

8 Buddha Hand Gestures (Mudras) and Their Meanings



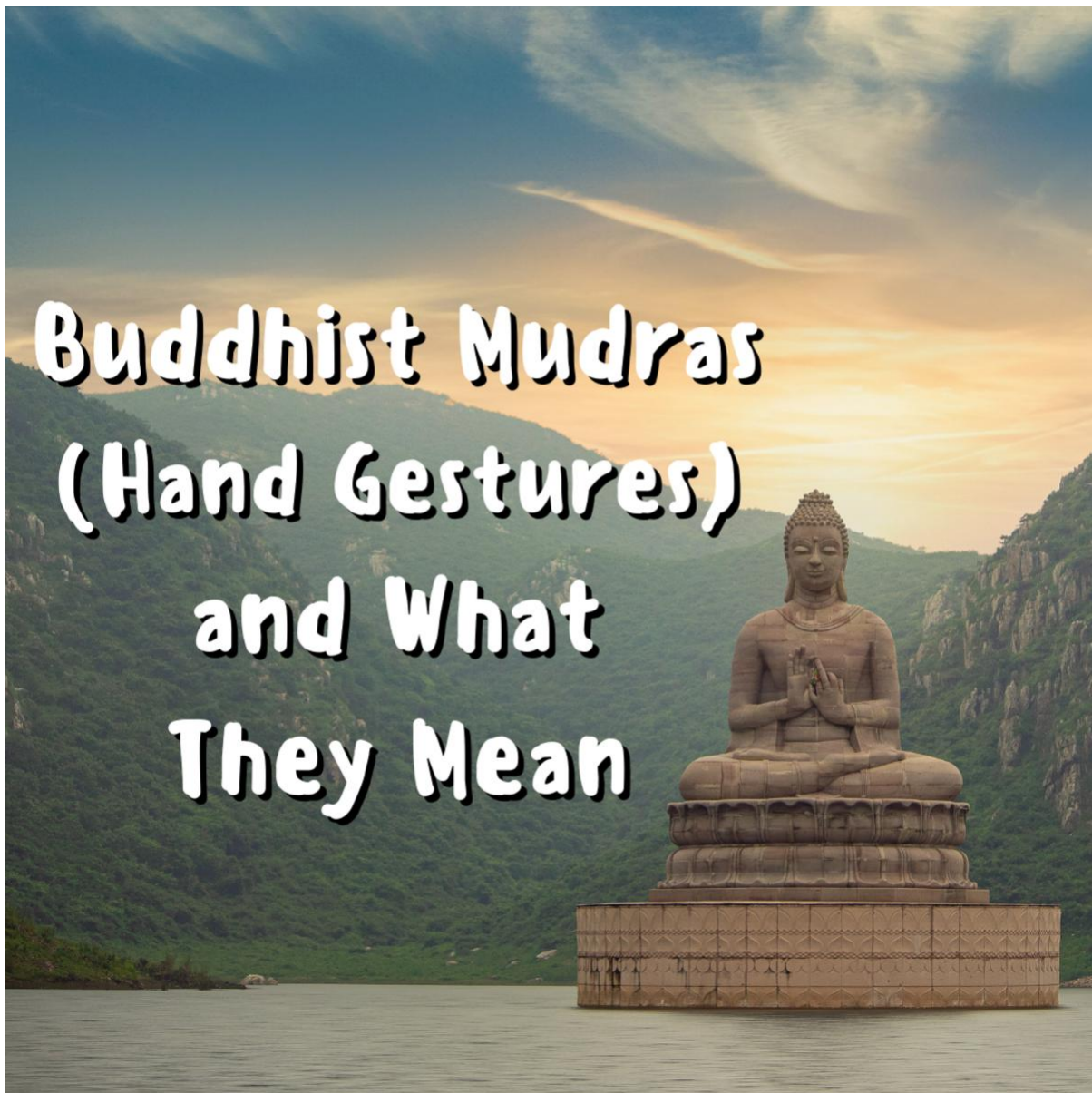
[JLSHERNANDEZ](#) MAY 16, 2025

Explore eight Buddhist hand gestures (mudras).

