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MUDRAS & HAND SYMBOLISM--THE POWER OF MUDRAS PART 1: WHAT ARE MUDRAS?

When we study Eastern philosophies, beliefs, culture, and the pragmatic yogic methods of Hinduism and Buddhism, we often come across practices of systematic hand gestures. The rites, rituals, initiations, dances, and spiritual disciplines of these Oriental religions and traditions are replete with multifold forms of hand gestures with symbolic meanings and empowering virtues. In Sanskrit these gestures are called *mudra*. Mudra means "seal," or "symbol." The word has various connotations or definitions in Yogic and Tantric philosophies. In Hatha yoga, mudras are special physical asanas, or body-postures; they are also certain exercises or processes that arouse into activity one's innate energies. The ancient yogic text, the "Gheranda-Samhita," describes twenty-five of these mudras among which are: *ashvini-mudra*, *bhujangini-mudra*, *kaki-mudra*, *khecari-mudra*, *maha-mudra*, *manduki-mudra*, *matangi-mudra*, *nabho-mudra*, *pashini-mudra*, *sahajoli-mudra*, *shakti-calani-mudra*, *shambhavi-mudra*, *tadagi-mudra*, *vajroli-mudra*, *viparita-karani-mudra*, *yoni-mudra*, etc.

The above yogic manual advises us that these mudras are to be kept secret with great care and not to be conveyed to anyone unfit for their reception as these mudras could confer tremendous power and psychic abilities called *siddhis*. Those without the right spiritual qualifications could cause untold harm to themselves and others should they engage in these exercises and be successful in unfolding occult faculties. The psychic powers acquired therefrom would be misapplied, misused and abused for egoistic purposes--and this is potentially fatal for one's evolutionary growth. These mudras were therefore esoteric in nature and reserved for the chosen few--the true spiritual aspirants, and not for the worldly-minded or the overly spiritually ambitious. This doctrine "for the few" was observed carefully by mostly all spiritual traditions. In one ritualistic text of the Vajrayana Tantra concerning an initiatory teaching, the chela or student is enjoined to,

" . . . spread this teaching with great caution. It should be kept secret from both sinful and Dam Med (oath-breakers) persons; from sophisticated and foulmouthed persons. This teaching should not be given to skeptical and defamatory persons; it should not be bestowed upon heretical and insincere persons. It should not be given to the thief of Dharma [spiritual doctrines] or to those who do not observe the precepts. Keep this sacred teaching from such persons is a rule you should observe."

In his manual on yoga, which consists of 195 Sutras, Patanjali never once mentioned mudras, nor the serpent force, or kundalini for that matter. Perhaps he considered these teachings esoteric and not meant for general circulation.

Aside from the possible acquisition of paranormal powers as one result of the awakening of the kundalinic force lying latent at the base of the spine, the mudras described by the Gheranda-Samhita also results in rejuvenation, and the sought for liberation from the mortal, human condition. Intense and constant practice of these mudras in conjunction with other spiritual exercises is said to have the power to transform man into a living god. Hand mudras, we believe, do have this kind of effect.

Hindu Tantrism has a different understanding of mudras. To the practitioners of Tantra, the term refers to a *shakti*, a human female participant in the maithuna, or sexual rites; or even to the parched grain as one of the five ingredients used in the panca-tattva rite because of its physical resemblance to the yoni, the female genitalia. Shaktis are called "mudras" because in the process of ritualistic and yogic coitus they have an effect similar to body and hand mudras. Mudras awaken dormant psycho-physical centers and purifies certain subtle channels allowing for the circulation of energies to take place; Mudras facilitates concentration, and are a powerful means of communing with the forces and divinities lying within man's inner nature; women have a great access to psychic energies; thus, the sexual yogic act, when properly conducted, does the same thing. Being highly respected, a woman proficient in the Tantric arts is referred to as a "mudra," or to be more specific, "Karma mudra," of which there are five kinds, categorized according to various psycho-physical characteristics.



