
THE PRAYER FLAG TRADITION

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The Text

As the wind blows the flags, it spreads the message of the words. Usual text includes:

- Mantras = a syllable(s) with the capacity of influencing certain energy dimensions
- Sutras = prose texts based on the teachings from Buddha
- Prayers = all the other text seen on prayer flags, including good wishes

The Colors

Each color relates to an element and its connection to humans. Flags are always displayed in the same color order: yellow, green, red, white then blue.

- Blue – space
- White – air (sometimes referred to wind or cloud)
- Red – fire
- Green – water
- Yellow – earth

To me there are few things more beautiful than colorful prayer flags fluttering in the wind- sometimes waving gently, sometimes raging; a dance of shadow and light. There is perhaps no simpler way to create good merit in this troubled world of ours than to put prayer flags up for the benefit of other living beings. Prayer flags are not just pretty pieces of colored cloth with funny writing on them. The ancient Buddhist prayers, mantras and powerful symbols displayed on them produce a spiritual vibration that is activated and carried by the wind across the countryside. All beings that are touched by the wind are uplifted and a little happier. The silent prayers are blessings spoken on the breath of nature. Just as a drop of water can permeate the ocean, prayers dissolved in the wind extend to fill all of space.

The prayer flag tradition has a long continuous history dating back to ancient Tibet, China, Persia and India. The tradition has now reached the West and is rapidly gaining popularity.

The Tibetan word for prayer flag is Dar Cho. “Dar” means to increase life, fortune, health and wealth. “Cho” means all sentient beings. Prayer flags are simple devices that, coupled with the natural energy of the wind, quietly harmonize the environment, impartially increasing happiness and good fortune among all living beings.

According to Eastern medicine, health and harmony are produced through the balance of the 5 elements. Properly arranging colored flags around a sick patient harmonizing the elements in the body help to produce a state of physical and mental health.





Types of Prayer Flags

- Wind Horse flags are the most common. Their purpose is to raise the good fortune energy of the beings in the vicinity of the prayer flag.
- Victory Banners are used to overcome obstacles and disturbances
- Health and Longevity Flags usually tell a short version of the Buddha's life along with prayers and mantras for health and long life.
- The Wish Fulfilling Prayer Flag is good for raising one's fortune, protecting against war, famine, and natural disasters, as well as overcoming obstacles and quickly attaining one's wishes.
- Tara is the bodhisattva of compassion. She has 21 forms in which she appears to her followers. Flags dedicated to her are meant to spread compassionate blessings.

Originally, the writing and images on prayer flags were painted by hand, one at a time. Woodblocks, carefully carved in mirror image relief, were introduced from China in the 15th century. This invention made it possible to reproduce identical prints of the same design. Traditional designs could then be easily passed down from generation to generation.

Famous Buddhist masters created most prayer flag designs. Aside from new techniques, no real innovations to the printing process have occurred in the past 500 years. Most prayer flags imported to the West today are woodblock printed however some shops use a zinc block cut by a laser to produce a finer image. Natural stone ground pigments have been replaced by printing inks. Most of the companies in the west prefer to use silkscreen printing techniques as wood carving is a time consuming skill.

Prayer flags typically come on ropes to be hung in horizontal displays or printed on long narrow strips of cloth that are tied on vertical poles. It is common to see displays of prayer flags on poles erected around monasteries and pilgrimage sites.

Placing prayer flags in and around one's home or business imparts a feeling of harmony, increases the spiritual atmosphere and brings to mind the teachings of enlightenment. By placing prayer flags outdoors their sacred mantras are imprinted on the wind, generating peace and good wishes.

When raising prayer flags proper motivation is important. If they are put up with the attitude "I will benefit from doing this"– that is an ego-centered motivation and the benefits will be small and narrow. If the attitude is "May all beings everywhere receive benefit and find happiness," the virtue generated by such motivation greatly increases the power of the prayers.

Tibetan tradition considers prayer flags to be holy. Because they contain sacred texts and symbols they should be treated respectfully. They should not be placed on the ground or put in the trash. When disposing of old prayer flags one should burn them so that the smoke may carry their blessings to the heavens.

