

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Prayer Wheel - Mani chho-khor*** ([Image](#))

Ritual or devotional object

Wood handle, bone pivot, brass and leather wheel

~12.0 inches

Eastern Tibet (Kham region)

Ca. 19th century

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The Prayer Wheel, or *mani chho-khor* in Tibetan, is a very common object in Tibet and Tibetan culture. There are many varieties of the Prayer Wheel, all sharing the same religious function and constructed according to a similar design.

The prayer wheel dates back five or six centuries and is a Tibetan innovation. The idea has its origins in a play on the Sanskrit phrase "to turn the wheel of the law" meaning "to teach the Dharma" and refers to the event when Shakyamuni Buddha began to preach. The basic design is a cylinder containing rolls of prayers wound around an axle. With each turn of the wheel the prayers are released and the person spinning the wheel accumulates merit. Although merit is never quantitatively assessed, a greater number of rotations result in a greater amount of merit accumulated. Also, additional prayers wrapped on the inside multiply the amount of merit accumulated per rotation.

The cylinder must be spun clockwise for a number of reasons. One, a clockwise spin rotates the words of the prayers in their proper reading direction. Two, clockwise follows the direction of the sun. Three, this direction matches the clockwise circumambulation of the *chortens*. Interestingly, prayer wheels used in the Bon religion are rotated counterclockwise, matching the Bon direction of circumambulation.

The largest of the prayer wheels are constructed on a scale of twenty feet. They are usually situated in or near temples and are spun by passersby, either by pushing the side of the wheel or turning a crank. Prayer wheels of this size contain the entire Tibetan canon. Another large scale variety of prayer wheels are placed in streams and on building tops, using water and wind power to release the prayers and accrue merit. On a more practical scale are prayer wheels spun by the steam from butter lamps and stoves, or even smaller, wheels designed to be spun with two fingers on a tabletop.

The variety of prayer wheels like the one shown here is a very common one. This kind is spun with one hand, with a weight attached to increase the centripetal force of the movement. They are used both by laymen and by monks for almost any activity, from a physical accompaniment for the Avaloketishvara mantra to circumambulating a *chorten*.

The prayer wheel of this type in the collection is constructed of a wood handle, bone washer, and a leather cylinder with copper and metal finishings. Beneath the cylinder is a metal piece in the design of a lotus. Its counterpart on the upper side of the cylinder is an eight-spoked wheel signifying the

Dharma. The wheel is capped off with a brass piece, most likely a *chorten* or a vase.

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