Buddha showing mudra

In another sense, "closed electrical-circuits" of the subtle channels in the physical and etheric bodies are also known as "seals," or mudras.

In passing, we should mention that the large earrings worn by members of the *Kanphata Order* in India are likewise called "mudra."

The Kagyu sect of Vajrayana Buddhism uses the suffix "maha" meaning "great" in association with the term "mudra." Thus, the conjoined word mahamudra means "the Great Seal," or "the Great Symbol." In this context, the word refers to a state of direct realization and experience of the ultimate nature of the Mind or Reality where all dualities and sense of separateness from All that Is are transcended.

Putting aside complexities, the definition of mudra is simply "symbolic gesture." Chogyam Trungpa in his book, "Mudra," defines the word as,

"a symbol in the wider sense of gesture or action. It is the inspiring color of phenomena. Also it is a symbol expressed with the hands to state for oneself and others the quality of different moments of meditation, such as touching the earth with the right hand as a witness to Buddha's freedom from emotional and mental frivolousness."

Yoga teachings in general explain that mudras denote the hand gestures and movements used in the performance of dances, rituals, rites, and while engaging in spiritual exercises such as meditation. Mudras symbolically express inner feelings and inner psychological states; they also generate various qualities such as fearlessness, power, charity, and peace in the practitioner and to on-lookers.

In another ancient text called *Soma-Shambhu-Paddhati*, a great number of these hand mudras are described. Perhaps the best known by yogic practitioners and students are abhaya-mudra, anjali-mudra, cin-mudra, dhyana-mudra, and jnana-mudra. Some of these mudras are known by other names, especially in other cultures and spiritual traditions. It is this latter understanding of mudra that we shall be dealing with in this series of articles.

To sum up, we present Nik Douglas' definition of "mudra" to be found in the glossary of his book, *Sexual Secrets* :

(Mudras are) "mystic hand gestures used to focus subtle energy, transmit teachings through symbols and confer psychic protection. As an aid to Tantric meditation, mudra can also mean woman in her role as Yogini. The same term is sometimes used to refer to cereal grains used in Tantric rites. "

The Origin of Mudras

It is not quite known when or where systematized and stylized gestures originated. Almost all ancient cultures made use of hand signs in one form or another. Hand Signs were employed even in earliest times in religion, in the rhetoric art, in social intercourse, in builders' and trade guilds, etc. The operative Masons--the Comacines, the builders of Europe's finest cathedrals, and the hoary trade guild known as *the Dionysiac Artificers*--who were responsible for the construction of ancient buildings and structures--all made use of hand signs as a system of communication and protection of their conclaves or secret meetings against unauthorized entry.



Ritual mudras of Chen Yen (Shingon)
Buddhism

In Hinduism, as well as Buddhism, hundreds of mudras were formed for yogic purposes, for ceremonies, drama, and dance. Most of these were symbolic in nature, others, however, had metaphysical virtues. There are literally hundreds of mudra-gestures formed by the ancient yogis and sages; however, they are all based on four basic hand positions: the open palm, the hollowed palm, the closed fist, and the hand with fingertips together.

In the Occident, the study of hand gestures in ritual and its spontaneous movements is called cheironomy. It particularly relates to gestures used in esoteric symbolism and certain forms or signs used in religious ritual. In occultism, each hand gesture has certain significance as well as embodying a certain force. Ritual gestures were an important part of religious ceremonies in most ancient cultures. They were said to have the power to call upon the gods, to unfold powers, and to affect the surroundings in various ways.

The ancient Egyptians regarded the hand poses of their god-incarnate pharaohs as highly potent, even if it is just a pictorial representation. While depicting these pharaohs in murals or while forming statues of them, artists were careful not to misrepresent the mudras

assumed by their sovereign for fear that it would evoke an unwanted force.

