

Prayer flags

A prayer flag is a colorful rectangular cloth, found strung along mountain ridges, on peaks high in the Himalayas, or near sacred sites, like a source of water, lake, etc. Prayer flags do not merely bring merit to the planter, but to the whole countryside as well.



Prayer flags on Taglang-La, one of the passes between Leh and Manali.

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There are two kinds of prayer flags:

The **horizontal prayer flags** are called **lung ta** (in Tibetan meaning «wind horse» or «airy horse»). They are of square or rectangular shape, and are connected along their top edges to a long string or thread. They are commonly hung on a diagonal line between two objects, for example a rock and the top of a pole, in high places such as the tops of temples, monasteries, stupas, and mountain passes. Such prayer flags can also be erected near a water source or on a prayer ground where teachings will be held.

The **vertical prayer flags** called **darchor** (in Tibetan meaning «flagstaff») are usually large single rectangles attached to poles along their vertical edge. Darchor are commonly planted in the ground, on mountains, near cairns, and on rooftops. You will also find them in monastery courtyards, near houses, etc.

Traditionally, prayer flags come in sets of five, one in each of the five colors blue, white, red, green, and yellow. These colors represent the five elements, which are earth, air/wind, fire, metal, and ether. Blue symbolizes the sky and space, white symbolizes the air and wind, red symbolizes fire, green symbolizes water, and yellow symbolizes earth. According to Traditional Tibetan Medicine, health and harmony are produced through the balance of these 5 elements.

Prayers and symbols on the prayer flags

The center of a prayer flag traditionally features a *lung ta*, a powerful or strong horse, bearing three flaming jewels on its back. The *Ta* is a symbol of speed and the transformation of bad fortune to good fortune. The three flaming jewels on its back symbolize the Buddha, the Dharma (Buddhist teachings), and the Sangha, the Buddhist community, which are the three cornerstones of Tibetan philosophical tradition.

Surrounding the horse are various versions of traditional mantras, each dedicated to a particular deity. In addition to mantras, prayers for a long life of good fortune are often included for the person who mounts the flags. Images or the names of four powerful animals, also known as the four dignities, adorn each corner of a flag: the dragon, the garuda, the tiger, and the snowlion.

Symbolism and tradition

Traditionally, prayer flags are used to promote peace, compassion, strength, and wisdom. The flags do not carry prayers to gods, which is a common misconception. Rather, the Tibetans believe the prayers and mantras will be blown by the wind to spread the good will and compassion into all pervading space. Therefore, prayer flags are thought to bring benefit to all.

By hanging flags in high places, the *Lung ta* will carry the blessings depicted on the flags to all beings. As wind passes over the surface of the flags, which are sensitive to the slightest movement of the wind, the air is purified and sanctified by the mantras.

Because the symbols and mantras on prayer flags are sacred, they should be treated with respect. They should not be stepped on, be placed on the ground, used on clothing, etc.

The **best time to put up new prayer flags** is in the morning on sunny, windy days, usually on auspicious astrological dates. Whenever new prayer flags are put up, the locals in Ladakh cry out *kiki soso lhargyalo* three times (in Ladakhi meaning «truth shall prevail»).

Old prayer flags should be burned or hung in trees. Often during Losar, the new year, new prayer flags will be added to the old ones.