



Prayer Wheel

Date

19th - 20th century

Medium

Wood, metal, and pigments

Description

In Tibetan Buddhist culture, those who are unable to read are instructed to spin a “wheel” filled with thousands of inscribed mantras, or mani, written on paper tightly wrapped around a central pole inside a cylinder that encases them. It is believed that turning the wheel is the same as reciting the prayers and mantras, leading to the accumulation of merit and wisdom while purifying negative karma for a practitioner; it also releases these mantras into the world, benefitting countless beings.

Believed to go back to the famous Indian master

Nagarjuna, this common practice is usually accompanied by vocal recitations of mantras and often combined with circumambulation around a sacred site or temple. The wheels are spun clockwise so the mantras inside can be read correctly, from left to right. This stationery prayer wheel would have been placed outside of a temple or shrine so visitors could turn the wheel on their way in and out of the temple and while circumambulating it. The rectangular panels that house the wheel are painted in the traditional Central Tibetan style and display teachers and deities of the Sakya Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The lotus petal cutouts on each panel serve as windows into the large decorated wooden cylinder of the prayer wheel inside. A smaller prayer wheel, capped by a bronze finial and threaded onto a long metal spindle on top, was probably a later addition. The mantra of the deity of compassion Avalokiteshvara, Om Mani Padme Hum, decorates the posts of the structure in ornamental Lantsa script.

Dimensions

94 × 33 1/4 × 32 in. (estimate)