Buddha Mudras (Hand Gestures) and What They Mean

Buddhas are often depicted in paintings, sculptures and Indian dances with certain postures and hand gestures known as *mudras*. A mudra is a symbolic hand or ritual gesture in Hinduism and Buddhism which represents a period in the life of [the historical Buddha](#).

There are hundreds of mudras, and only a few are represented in Buddhist art. What do these hand gestures mean?



This article teaches eight of the Buddhist mudras (hand gestures) and explains what they mean. It also provides info on where best to place various Buddhas in your home. Finally, you'll find a relaxing video to teach you yoga for your hands!

Here are some Buddha sculptures that I own, which were placed in certain locations of the house based on the meaning of the hand gestures and the positive energy each one gave me. I'll be covering the following mudras:

1. Vitarka Mudra
2. Dhyana (or Yoga) Mudra
3. Varada Mudra
4. Abhaya Mudra
5. Bhumisparsa Mudra
6. Dharmachakra Mudra
7. Karana Mudra
8. Anjali (or Namaskara) Mudra



A Vitarka Mudra Buddha carved out of sandalwood, sitting on a lotus flower.

1. Vitarka Mudra

The Vitarka Mudra is the mudra of discussion and intellectual argument. In this mudra, the thumb and the index finger touch to form a circle, which symbolizes the constant flow of energy and information. The circle, having neither a beginning nor an end, is the symbol of perfection, resembling the Law of Buddha, which is eternal and perfect.

The Vitarka Mudra is formed when the right hand is raised to shoulder level and the left hand sits upon the lap with the palm facing upwards.



A hand-carved teak Buddha portraying the Vitarka Mudra hand gesture.

Pictured above is my favorite hard-carved teak Buddha, which sits on a teak foyer sideboard in the entryway of my home. The serene countenance, the gentle folds of the robe, and the beautiful overall carving of the hands in Vitarka Mudra pose give this Buddha a commanding presence. Although the best feng shui placement for this is in a home office or library, I like the positive feeling this Buddha brings as one enters the house.



A buddha portraying the Dhyana (or Yoga) Mudra hand gesture.