Power in the Hands

The hands when used systematically in mudra exercises result in a wealth of benefit for the practitioner. Not only does it improve one's health, they also generate the energies that would empower one to live a dignified life as a child of God. Specific hand gestures assist the unfoldment of one's divine potentials, or inner divinity lying dormant within one's being.

Mudras facilitate the awareness of our inner nature, the reality of Spirit, the oneness of the Cosmos. It arouses the spiritual heart to expand and express itself with effulgent radiance. Through love, selfless love, unconditional love, divine love, it is possible to conquer all things. It is with love that we approach God, not through fear; fear will never take us to the divine throne. To express love is the beginning of wisdom.

By practicing hand gestures we eventually find ourselves communicating with Nature, for some of her esoteric languages are signs and symbols. Mudras generate structured magnetic fields with forms that resemble computer fractals and images. Abstract forms reach the higher planes of life where angelic forces reside. Thus, by performing mudras we may eventually find ourselves socializing with cherubim and seraphim.

According to scientists we use about 10% of our brain potential. Mudra practices may change all that, for the energies that it awakens clears all of the vessels--physical and non-physical--of obstructions and blockages that prevent the brain from being nourished and developed. New synapses between neurons are formed when the brain receives a good supply of chi or prana. An increase in I.Q., a strong memory retention, improved learning ability, and mental alertness, are some of the results of cleared energy channels. When empowered the brain forms new connections with the etheric brain. These connections resemble and function as miniature sutratma, which is the link between the lower quaternary of the microcosm and the higher components that we normally refer to as "the Spirit" of man. The more links between the etheric and physical brain, the more powerful and intelligent the brain becomes.

Mudras awaken the power of the hands to act therapeutically and magically. The psychic centers in the palms and fingertips are activated to their optimal level by the consistent application of mudras. This eventually facilitates the free outflow and influx of cosmic forces that may be utilized for various occult purposes. With such power, even a mere touch may mesmerize, enchant, fascinate, or quicken the "dead." Hands with such power would definitely be an asset not only to the metaphysical practitioner but also to those involved in social and business affairs.

The Various Traditions

In these series of articles we hope to describe the mudra practices to be found in various religious practices, such as in Buddhism, and Hinduism; and in various countries rich in cultural traditions as for instance, Japan, India, China, Tibet, and Indonesia. Mudra teachings are also to be found in Christianity and in the Egyptian tradition. Contemporary development of Runic lore has also its own version of hand-gestures designed to offer psychic benefits. We will describe some of these and teach how our readers may put these mudras into practice to assist their spiritual unfoldment and the improvement of their mundane lives.

Regrettably, there are many powerful mudras to be found in mystical schools and traditions that we have not been able to get access to and thus present in these articles. For instance, Chen Yen or Shingon Buddhism, which is considered as an esoteric tradition, has a rich heritage on mudra practices. These mudras are performed in conjunction with mantras and the visualization of

mandalas. According to their doctrines, mudras, mantras, and mandalas represent body, speech, and mind. Chen Yen Buddhism teaches that the culture of these three aspects of the microcosm leads the practitioner to a higher spiritual state of being. Another Buddhist school that teaches mudras is the True Buddha School led by the Living Buddha Lu Sheng-yen. One would have to be a follower of the Living Buddha in order to acquire the mudra teachings.

