



THE SOURCE, MEANINGS AND USE OF "MUDRA" ACROSS RELIGIONS

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Abstract:

This paper traces the origin of the word 'Mudra', explains the meaning and focuses on its trans-religious use around the globe. Generally it is believed that the word 'Mudra' is associated with Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism and that it has no meaning for other religions or it is known outside the subcontinent. This research, however, has found that Mudras present in almost all the known religions including Islam.

Key Words: Mudra, Charkara, Sanskrit, Mantra Shastra, Upasana Shastra, Nritya Shastra, Gyan Mudra, Panja & Panjtan.

Introduction:

Basically *Mudra* is a Sanskrit word used for the hand or hands position to depict certain ritual gestures conveying different messages, although, some *Murdas* involve the entire body. The term *Mudra* is derived from two words "mud" and "ra" means to rejoice or to be happy and to give, thus is action which offers delight or extreme joy. This is an indication that the practice of *Mudra* is concerned with sensory aspect. The other meanings of *Mudra* are "seal" and "mark". The symbolic gestures are used in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain iconography, Indian classical dance, yoga exercises and sign language.

Origin and Development of Mudras:

The origin of *Mudras* can be traced back to the remote past when men started communication with each other and used these gestures as a sign language in the absence of any kind of dialogue, language or script. The earliest script that have been found are from different sources and are also in the form of symbols, such as the early Egyptian Script and Indus Script (still not deciphered).

The most common gesture throughout the history remains the 'bow-down-in-respect', either in front of a powerful man or the things which were out of control of the human being, hence threading him such as the sun, moon, fire, thunder storm etc. Fear of the unseen and uncertainty gave way to create different deities and to gain favour of the Supreme power for a trouble-free existence. The earliest cult or the concept of worshipping images is found in Neolithic period i.e. 10,000 BC where the presence of large number of female figurines suggest a concept of the mother goddess or fertility goddess to be worshipped for manipulation and the growth of human races. Merlin Stone wrote in her book titled "When God was a Woman". The great goddesses the Divine Ancestress had been worshipped from the beginning of the Neolithic period of 7000 BC until the closing of the last goddesses' temples about 500AD. Some authorities would extend goddesses worship as far into the past as the upper Paleolithic age of about 25000 BC. [Lorie-Odegard: 23]

Later on, number of gods and goddesses were found in ancient civilizations of Rome, Egypt, Greece, and the cultures of South Asia, which include Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. To identify god, goddess and deity, certain characteristics were assigned to them and their iconography was fixed by allotting them special features and attributes. Further classification of these gods and goddesses, especially in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religion are based on *Mudras* or the gestures in iconography representing different manifestations of the same.

No one knows for sure where and how *Mudras* originated. They have been in use for millennia, and have not been known to adhere to any barriers. They have been found in all continents, practiced by people of all religions and those who profess no religion. They are as natural to the body as the daily needs of the body. All that was required was to recognize them, identify them and systematically understand and use them.

Hinduism shows the earliest recorded knowledge and analysis of *Mudras*. The earliest documentations are found in *Mantra Shastra* (the book of incantations), *Upasana Shastra* (the book of the worship and prayers) and the *Nritya Shastra* (the book of classical dances). The following verse from *Srimad Bhagwad Gita* mentions that Lord Krishna was in the posture of *gyan Mudra* when he bestowed the knowledge of Gita and Arjuna.

Concept of Mudras:

The concept of a *Mudra* is dependent upon all the fingers of both the hands of an individual. Each of the fingers is linked with specific meaning and energy. The accurate use of the fingers provides the *Mudra* with the energy to heal. Fingers are stated to bear the human body's five elements, which are air, water, fire, earth and sky. These are there in set proportions and a slight imbalance may cause severe disaster. The striking of balance in between these elements is however not easy. Thus, the practice of using *Mudras* facilitates the harmonizing of the five elements present in the human body. Human body is by far the best creation of nature and human

bodies are built and dependent on five elements fire, air, akash, and water. These five elements cause various types of natural disturbances and upheavals and physical ailments when an imbalance takes place in these elements [Rajni Kant: viii].