2. Dhyana (or Yoga) Mudra

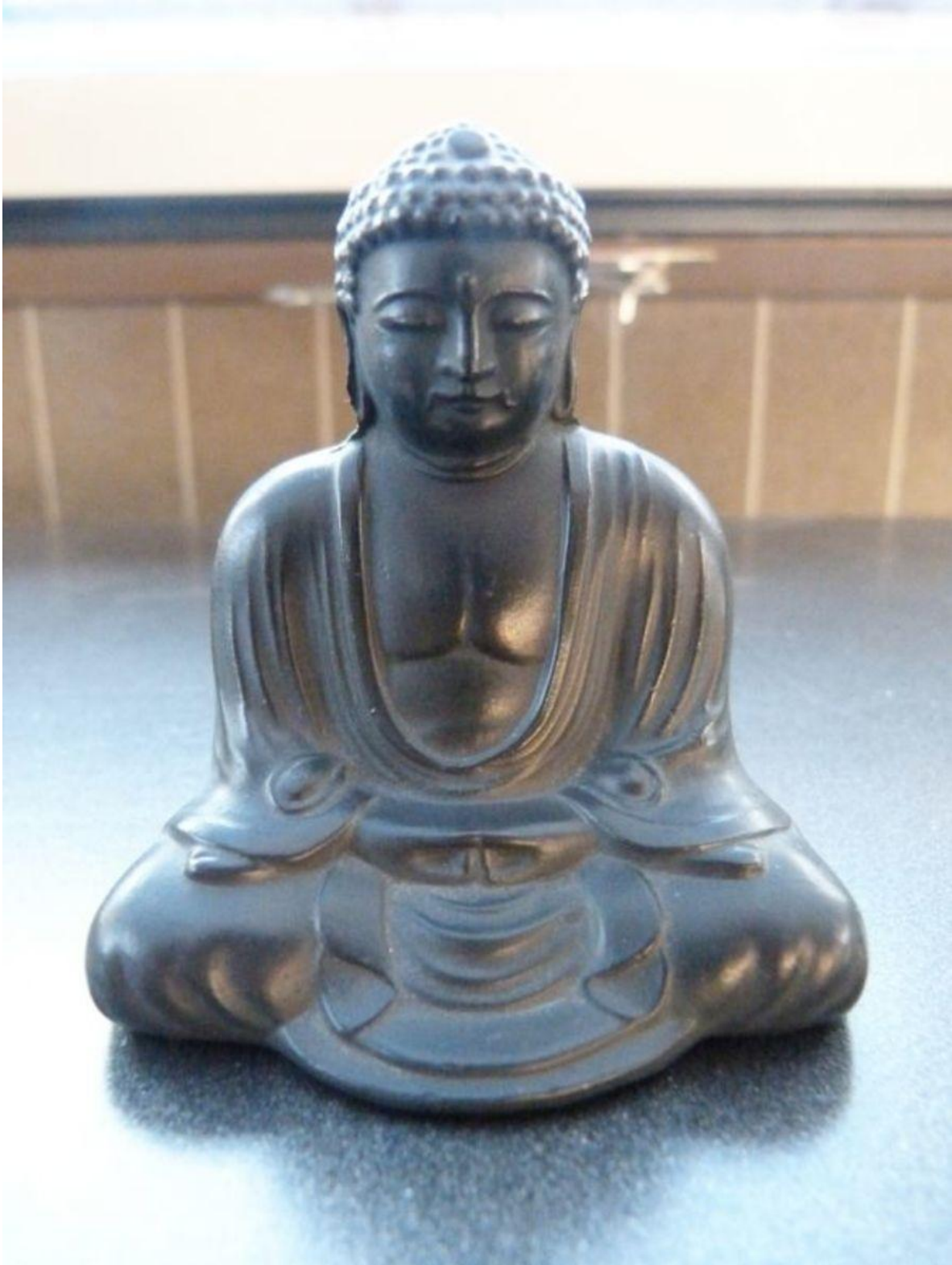
The Dhyana Mudra is a gesture of meditation or concentration. This hand gesture is common to seated buddhas found in Asian décor, paintings, statues, and garden fountains. In this mudra, the back of the right hand rests on top of the left palm with the thumbs lightly touching each other.

The right hand, being on top, represents enlightenment, and the other, the world of appearance. Thus, this gesture symbolizes overcoming the world of appearance through an enlightened state of mind. This was the state the spiritual leader, Gautama

Buddha, found under the [bodhi tree](#) when the armies of Mara attacked him, and he called the Earth to witness his enlightenment and defeated the demons.

My meditating Buddha in the Dhyana Mudra gesture sits on top of a wooden ice chest that could easily pass for an outdoor altar. To create a sense of serenity and a place to get away from it all, roll-up bamboo blinds were lowered in this covered porch.

This is where I can read a favorite book at my leisure, sip a glass of Chardonnay or a cup of tea to relax, or just lie back in the lounge chairs and listen to the birds chirping and the gurgling of the fountain.



A replica of the Great Buddha of Kamakura – Amitabha Buddha – in the Dhyana Mudra meditative pose.

This is a very small version of the Great Buddha of Kamakura (Daibatsu in Japanese) in Japan, which I brought home as a souvenir. The Daibatsu was cast inside a temple in 1252 A.D. in Nara, but a huge tsunami washed away the wooden structure in the 15th century, and the Great Buddha has sat outdoors on the grounds of Kotoku-in ever since. I was fortunate enough to have been inside the cavernous bronze Great Buddha, which is the most impressive Buddha monument in Japan today.

The Amitabha Buddha's mudra is two circles formed by his two hands: the index, middle, and ring fingers touch while the thumbs and little fingers do not. This mudra is called "Jobon-josho-in (uppermost grade of the highest rank)" and is considered the highest.



A Buddha portraying the Varada Mudra hand gesture.

3. Varada Mudra

The Varada Mudra is a gesture of compassion and wish-granting. In the Varada Mudra, the open right hand is held palm outward, fingers pointing down. It represents open-handed generosity and the granting of wishes.

