

I wrote and narrated this short audio script to accompany gift bracelets for the client's guests at a trade-show party.

—Judith West

POWER BEADS: Gems of Wisdom?

[MONTAGE OF VOICES, DIFFERENT TONES & MOODS, OVERLAPPING.
PERHAPS FAINT CLICK OF BEADS IN BACKGROUND.]

WOMAN 1

“Christopher finally asked me out. The rose quartz really is working!”

WOMAN 2

“Does this aventurine clash with the blue shoes?”

MAN 1

“Hey, thanks. I was *so-o-o* depressed, but that hematite bracelet you gave me really seems to have helped me out.”

WOMAN 1

“...and when you run the *mala* over your middle finger, you’re focusing the energy of patience.”

MAN 1

“I don’t care if they ‘work’ or not. They’re fun.”

WOMAN 2

“I’ve got a *major* presentation tomorrow, and I can’t find my jade bracelet!”

MAN 2

[Unbeliever:] “Hello-o-o. They’re rocks!”

[SILENCE]

NARRATOR

And are they? Or are power bead bracelets more than they seem? The simple circlets of gemstone beads certainly have captivated a wide range of people: they’ve been seen on wrists belonging to Madonna and Ricky Martin, teenage girls and high-power CEOs, Richard Gere and the Dalai Lama.

The bracelet craze started in January 1999 when New York designer Zoe Metro watched a man on the subway studiously open and read a pile of fortune cookies. Shortly after that, she was struck by the prayer beads the Dalai Lama wore at his wrist. A student of ancient art and religions, Metro combined the “fortune” aspect with the idea of simple but meaningful beads, and the power bead bracelet was born—and first sold by her company, Stella Pace. They run about 20 or 30 dollars, though you can get plastic or glass versions elsewhere for as little as a dollar or two.

But why “power bead bracelets”? What are they? What kind of “power” do they really generate—if any? And why the fascination now?

Perhaps their attraction, and their power, lies not in any single quality but in the fact that they can be and mean so many different things. And also that beads, both as ornament and talismans, have a history almost as long and varied as humanity itself. Virtually all cultures have at some time endowed beads with a spiritual or personal meaning. And meaningful things, by definition, possess power.

For instance, amber, in Greek myth, was considered the solidified tears of the Heliades. These three maidens mourned their brother’s death so piteously that the gods turned them into trees and their tears to amber. Now, the Greeks knew that amber comes from tree resin. But giving it mythic significance invests it with power and meaning—and accounts in a way for its beauty. The fact that when it’s rubbed, amber accumulates static electricity and attracts bits of paper and lint gave it even greater mystery and honor.

Native Americans have always carved totemic animals and plants on stones as talismans: scorpions can represent good luck, vines and flowers symbolize life.

In Tibet, the powerful *dZi* bead, considered “a precious jewel of supernatural origin,” protects its wearer from great danger.

And in the animistic traditions of sub-Saharan Africa, fine beadwork carries great spiritual energy. Glass *bodom* beads in Ghana are highly valued for their magical or healing properties, especially if they’re old and worn.

Beads come with power built into their name: the word *bead* means “prayer.” Prayer bead traditions exist in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, and among the Quipo of Peru. In Christian cultures, prayer beads are familiar as rosaries. (Ironically, when medieval monks started using coral, crystal, and amber rosaries and nuns started wearing them around their necks, the church had to call a halt to such “worldly” ornamentation.)

The beads so popular today are inspired in part by the Buddhist prayer beads known as *malas*. (So the Dalai Lama isn’t *really* making a fashion statement.) In the meditation central to Buddhist spirituality, the *mala* helps the meditator focus and count the repetitions of mantras and prayers. While *malas* were originally made of wood, semiprecious stones also came to be favored.

Each power bead bracelet is made of gemstones said to focus some special kind of cosmic energy on its wearer: Ruby for passion, a light-green Jade Aventurine for success, the magnetic, metallic Hematite for happiness and combating depression, Tiger’s Eye for courage and artistry, the very popular Mother-of-Pearl for wealth and prosperity, and so on. This symbolism borrows heavily from New Age versions of the Hindu *chakras*: seven bodily centers that each rule a different physical, mental, and emotional aspect. Each *chakra* has corresponding colors, planets, and gemstones with appropriate powers.

If today’s power beads are links to a rich history of bead-power traditions, they’re also a lighthearted, no-lose way to “unload” a little, even if just symbolically or imaginatively—and maybe feel a little more in control. Life feels random. Life is big responsibilities. And it’s a rare being who doesn’t at least occasionally peak at their horoscope in the

newspaper. The world gets more “virtual” with every passing nanosecond, and these metaphysical baubles are tangible reminders of our personal and professional goals. We may not “believe in” power bead bracelets, or astrology, but for most people there’s an undeniable urge to “find out” about ourselves and our rather perplexing lives. If we don’t believe in their power, we *can* believe in what they represent, whether it’s strength, happiness, striving for accomplishment, or healing.

MAN 2

[Unbeliever again:] “Hello-o-o. They’re rocks!”

NARRATOR

OK, it’s easy to get caught up in mystical and psychological speculation about power bead bracelets. So let’s not let their “fashion power” go unmarked. These little stunners—basic, beautiful, and unobtrusive—can let men and women, kids and adults, make a quiet fashion statement. You can be part of a trend—or, if you prefer, be chic—without being losing your individuality...or looking eccentric. Crystals are a lit-tle too New Age-y for most of us. But power bead bracelets have whimsy as well as “power.” Great conversation starters and go with anything—including your psyche!

So. If you want to buy, make, or give a power bead bracelet, how do you choose the right stone? First, you’ll probably want to consult one of the charts that identify each stone’s meaning. Or go at it backwards: find a stone that “speaks to you” and then see what power you’ll be hearing from.

It’s usually color that puts the “power” in power beads—red stones (like garnets and rubies) for passion, love, and sex, blue and light green stones (like lapis and jade aventurine) for spirituality, wisdom, and tranquility. But then why the craze for power *beads*? And why power bead *bracelets*? While some claim you can sense cosmic “vibrations” in various stones, there’s stronger evidence that people find the roundness of the beads and the circularity of the bracelet comforting, giving a feeling of wholeness and completion.

In the end, it’s probably the combined simplicity *and* richness of the bead bracelets that give them power. They bring together opposites and contrasts: they’re a quick-fix with depth and dimension, a frivolous fashion statement with meaning, something new that’s really quite old, a thing of beauty that’s also useful, a link between cultures, something elemental in a technological age—and a bond that binds past and future in the here and now.

- END -