An elaborate study concerning the fingers and their links with the five fundamental aspects unveils the fact that the element earth, worry and stomach are represented by the thumb. Index finger of a human being represents the element mental and has an influence over the large intestine, lungs, and also the control over emotions like sadness, depression and grief. The hand's middle finger is regarded as the element fire, which is connected with the small intestine, heart, respiratory and circulatory systems and emotions, which include hastiness and impatience. The element wood is related to the ring finger and is associated with the gall bladder, liver and nervous system, and represents anger, while the little finger represents water, fear and with the kidneys. Apart from this, the fingers of the hands are linked to profound meaning in palmistry and astrology. The hand's little finger represents Mercury, which is associated with communication. The little finger is also linked with the second *chakra*. About Chakra Hirschi writes as following: The human being consists of many different energy levels both physical and subtle. There are five energy vortexes along the spinal column. They move like wheels and have specific colours. There is an additional vortex in the area of the forehead and one more above the cranium. There are the so-called major chakras (there are also additional minor chakras) the five chakras situated along the spinal column are associated with the five fingers. The chakras can be compared to transformers, as we know from the field of electricity. They collect the energy that flows into the body process and transform it and distribute it again. The chakras are similar to the intersection of the energy paths called *nadis* (streams), which supply them with energy and carry it off again. In addition they transform the frequencies into sensations that the human being understands thinking and feelings. They make sure that the lack of energy is compensated for and the diverse energies are in the right place. They can also be called the organs of the energy body [Hirschi G: 204]. The middle finger is associated with Saturn and it denotes responsibility and is linked with throat *chakra*, which is the entrance to purity. The index finger is related to Jupiter and it denotes self-worth and is linked to heart *charka*. Lastly, the thumb is linked to Mars, and this denotes self-assertion and is related to the element of fire.

Mudras are used in the iconography of Hindu and Buddhist art of the South Asian subcontinent and described in the scriptures, such as *Natyasastra*, which lists twenty-four *samyuta* (separated meaning "one-hand") and thirteen *samyuta* (joined meaning "two-hand") *Mudras*. Both the hands and the fingers usually form *Mudra* positions. Along with *asans* (seated postures), they are employed statically in meditation and dynamically in Natya practice of Hinduism. Each *Mudra* has a specific effect on the practitioner. Common hand gestures are to be seen in both Hindu and Buddhist iconography. The Origin of the *Mudra* is a mystery. *Mudras* are not only found in Asia but they are used throughout the entire world. In their rituals our European ancestors were definitely familiar with specific gestures, which they used to underline and seal what they thought and wanted to say. During the Christianization of the Nordic people many gestures were initially prohibited such as invoking the gods, which raised arm. Later these gestures were partially integrated into the Christian teachings. If we observe the various gestures made by a priest saying the Mass, we can perhaps sense how these ancient people expressed themselves [Hirschi G: 5].

Mudras in Hinduism:

Abhaya Mudra:

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions of the world. The prime gods are Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva but there are hundreds and thousands other manifestations and other deities. Most of the following *Mudras* in Hindu iconography are also shared by Buddhist and Jainas. *Abhaya Mudra* (also called *santida*) is a gesture, which dispels fear because the presence of the divinity gives reassurance and protection to the devotee. In this *Mudra* the palm and fingers of right hand are held upright and facing outwards.

Anjali Mudra:

Anjali Mudra is a gesture of devotion and respectful greeting in which both hands are clasped together with the fingers upwards and palm touching. It is held near the chest. Devotees and minor deities are often portrayed in this pose including Garuda, Hanuman, Kaliya, Yama and others (Stutley: 9, Fig. 1).

Ardhachandra Mudra:

Ardhachandra Mudra is a gesture in which the palm of the hand is held upwards and curved to form a crescent. Sometimes a 'bowl of fire' is held in this hand. Seven flames make up the fire, which represent the seven tongues or flames of Agni. The bowl is held by Nataraja [Coomara swami: 10, Fig. 2].

Mudras are a non-verbal mode of communication and self-expression consisting of hand gestures and finger postures, which retain the efficacy of the spoken word. It is an external expression of inner resolve suggesting that such non-verbal communications are more powerful than the spoken word.

Mudras in Buddhism:

A *Mudra* is a bodily posture or symbolic gesture. In Buddhist iconography every Buddha is depicted with a characteristic gesture of the hands. Such gestures correspond to natural gestures (of teaching, protecting, and so on) and also to certain aspects of the Buddhist teaching or of the particular Buddha depicted.

Here *Mudras* accompany the performance of liturgies and the recitation of *mantras* (words or sounds repeated to aid concentration in meditation). They also help to actualize certain inner states in that they anticipate their physical expression; thus they assist in bringing about a connection between the practitioner and the Buddha visualized in a given practice.