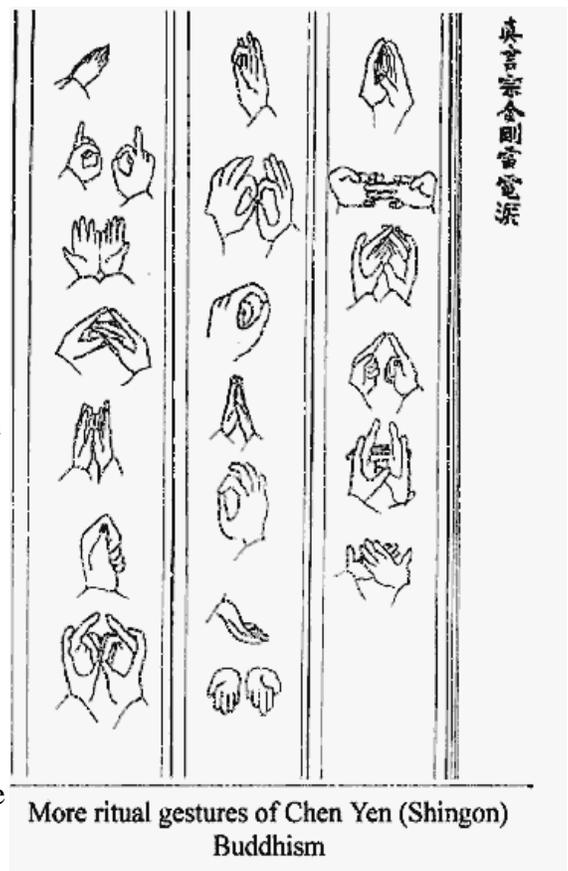
The Spiritual Path

At the very outset of these articles we would caution our readers not to misapply any phenomenal powers that they may acquire through the practice of the mudras. Always aim for spirituality, not for the attainment of illusory baubles. Do not strive for the phenomenal, the sensational; or be obsessed with spiritual powers. The goal is soul-development, not self-aggrandizement. The spiritual tyro should not succumb to self-deception, self-complacency, self-centeredness, self-importance, and all egoistic tendencies. Until the false ego is subdued, one has not reached the proper state where enlightenment may be acquired or where spiritual forces and powers may be properly harnessed and applied; even the so-called awakening and rising of the kundalini force will not be optimal in its influence. There is too much deception here. Psychicisms is often mistaken for spirituality. Visions may delight the ego, seeing spirits may make one think highly of oneself, the vain display of "supernatural" powers may leave one too self-complacent. In the end the evolving soul gets stuck in the astral mire, no matter how sublime visions or experiences may be. The nature and apprehension of one's visions is related to one's evolutionary status. The higher we are the more true our understanding and perception. Those who claim the ability to see sublime visions while being morally bankrupt are only perceiving the lower astral planes and the projections of their own subconscious minds.

What true spirituality is cannot be stated too openly for the reason that it would be falsely adopted or assumed by those pretending to be "Masters" in order to fool an unwary and ignorant crowd. The true Master, however, has his own criteria and is able to differentiate the false from the real, the quacks from those who are genuine.

If the reader argues that he or she seeks powers so that they may be of help to humanity it is time for introspection. With what you have right now, are you helping humanity? Do you make sacrifices on behalf of humanity? Do you serve selflessly? Please do not deceive yourself. It is always wise to first work upon your own character before undertaking the unfoldment of powers. Without a true Guru one could be led astray by dark forces posing as representatives of Light.

The spiritual path is filled with thorns and mirages. The closer one gets to the goal, the more temptations, obstacles, tests, and trials one encounters. The chelas, students of the spiritual path often succumb to glamour and illusions, false understanding and beliefs. Without the Guru's aid, they could fall. But most often while bathing in the false astral light they forget the Guru and seek



instead temporary delights. Students of metaphysics should not attempt to fly before they can run, run before they can walk, walk before they can stand, or stand before they can crawl.

