

Buddha

Buddha is the past participle of Sanskrit buddh (to awaken, to know), and is translated as "one who has awakened to the truth." Buddha is not a personal name. It is an honorific term, like messiah or Christ (the anointed one). Another common Sanskrit term for Buddha is Tathagata. In Japan, Tathagata is rendered as "Nyorai," an honorific title given to those who have attained enlightenment. There are many Buddha in Mahayana traditions. The Historical Buddha (a real person who lived around 500 BC) is one of the most widely recognized in Asia and worldwide. Statues of the various Buddha share common attributes. First, they are generally simple, without jewelry or princely clothes. Second, most Buddha statues are depicted with elongated ears (all-hearing), a bump atop the head (all-knowing), and a boss in the forehead (all-seeing). Third, they are portrayed with characteristic hand gestures (mudra).

1. Dharmachakra mudra

Dharmachakra in Sanskrit means the 'Wheel of Dharma'. This mudra symbolizes one of the most important moments in the life of Buddha, the occasion when he preached to his companions the first sermon after his Enlightenment in the Deer Park at Sarnath. It thus denotes the setting into motion of the Wheel of the teaching of the Dharma.

In this mudra the thumb and index finger of both hands touch at their tips to form a circle. This circle represents the Wheel of Dharma, or in metaphysical terms, the union of method and wisdom.

The three remaining fingers of the two hands remain extended.

These fingers are themselves rich in symbolic significance:

The three extended fingers of the right hand represent the three vehicles of the Buddha's teachings, namely:

- The middle finger represents the 'hearers' of the teachings
- The ring finger represents the 'solitary realizers'
- The Little finger represents the Mahayana or 'Great Vehicle'.

The three extended fingers of the left hand symbolize the Three Jewels of Buddhism, namely, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Significantly, in this mudra, the hands are held in front of the heart, symbolizing that these teachings are straight from the Buddha's heart.



This mudra is displayed by the first Dhyani Buddha Vairochana. Each of the five Dhyani Buddhas is associated with a specific human delusion, and it is believed that they help mortal beings in overcoming them. Thus, Vairochana is believed to

transform the delusion of ignorance into the wisdom of reality. By displaying the Dharmachakra mudra, he thus helps adepts in bringing about this transition.

2. Bhumisparsha mudra



Literally Bhumisparsha translates into 'touching the earth'. It is more commonly known as the 'earth witness' mudra. This mudra, formed with all five fingers of the right hand extended to touch the ground, symbolizes the Buddha's enlightenment under the bodhi tree, when he summoned the earth goddess, Sthavara, to bear witness to his attainment of enlightenment.

The right hand, placed upon the right knee in earth-pressing mudra, and complemented by the left hand-which is held flat in the lap in the dhyana mudra of meditation, symbolizes the union of method and wisdom, samasara and nirvana, and also the realizations of the conventional and ultimate truths. It is in this posture that Shakyamuni overcame the obstructions of Mara while meditating on Truth.

The second Dhyani Buddha Akshobhya is depicted in this mudra. He is believed to transform the delusion of anger into mirror-like wisdom. It is this metamorphosis that the Bhumisparsha mudra helps in bringing about.

3. Varada mudra

This mudra symbolizes charity, compassion and boon-granting. It is the mudra of the accomplishment of the wish to devote oneself to human salvation. It is nearly always made with the left hand, and can be made with the arm hanging naturally at the side of the body, the palm of the open hand facing forward, and the fingers extended.



The five extended fingers in this mudra symbolize the following five perfections:

- Generosity
- Morality
- Patience
- Effort
- Meditative concentration

This mudra is rarely used alone, but usually in combination with another made with the right hand, often the Abhaya mudra (described below). This combination of Abhaya and Varada mudras is called Segan Semui-in or Yogan Semui-in in Japan.

Ratnasambhava, the third Dhyani Buddha displays this mudra. Under his spiritual guidance, the delusion of pride becomes the wisdom of sameness. The Varada mudra is the key to this transformation.

4. Dhyana mudra

The Dhyana mudra may be made with one or both hands. When made with a single hand the left one is placed in the lap, while the right may be engaged elsewhere. The left hand making the Dhyana mudra in such cases symbolizes the female left-hand principle of wisdom. Ritual objects such as a text, or more commonly an alms bowl symbolizing renunciation, may be placed in the open palm of this left hand.

When made with both hands, the hands are generally held at the level of the stomach or on the thighs. The right hand is placed above the left, with the palms facing upwards, and the fingers extended. In some cases the thumbs of the two hands may touch at the tips, thus forming a mystic triangle. The esoteric sects obviously attribute to this triangle a multitude of meanings, the most important being the identification with the mystic fire that consumes all impurities. This triangle is also said to represent the Three Jewels of Buddhism, mentioned above, namely the Buddha himself, the Good Law and the Sangha.

The Dhyana mudra is the mudra of meditation, of concentration on the Good law, and of the attainment of spiritual perfection. According to tradition, this mudra derives from the one assumed by the Buddha when meditating under the pipal tree before his Enlightenment. This gesture was also adopted since time immemorial, by yogis during their meditation and concentration exercises. It indicates the perfect balance of thought, rest of the senses, and tranquillity.

This mudra is displayed by the fourth Dhyani Buddha Amitabha, also known as Amitayus. By meditating on him, the delusion of attachment becomes the wisdom of discernment. The Dhyana mudra helps mortals achieve this transformation.