The most important *Mudras* are:

<i>dhyaniMudra,</i>	(gesture of meditation)
<i>vitarkaMudra,</i>	(teaching gesture)
<i>dharmachakraMudra,</i>	(gesture of turning the wheel of the teaching)
<i>bhumisparshaMudra,</i>	(gesture of touching the earth)
<i>abhayaMudra,</i>	(gesture of fearlessness and granting protection)
<i>varadaMudra,</i>	(gesture of granting wishes)
<i>uttarabodhiMudra,</i>	(gesture of supreme enlightenment)
<i>anjaliMudra,</i>	(gesture of greeting and veneration)
<i>vijrapradamaMudra,</i>	(gesture of unshakable confidence)

Bhumisparsha Mudra:

Bhumisparsha Mudra is a gesture of the right hand and is peculiar to seated statues. It is formed by presenting the hand pendent in front of the right knee with the palm turned inwards, the fingers extending downward touching or "designating" the ground while the left hand holds a section of the stole at the level of the breast or lies in the lap. The *Mudra* stands for calling earth to witness triumph over evil and especially related to Buddha Shakyamuni's enlightenment at Bodh Gaya [Zwalf:40Fig. 3].

Dharmachakra Mudra:

Dharmachakra Mudra is the *Mudra* that represents a central moment in the life of Buddha when he preached his first Sermon after his Enlightenment in Deer Park in Sarnath. As symbolic of the dispensing of the law, in South and South East Asia in general, Gautama Buddha is the Buddha most frequently shown making this *Mudra* although images of Maitreya are also found in this position. This represents turning of the wheel of the *Dharma*. It is formed when two hands close together in front of the chest in *vitarka*, having the right palm forward and the left palm upward, sometimes facing the chest. There are different variations of this *Mudra* (Zwalf: 82, Fig. 4).

Dhyana Mudra:

Dhyana Mudra is the gesture of meditation or concentration on the good law. The two hands are placed on the lap, the right hand on left and fingers fully stretched. Four fingers resting on each other, thumbs facing upwards towards one another diagonally, palms facing upwards in this manner and the hands and fingers form the shape of triangle, symbol of spiritual fire or the *triratna* (the three jewels of Buddhism) (Terevor:85, Fig.5).

Mudras in Jainism:

Jainism is an Indian religion that prescribes a path of non-violence towards all living beings. Its philosophy and practice emphasize the necessity of self-effort to move the soul toward divine consciousness. Jainism is contemporary to the Buddhism, the iconography of Mahavira the founder of this religion is similar to that of the Buddha, as some gestures such as meditation are found in both traditions. Being extremist in thought most of figures shown are naked. Instead of hand gestures the symbols on the pedestals are important in describing the different Trithankras (a title assigned to Mahavira and other followers in this religion). An important symbol in Jainism consists of a hand and wheel reading *ahimsa*, the Jain vow of non-violence.

Mudras in Christianity:

The symbolism of the early Church was characterized by being understood by initiates only, while after the legalization, as mentioned elsewhere, of Christianity in the 4th century more recognizable symbols were used. Christianity has borrowed from the group of significant symbols known to most periods and to many regions of the world.

Prithvi Mudra:

Mudras have been depicted not only in Buddhist and Hindu imagery for centuries, but in Christian imagery as well. Christ is often painted with his right hand in *Prithvi Mudra*, in which the tips of the thumb and ring finger are joined. *Prithvi Mudra* is said to provide stability and cure weaknesses of the body and mind. The *Prithvi Mudras* aren't limited to Byzantine religious icons alone. To this very day, Greek Orthodox priests often hold the fingers of their right hand in *prithvi Mudra*, while making the sign of the cross during a spoken blessing. *Prithvi Mudra* is also known as the "Sign of Benediction or Blessing" (Fig. 6).

Pran Mudra:

There are also depictions of Christ with his right hand in *Pran Mudra* (little finger and ring finger connect with the thumb), which is said to increase vitality and protect the body against disease. Of course, one can hardly avoid the most obvious *Mudra* in Christian imagery – *anjali Mudra* - Christ with prayer hands at heart center (Fig.7).

Symbol of Hands in Islam:

Islamic Symbols are used to express identification with Islam, or a particular tradition within Islam. They are also used to evoke feelings, or to stand for certain Islamic beliefs and ideas. Some symbols, such as the colour green, have been associated with Islam for a long time and in many regions, others are of more limited duration and extent. Muslim art often uses such symbols to represent complex ideas. Islamic architecture may also incorporate such symbols in the decoration of religious edifices such as mosques, khanqahs, and dargahs. The Quran does not specify any symbols or colours. These Islamic symbols are results of the understandings and imaginations of Muslim artists, politicians, and thinkers.