In their ambition to attain spiritual power and personal bliss quickly, students of metaphysics make the mistake of jumping from Guru to Guru, from teaching to teaching, from tradition to tradition, not realizing the traps that they are laying for themselves, and thus delaying the divine grace that the true Guru would channel to them. They would also not experience the Guru's essence in such a manner; nor will they receive all that the Guru would like to give. It is like digging a well for water. We would dig 5-6 m before reaching water. If we were to dig a meter here, a meter there, we would end up with nothing substantial. Students would end up confused: one Guru says this, another says that, etc. Students that follow many Gurus simultaneously are not loyal to the instructions of any one of them. It is also unfair to the Guru as a problem might arise in their spiritual disciplines. Who would then be responsible for that? To which Guru should the student go to? The spiritual aspirant is unaware that certain traditions are incompatible, that some rays do not mix well, and that by practicing them together these might eventuate in psychic and psychological impediments and problems. Masters have always cautioned us to "make haste slowly." The ancient Rishis and Yogis were well aware of this problem of the neophyte, they therefore established *Guru Puja*, or the worship of the Guru. Essentially this was not for the purpose of glorifying the Guru in any way, it was for the purpose of assisting the chelas or students to maintain focus, to develop divine love, to instill a sense of identification with their Guru so that they may become like the object of their adoration.

Students would derive the utmost benefit by sticking to a single Guru. Only in this manner would it be possible for the chela to experience "Guru Tattva," "Zat Guru," or the essence of the Guru where the Supreme Being expresses and bestows through the Guru untold spiritual wealth upon the loyal and devoted student. We may claim that we express unconditional love; and yet, if we do not have trust and faith in our Preceptor, if we do not apply his instructions and advice seeking pastures in other fields and hoping for a quick attainment, and thus destroying all that the Guru wishes his disciples to accomplish--that is, to unfold in an orderly and proper manner--then it simply proves that our claim of unconditional love is false.

There are agents of the dark forces stomping around looking for victims. They entrap their prey by flattery, big promises and a show of "psychic powers" and the like. Metaphysical students should be on guard and not fall into their clutches for their path lead downward to the abyss.

The spiritual path toward the lofty goal of Buddhahood, human perfection, or the ascension may be compared to a ladder consisting of many rungs. Each rung should be treaded upon. Missing a rung would only mean returning again in a later life time to learn or experience it. Attaining nirvana, experiencing bliss, or acquiring an expanded consciousness is all well and good but a person is no closer to the goal than before. Prior to starting off his career as a human soul Man was in such a divine natural state, tranquil, blissful, sans ego; and yet he incarnated for a reason, for a spiritual purpose. Would we negate this purpose now by ignoring it and experiencing bliss for our own sakes alone? The goal is the Ascension and in order to do that the quaternary principles--the physical, the etheric, the astral, and the lower mental bodies would have to be transmuted and raised to the causal level, and this cannot be done with the false ego still running amuck, when the sense of mortality still holds sway, when self-centeredness is the whole purpose of existence.

The experience of bliss does not indicate a high spiritual development. There are various levels of bliss, not all of which originate in the blissful center of the Soul, or Higher Self. Man possesses certain components in his being that records past feelings whether of trauma or joy. When stimulated or cleansed these components release their contents and is experienced by the consciousness. This experience is often mistaken for the impregnation of the Holy Spirit.

An advanced consciousness no longer judges dualistically what it perceives. It does not differentiate between the good and the bad, the evolved and the unevolved, the beautiful and the ugly. It is only aware of the presence of God in all.

When we get down to spiritual basics, psychic powers mean nothing. They do not take a person closer to God. Possessing paranormal abilities do not make a person spiritual. Spirituality has nothing to do with what you have or what you know. It has to do with what you are, and how well you are expressing your Divine Self. Therefore, in conjunction to the study of mudras we would adjure our readers to develop purity, love, affection, detachment, disinterestedness, gentleness, harmlessness, beauty, selflessness, self-abandonment, and other divine virtues. Also, deepen your metaphysical knowledge of Cosmic laws and apply spiritual precepts. Do not miss a rung of the ladder leading toward the goal of human perfection. As said before, if any rung is missed you would have to return to start all over again in order to tread it. It is wonderful to unfold unconditional love and to experience bliss but do not forget that Divine Consciousness has many spiritual aspects and attributes, each one of which the spiritual aspirant would have to personally unfold. The person with the full unfoldment of one or two divine virtues has still a long way to go to reach perfection compared with another who has almost unfolded all of them but incompletely as yet. It is therefore, difficult to judge another using human values and perception.

