



EXPANDED EDITION

*A Comprehensive Guide
to the Hand Gestures of
Yoga and Indian Dance*

MUDRAS OF INDIA

CAIN CARROLL AND REVITAL CARROLL

FOREWORD BY DR. DAVID FRAWLEY

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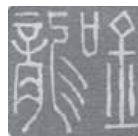
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For Yashodhara Enz
Always follow your heart

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INTRODUCTION

The History and Heritage of Mudras

Our hands are a source of tremendous power. With such profound dexterity, sensitivity, and utility, the human hands may be one of our most defining features as a species. Playing guitar, delivering a baby, knitting a sweater, building a house, wielding a sword, painting intricate figures: through the use of our hands we create and shape the world we live in. Hands can heal, hands can harm. One touch can convey a wide array of thoughts, feelings, or intentions. Hands tell the story of our mood or state of mind. When we feel angry, a clenched fist; when anxious, fidgeting fingers. Even plants and animals respond to the subtle nuances of our touch.

With the hands playing such a central role in our experience of being human, it comes as no surprise that many of the world's great spiritual and artistic traditions have considered the hands as sacred. With five digits, twenty-seven bones, and fifteen joints—plus numerous carpal joints affording articulation of the wrist—the human hand is a masterpiece of nature. Perhaps, this is why many cultures throughout history viewed the human hand as a perfect microcosm of the universe. For example, the shaman kings (*Wu*) of ancient China viewed all things in the animated world as emanations of the changing relationship between five fundamental principles (commonly referred to as the Five Elements): Water, Wood, Fire, Earth, and Metal. They viewed the human hand as one of the most poignant examples of these five principles, with each of the fingers representing one the Five Elements (Earth/thumb, Metal/index, Water/little, Wood/ring, and Fire/middle). These relationships, and the character of each finger based on the theory of Five Elements, are woven into the philosophy and practice of all the traditional Chinese arts: calligraphy, Traditional Chinese Medicine, astrology, martial arts, *cha dao* (tea culture), classical music, dance, and theater.

In many of these arts, specific hand positions and gestures are used in relationship to the precise effect desired by the practitioner. For example, a Chinese shaman might instruct a patient suffering from anxiety to tuck her thumbs into her palms and hold them firmly. Since the thumb relates to Earth, closing the other fingers around it creates an energetic seal, a mudra, which imparts a sense of safety and stability, thus reducing anxiety. In Chinese calligraphy, the brush is held firmly with the thumb, index, middle, and ring

finger while the little finger is tucked slightly in and not used. This is in an effort to conserve the energy of the kidneys (Water), giving the calligrapher a certain vitality that can be seen in the *qi* of their brush strokes.

A similar tradition emerged in ancient India, where Vedic sages and Tantric yogis developed a highly nuanced cosmology with the *Pancha Maha Bhuta* (“Five Great Elements”) as the basic foundation. The *Pancha Maha Bhuta* of the Indian cosmological system is similar, but not identical to, the Five Element theory used throughout East Asia.

Pancha Maha Bhuta

Element (English)	Element (Sanskrit)
Fire	<i>Agni</i>
Air	<i>Vayu</i>
Ether/Space	<i>Akasha</i>
Earth	<i>Prithivi</i>
Water	<i>Apas</i>

Indian *rishis* (seers) discovered a direct connection between the *Pancha Maha Bhuta* and the five fingers of the human hand. They emphasized that the relationship of the *Pancha Maha Bhuta* in the body should remain balanced and in harmony with the rest of the natural world. They taught that any disorder in the body or mind indicates an excess or deficiency in one or more of the Elements. Through centuries of research and experimentation with techniques used to influence the *bhutas*—as well as influential exchanges with other Asian traditions—they developed an elaborate system called *Yoga Tattva Mudra Vijnana*.¹ This unique branch of Vedic wisdom clearly describes the relationship between the five fingers and Five Elements, and sets forth an extensive system of mudras whose influence is seen in many of the classical disciplines of India: dance, theater, architecture, painting, medicine (*Ayurveda*), martial arts, and yoga. Since all the classical arts of India were evolving within the context of Vedic and Tantric spirituality, the cosmology of the *Pancha Maha Bhuta* and the presence of mudras are almost ubiquitous.

The Sanskrit word *mudra* means “attitude,” “gesture,” or “seal.” The most common use of the word describes the many hand gestures used in yoga, spiritual ritual, and Indian dance. It is these hand gestures (*hasta mudras*) that are the main focus of this book. However, it is important to understand that *mudra* has many other meanings used in numerous different contexts. For example, the *Kularnava Tantra*² traces the word *mudra* to the root *mud* (“to delight in”) and *dru* (“to give” or “draw forth”). This hints at an ecstatic state of non-duality, or

union with the deity, as the ultimate definition of *mudra*. In the *Siva Sutras*, one of the most important texts of Kashmir Shaivism, *mudra* is mentioned in two contexts: as *mudra-virya* and *mudra-krama*. *Mudra-virya* refers to the underlying power that reveals the ground of our experience as *Turya* (“pure awareness”).³ *Mudra-krama* is a densely loaded phrase that connotes the state in which the mind alternates between internal awareness of “self” and external awareness of “the world,” and thus cannot find a true distinction between the two. Due to this power called *samavesha* (“co-existence”), the practitioner’s consciousness is perfectly merged with the way things are. In this context, *mudra* is the sense of having united with something larger, while simultaneously knowing that such a union is primordial.

The word *mudra* also refers to the large earrings worn by Kanphata Yogis⁴ in India, an order of *sadhus* (religious ascetics) who follow the teachings of Gorakhnath (a famous Nath Yogi and prolific author who lived in the tenth or eleventh century). In Indian Tantrism, *mudra* is also used to denote the parched grains used in Tantric ritual, and also as a subtle reference to the female consort, called *Shakti* or *Dakini*, of a Tantric yogin. The Kagyu sect of *Vajrayana* Buddhism uses the suffix *maha* (“great”) in conjunction with the term *mudra* to describe the lineage’s quintessential meditation practice called *Mahamudra* (“the Great Seal”). In this context, the word *mudra* refers to a specific method of meditation and its fruition. *Mahamudra* describes the practice of looking directly at the fundamental nature of Mind. It also denotes the highest enlightenment, where Mind and Emptiness are synonymous.⁵

Mudras in the Yoga Tradition

In the Hatha Yoga tradition, mudras are considered precious tools on the path of awakening. There are five classes of such mudras taught in the yoga tradition: *hasta* (“hand”), *mana* (“head”), *kaya* (“postural”), *bandha* (“lock”), and *adhara* (“base” or “perineal”). Although these five are different, they share the common purpose of serving as “seals” or “locks” used to affect the flow of energy in particular organs and channels of the body. The *Gheranda Samhita* (a seventeenth-century text on Hatha Yoga) describes twenty-five of these types of mudras.⁶ Each of the five classes of mudras contains numerous techniques used for different purposes. Many of the postural mudras and locks form the basis for the internal practices of Hatha Yoga that—contrary to the popular application of yoga as a fitness fad—are aimed primarily at affecting the autonomic nervous system, and have very little to do with the appearance of the musculoskeletal system.

Hasta Mudra is the name given to the many hand gestures, such as *Surabhi Mudra* (see p.243), used in Hatha Yoga to regulate the flow of *prana* (“life force”) and ready the mind for meditation. The *Soma Shambhu Paddhati* (circa