5. Vitarka Mudra - Intellectual Argument, Debate, Appeasement

The gesture of discussion and debate indicates communication and an explanation of the Dharma. The tips of the thumb and index finger touch, forming a circle. All other fingers are extended upwards. Sometimes the middle finger and thumb touch, which is gesture of great compassion. If the thumb and ring finger touch, they express the mudra of good fortune.

6. Abhaya Mudra



Abhaya in Sanskrit means fearlessness. Thus this mudra symbolizes protection, peace, and the dispelling of fear. It is made with the right hand raised to shoulder height, the arm crooked, the palm of the hand facing outward, and the fingers upright and joined. The left hand hangs down at the side of the body. In Thailand, and especially in Laos, this mudra is associated with the movement of the walking Buddha (also called 'the Buddha placing his footprint'). It is nearly always used in images showing the Buddha upright, either immobile with the feet joined, or walking.

This mudra, which initially appears to be a natural gesture, was probably used from prehistoric times as a sign of good intentions - the hand raised and unarmed proposes friendship, or at least peace; since antiquity, it was also a gesture asserting power, as with the magna manus of the Roman Emperors who legislated and gave peace at the same time. Buddhist tradition has an interesting legend behind this mudra:

Devadatta, a cousin of the Buddha, through jealousy caused a schism to be caused among the disciples of Buddha. As Devadatta's pride increased, he attempted to murder the Buddha. One of his schemes involved loosing a rampaging elephant into the Buddha's path. But as the elephant approached him, Buddha displayed the Abhaya mudra, which immediately calmed the animal. Accordingly, it indicates not only the appeasement of the senses, but also the absence of fear.

In Gandhara art, this mudra was sometimes used to indicate the action of preaching. This is also the case in China where it is very commonly found in images of the Buddha, mainly in the Wei and Sui eras (fourth to seventh centuries).

The Abhaya mudra is displayed by the fifth Dhyani Buddha, Amoghasiddhi. He is also the Lord of Karma in the Buddhist pantheon. Amoghasiddhi helps in overcoming the delusion of jealousy. By meditating on him, the delusion of jealousy is transformed into the wisdom of accomplishment. This transformation is hence the primary function of the Abhaya mudra.

Buddhist Symbols

Since the making of human images of the Buddha was considered sacrilegious for a long time, Buddhist visual art has produced an elaborate vocabulary of symbolic and iconic forms of expressions. A great variety of Buddhist symbols is found in temples and in Buddhist visual art and literature. The following eight figures are among the more common ones. The lotus, the wheel, and the stupa can be seen in almost every Buddhist temple. One may understand these symbols as visual mantras. Contemplating these figures is an exercise in meditation to establish inner contact with the aspect that is represented.



Lotus Flower

Padma - Symbol of Purity. Can be of any colour except blue.



Dharmachakra

The wheel of the law. The eight spokes represent the eightfold path.



Stupa

The stupa is a symbolic grave monument where relics or the ashes of a holy monk are kept. It also symbolises the universe.



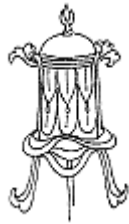
Triratana

The three jewels - the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.



Chhatra

A parasol - protection against all evil; high rank.



Dhvaja

Banner - the victory of the Buddha's teachings.



Deer

The deer - usually in pairs - symbolises the first sermon of the Buddha which was held in the deer park of Benares.



Naga

The snake king. Vestige of pre-Buddhist fertility rituals and protector of the Buddha and the Dhamma.

Mudras

Images of the Buddha were produced from the fifth century onwards. The sacred nature of the representation is reflected in the artistic goal of creating an aura of equanimity, perfection, and holiness. The large number of rules governing the execution of a portrayal or a statue require an erudite understanding of Buddhist symbolism. Any Buddha figure made by a skilled artist exhibits a multitude of characteristics that communicate subtle meanings and intentions to the viewer. The most important of these characteristics are perhaps the mudras, or hand gestures, of the Buddha. These well-defined gestures have a fixed meaning throughout all styles and periods of Buddha images.



Bhumisparsha Mudra
Touching the earth as Gautama did, to invoke the earth as witness to the truth of his words.



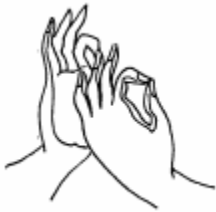
Varada Mudra
Fulfilment of all wishes; the gesture of charity.



Dhyana Mudra
The gesture of absolute balance, of meditation. The hands are relaxed in the lap, and the tips of the thumbs and fingers touch each other. When depicted with a begging bowl this is a sign of the head of an order.



Abhaya Mudra
Gesture of reassurance, blessing, and protection. "Do not fear."



Dharmachakra Mudra
The gesture of teaching usually interpreted as turning the Wheel of Law. The hands are held level with the heart, the thumbs and index fingers form circles.



Vitarka Mudra
Intellectual argument, discussion. The circle formed by the thumb and index finger is the sign of the Wheel of Law.



Tarjani Mudra
Threat, warning. The extended index finger is pointed at the opponent.



Namaskara Mudra
Gesture of greeting, prayer, and adoration. Buddhas no longer make this gesture because they do not have to show devotion to anything.



Jnana Mudra
Teaching. The hand is held at chest level and the thumb and index finger again form the Wheel of Law.



Karana Mudra
Gesture with which demons are expelled.



Ksepama Mudra
Two hands together in the gesture of 'sprinkling' the nectar of immortality.



Uttarabodhi Mudra
Two hands placed together above the head with the index fingers together and the other fingers intertwined. The gesture of supreme enlightenment.