Mudras are tools to spiritual development. They should be used in conjunction with other metaphysical disciplines and not applied as a sole sadhana or spiritual practice. There is no one method or technique that is superior to another. They all have their place in a disciple's daily work-out, and each have their own purpose and effect. Thus, while engaging in mudras, one should not give up one's daily prayers, meditations, occult disciplines and other yogic practices.

Chelas should not be attached to the sensations that mudras give--their purpose is not to offer personal delight; rather chelas should be focused more on the goal of human existence.

Purpose of These Series of Articles

All that we need to progress spiritually may be found within us. We were told by the Master Jesus that heaven is within us, within our beings; it is not a place that we go to when we pass away, or after the last angelic trumpet call during the last days of the Apocalypse. We do not deny that in some scriptures heaven is said to be a place. There is some truth in this belief, in this context we may equate heaven to the various dimensions, planes of existences, or realities. However, the heaven referred to by Master Jesus is quite different. It is more of a state of being, a level of awareness, a spiritual attitude.

The more we depend upon our inner being, our own Self, our own resources for our own evolverment, the more quickly we will reach the goal of human existence. Excessive dependence upon external agencies simply prolongs our state of ignorance and our human, mortal condition. This is one of the reasons why in Holy Scriptures we are warned not to visit street fortunetellers, paranormals and such, for they frequently instill in us a false sense of self-assurance and complacency, or conversely--needless fear. They misdirect our attention to things of no eternal worth. They are part of that materialistic scheme of the Dark Ones that hope to delay and if possible, thwart humanity's soul progress.

Salvation does not come from without, it comes from within. The savior of humanity lies within our own hearts. We have to find him there. This is a simple message that all mystics and saints have been telling us. We may disregard it at our own peril.

The purpose of these articles is to assist the raising of the awareness and the expansion of the consciousness of our readers who apply the teachings of the mudras. They are keys to personal development and spiritual unfoldment. By practicing the mudras consistently, the practitioner would in time realize the following :

- The existence of unseen forces and Intelligence
- The omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience of Energy
- The existence of other dimensions and realities
- The oneness of all life
- The errors of dualistic perception
- The blissful nature of the Spirit, or the Self
- The various powers of the Soul
- The illusions of time and space
- The birthrights of the Soul such as health, tranquility, prosperity, joy, etc.
- The powerful nature of Divine Love
- The ephemeral nature of physical life
- Morality as a soul necessity
- The sacredness of all sentient life
- The reality of the Soul

. . . and many other things that cannot be put into print or understood intellectually. Mudras may take us to spiritual heights that we have not reached heretofore. It initiates us into the world of pragmatic mysticism. All that a true spiritual Guru may do is to offer keys, guidance, advice, and teachings. He or she is unable to force any chela to comply or to obey because of the Law of Free Choice. It is up to the disciple to trust, have faith in and to open-up to the Teacher.

One of our intentions in the writing of these articles is to help preserve an important aspect of the cultural heritage of humanity. Here and there in these works are to be found spiritual gems and seeds that may not be recognized as such. In any case, we believe that they will eventually take root in the fertile grounds of our reader's mind and sprout in an active enhancement of the human condition disregarding commercialism and all partisanship and fanaticism of race, religion, color, gender, tribal affiliation, etc.

Although these series of articles are incomplete and have their shortcomings, the author feels that it would still fill the void in most people's awareness concerning esoteric methods of spiritual development. There are many occult techniques, systems, and traditions at our disposal, we only need to search for the tools that work for us. An open mind, fearlessness, and humility are all necessary qualities that would help us in our search for the keys to spiritual knowledge and unfoldment.

We reiterate: everything that we need to evolve and grow spiritually we already possess within us. We just need to be shown and given the keys that opens the right portals. These articles, it is hope, would offer a bunch of these keys that would unveil for the reader a greater world of understanding and experience. This is what the writer wills.

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