaging,” says Compton. “The messaging is how we can help empower others with wellness, and the beads are our way to spread that message.”

Compton, whose Filipino parents immigrated to the U.S. in the 1950s, recognized her good fortune from a young age and always wanted to give back to their home country. Mala and Mantra necklaces are made by a women’s cooperative in Northern Luzon, Philippines, which provides women and their families a safe work environment, fair wages and a sustainable income. malaandmantra.com



Jai Mala Rose

In 2012, after a hip injury kept her homebound, Celeste Onorati heard this message while meditating: “Go buy roses, you will make beads.” She researched rose beads, and discovered that nuns in the 1500s made beads out of rose petals for rosaries. “I love sacred beads,” Onorati says. “I used malas for many years. I’d never made jewelry before.” Many roses and hours later, she found her own way of creating them, using petals and water.

Each 108-bead mala is created from two and a half to three dozen roses, and the hand-formed beads take eight to 10 days to create. Onorati founded Jai Mala Rose with her son, Jonathan VanWettering, and has since made more than 500 pieces of rose bead jewelry. Last year, one of her unique malas was auctioned at Christie’s to benefit the Tibet House. She is currently working on a mala collection with rose petals blessed by Amma, an Indian spiritual teacher and humanitarian leader. “The thing I love the most is that they will never be mass produced,” she says. “It’s a sacred art form for me.” jaimalarose.com

Satya Jewelry

During yoga teacher training in the Bahamas after 9/11, founder Satya Scainetti was given the name Satya. She had a dream that she was going to make “jewelry of all truths” and give money to children all over the world—which she does through the Satya Foundation. “I completely opened up my heart, meditated, did yoga every day,” Scainetti says. “I was open to the message.”

From the beginning, traditional malas were a mainstay—she doesn’t leave home without a mala around her neck. “I loved making them; I loved the meaning behind them. There are 108 aspects of your true self. Each stone ignites that creative part of you. We do beautiful hand-knotted necklaces with silk thread and each knot represents a challenge. You either resist or find the lesson in it. For me, a mala represents so much of the journey of life. Each stone can bring you toward your higher self.” satyajewelry.com

Karma Mantra

Inspired by his mother, a clothing designer and painter raised in the foothills of Mussoorie in India, and spiritual trips to temples and sacred grounds with his father, Romell Bhaala creates jewelry rooted in divine ancient influences with striking modern details. Bhaala sources precious stones from his native India for Karma Mantra’s mala necklaces, and family artisans in India and Nepal make the jewelry. He seeks spiritual advisement on the stones from Chamunda Swamiji and consults with Chandresh Bhardwaj regarding ways to incorporate the stones into one’s yoga and meditation practice.

“Our malas change according to what stones are available,” says Bhaala, who hand-selects the best he can find on annual trips to India. The Japa Mala Prestige Collection launched late last year, and new pieces will be added this fall, including special orders featuring black onyx mixed with rough-cut sapphires or rubies. karmamantra.com

Five Star Hippie

Janine Forte, who hails from a family of jewelers, launched Five Star Hippie when she moved from New York to Los Angeles in 2014. “Some of the pieces have already been recycled, and others can be recycled,” says Forte, who gives customers a credit on future purchases for returning each worn piece. Wood mala beads have an eco-friendly paint coating and can be customized with a tassel or charm made of zinc alloy metals that are free of lead, nickel and cadmium.

After watching a TV segment with Ted Danson about the nonprofit Oceana, which helps protect and restore the earth’s oceans, Forte was determined to give back. “We can all make a difference by contributing in one way or another,” she says. A portion of Five Star Hippie proceeds is donated to Oceana. New pieces will be available for the holidays, including a Dalmatian jasper mala.

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