In Islam some poses and gestures similar to *Mudra* types, such as, bowing, using the index finger for "Toheed", using poses like *Dua*, *Raquh*, *Azan*, etc. In early 628AD/6AH (this was the month of Zulqada) the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) accompanied by 1400 men and decided to go Makka for Umrah. But the Makkans blocked the way and Muslims stayed outside of Makka. The name of that place was Hudaibiya. The Prophet (PBUH) sent a messenger to negotiate with Makkans but he was ill-treated and then Hazrat Uthman was sent. As Uthman did not return for a long time, a rumor broke out in Muslim Camp that he was killed by the Quraysh. This was a critical moment. The Muslims were not well armed and their number was small. Convinced of the Qurayshre solve to shed Muslim blood, the Prophet (PBUH) called upon his companions to take a pledge to fight unto death, called the pledge of the tree, also known as Bayt ar-Rizwan. This pledge was taken at the hand of the Prophet (PBUH) while he stood under a tree where the Prophet symbolically placed his own left hand to Uthman's right hand and he tooka pledge on his right hand. This pledge came to be known also as the pledge of good pleasure. Fortunately Uthman returned soon after and negotiation began anew in earnest, [Mazhar: 93].

The human hand with its five fingers is especially common amulet in the Islamic world. Among Muslims it is called the hand of "Fatima" after the youngest daughter of Prophet Muhammad and mother of the Imams. At the same time it can symbolize the *Panjtan* or 'Five people,' i.e. Muhammad, Fatima, her husband Ali and their two sons Hassan and Hussain who are the most important figures of Shi'ite Islam, but who are also highly esteemed among the Sunnis. The hand of Fatima is supposed to avert the 'evil eye'. Thus it is used at prominent places in the Islamic world such as hall of justice in the al-Hamrah, is such a talismanic sign [Schimmel: 115].

Conclusion:

Although we found similarity between *Mudras* which were used in different religions "*Dhyana Mudra*" was used in different religions. The practice of *Mudras* affects the human body, which are three sublime powers the physical, mental and spiritual. Therefore *Mudras* play a significant role in religion. Swami Mahavir Jain in Jainism, Buddha in Buddhism and Guru Nanak Devjiin Sikhism are always shown in *Gayan* or *Dhyana Mudra*. Example in Jainism *Mudrahimsa*, (Fig. 8) Other way in Jainism they used five fingers of hand as follows:

Little finger	Water,
Ring finger	Earth,
Middle finger	Sky,
Index finger	Air,
Thumb	Fire

A hand symbol "*Punja*" known as *Alam*, (Fig. 9) are similar symbol of hand, each finger represents one of the five figures Shias revere the most: Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, his cousin Ali and their two sons Hassan and Hussain. Through the event of Baytar-Rizwan we know how the Prophet used his own hand to symbolize with Hazrat Uthman's hand. Of course at that time and later some evident proof of the importance of specific poses and gestures of hands such as using index finger for To heed and pose of "Dua" etc similar to *Mudras* but Islam cannot be assigned as *Mudras*, as this term was only for Hindu Buddhist, and Jain religious iconography. Even other examples of Greek or Roman symbolic gestures do not fall in this category.

Thus through these historical evidences and given examples we can clearly see the direct or indirect connection between different religions.



Figure 1: Anjali Mudra

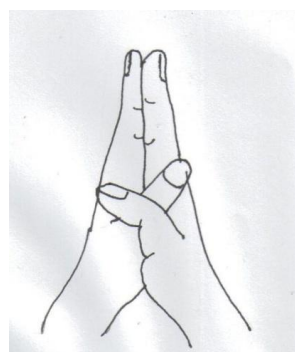


Figure 1: Close-up



Figure 2: Ardhachandra Mudra



Figure 3: Bhumisparsha Mudra



Figure 4: Dharmachakra Mudra



Figure 5: Dhyana Mudra



Figure 6: Prithvi Mudra



Figure 7: Pran Mudra



Figure 8: Mudra Himsa



Figure 9: Punja

18th century Punja, A representation of Fatima's Hand: Representing the Panjtan (Muhammad; his daughter Fatima; her husband Ali; and their two sons Hassan and Hussain).



Picture References:

1. Figure 1: <https://www.google.com/search?q=dharmachakra+Mudra&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8>
2. Figure 2: <https://www.google.com/search?q=dharmachakra+Mudra&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8>
3. Figure 3: <https://www.google.com/search?q=dharmachakra+Mudra&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8>

4. Figure 4: <https://www.google.com/search?q=dharmachakra+Mudra&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8>
5. Figure 5: <https://www.google.com/search?q=dhyana+Mudra&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8>
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