



Mudra: What Do Buddhist Hand Gestures Mean?

By Tricycle

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Photographs of Lama Pema Wangdak by Sally Boon



WHAT IS A MUDRA?

Mudra or Mudras are hand positions often depicted in Buddhist art and used in practice to evoke a particular state of mind. The most notable mudras (Sanskrit, “seal” or “sign”) are those commonly found in representations of the Buddha: hands folded in the lap signify meditation; a palm held up facing outward signifies the act of teaching or reassurance; an open palm pointed downward signifies generosity.

In the Vajrayana school, mudras assume an esoteric significance and are usually combined with mantra(recitation) and tantric visualization. In the Zen school of Mahayana Buddhism, which is relatively bare of esoteric rituals, two important positions, the dhyani, or meditation mudra (formed with the hands held in an oval), and the anjali, or greeting mudra (palms held together at chest level), nevertheless remain important elements of daily practice.

Every mudra has both an outer/symbolic and an inner/experiential function, for it communicates at once, both to the person who performs them and to the observer, aspects of the enlightened mind. The names are given in the original Sanskrit.



Amida Buddha, Kamakura, Japan.
Courtesy Graham Harrison.



DHYANI

With the mudra of meditation, the back of the right hand rests on the upturned palm of the other with the tips of the thumbs lightly touching. The top hand symbolizes enlightenment; the bottom hand, the world of appearances. Thus the mudra as a whole suggests the supremacy of the enlightened mind.



Tsong-kha-pa (detail),
contemporary fresco, Drepung
Monastery, Lhasa, Tibet.
Courtesy Graham Harrison.



Amitabha, 9th century,
Candi Borobudur, Central
Java. Courtesy Dirk
Bakker.

VITARKA

Teaching mudra. Held at chest level, the right hand faces outward. The thumb and forefinger form a circle, symbolizing the “Wheel of the Teaching.” Pointing downward, the left hand faces outward or lies palm up in the lap.



Shakyamuni Buddha, 10th century, Japanese. Courtesy Denman Waldo Ross Collection.

DHARMACHAKRA

Mudra of turning the Wheel of the Teaching. The thumbs and forefingers of each hand form circles that touch one another. The left hand faces inward, the right hand, out. The hands are held on a level with the heart.



Amitabha, 9th century, Candi Borobudur, Central Java. Courtesy Dirk Bakker.

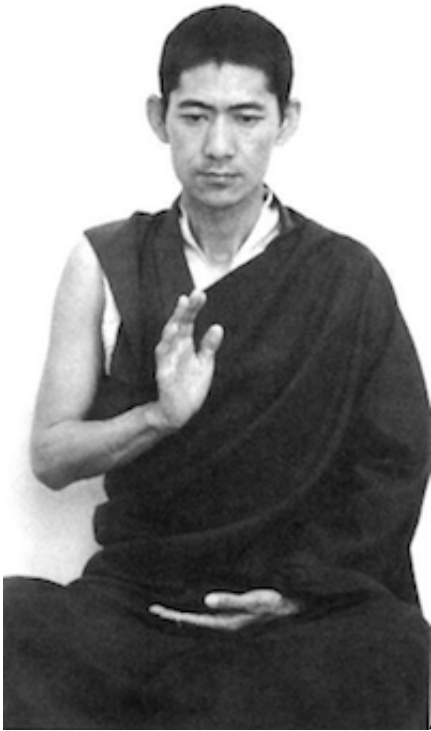
BHUMISPARSHA

With the earth-touching mudra, the left hand rests in the lap with the palm facing upward. The right hand rests palm down on the right knee with the fingers

pointing toward the earth. When the Buddha attained enlightenment, he reportedly used this gesture to summon the earth to bear witness to his victory over the seductive forces of illusion.



Dainichi Nyorai (Buddha of Eternal Radiance), 1149 C.E., Japanese. Courtesy Denman Waldo Ross Collection.



ABHAYA

Mudra of blessing or protection. The right hand, held at shoulder level, is pointed upward with the palm facing out. Attributed to the Buddha immediately following his enlightenment, the Abhaya is usually intended as a gesture of reassurance.



Nikko and Gakko (Sun and Moon) Bodhisattvas, 8th century, Japanese. Courtesy Flammarion.

VARADA

Mudra of giving or generosity. Pointed downward, the palm of the right hand faces out.



Nikko and Gakko (Sun and Moon) Bodhisattvas, 8th century, Japanese. Courtesy Flammarion.



BODHYAGRI

Mudra of supreme wisdom. The right forefinger is grasped in the fist of the left hand. It is subject to a variety of interpretations. Some sources refer to it as “the mudra of the six elements”: the five elements—earth, water, air, fire, and ether—all surrounding and protecting man. Other interpretations suggest wisdom hidden

by the world of appearances or in Tantric practices, the sexual union of a deity and his consort.



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ANJALI

Mudra of greeting. The universal greeting and gesture of respect throughout the Buddhist world. Formed by placing the palms together at the level of the heart, with the fingertips pointed upward.