The Varada Mudra could be switched to the left hand when combined with the Abhaya Mudra (right hand), commonly depicted in standing buddhas (as depicted in the photo above). The Varada Mudra is associated with the Dhyani Buddha [Ratnasambhava](#) and is used extensively in the statues of East Asia.



A standing Buddha portraying the Abhaya Mudra hand gesture.

4. Abhaya Mudra

The Abhaya Mudra is a gesture of fearlessness and granting protection. This is a standing Thai Buddha with the Abhaya hand pose aptly located in the entryway of my home. The right hand is raised (as if to say "stop thief"), with the palm facing outwards, joined fingers extended upwards.

This was the gesture that Buddha Shakyamuni used to appease a drunken elephant immediately after his enlightenment. The Abhaya Mudra hand gesture asserts power

and confers the absence of fear on others. The Dhyani Buddha Amoghasiddhi is often depicted with the Abhaya Mudra.

The Abhaya Mudra is often accompanied by the Varada Mudra (gesture of dispensing favors, charity, sincerity, welcome) as shown with the left hand. Standing buddhas are often depicted with this posture.



A Buddha portraying the Bhumisparsha Mudra hand gesture. This statue is at the archeology gallery of the Indian Museum, Kolkata.

5. Bhumisparsha Mudra

The Bhumisparsha Mudra is a gesture of taking the Earth as witness. Bhumisparsha Mudra means "gesture of touching the Earth." This was the gesture of Gautama Buddha when he summoned the Earth to witness his enlightenment and his worthiness as a Buddha at Bodh Gaya as he thwarted the temptations of the demon [Mara](#).

The left hand (in a Dhyana Mudra pose) rests with the palm upwards on the lap and the right hand hangs over the knee, all fingers extended, with the palm pointing inward to the Earth and fingertips touching the ground.

The Bhumisparsha Mudra is associated with the Dhyani Buddha [Akshobhya](#) as well as with the historical Buddha, sitting in a lotus position, sometimes with a begging bowl in the left hand.



A Buddha portraying the Dharmachakra Mudra hand gesture. This statue is at the National Museum in New Delhi.

6. Dharmachakra Mudra

The Dharmachakra Mudra gesture symbolizes the Wheel of Dharma, which is the continuous energy of the cosmic order. This gesture is associated with Buddha's first sermon or [teaching](#).

This gesture is formed by moving both hands in front of the breast and the heart, turning the left palm up and allowing the right palm to face outwards. Then, you touch the tips of the right index finger and thumb to the middle finger of your left hand while allowing the left ring and pinky fingers to remain straight.

This mudra symbolizes the teaching about the continuous energy of the cosmic order as coming from/through the heart.



A buddha portraying the Karana Mudra gesture.

7. Karana Mudra

Kwan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy and compassion, sits on the moon in an attitude of deep serenity. Her left hand is in the Karana Mudra gesture (warding off negative energy, sickness, and banishing evil), while the right hand cradles a fruit with the nectar of compassion.

In the Karana Mudra, the thumb holds down the middle two fingers, while the index and little finger extend upwards like the ears of a rabbit or the horns of a yak against an enemy.

The best Feng Shui placement for the Kwan Yin with the Karana Mudra is in our solarium with large windows facing two streets. The solarium is the problematic area of the house, which needs strong clearing of negative energy according to the [Feng Shui Bagua](#). There are a lot of teenagers parking their cars outside and hanging out till late at night.

Kwan Yin, Quan Yin, or Guanyin is the Bodhisattva of Compassion, hearing the cries of the world, blessing all with spiritual peace, healing, and compassion. In Buddhism, a Bodhisattva is an enlightened being.



8. Anjali (or Namaskara) Mudra

The Anjali (or Namaskara) Mudra is a gesture of greeting, adoration, and respect. In this mudra, the palms of the hands are placed against each other at chest level with the right thumb placed over the left in a gesture of universal prayer and homage. The sacred hand position is often used in Yoga as it is an excellent way to induce a meditative state of awareness. The Anjali Mudra is also often seen in the armed Kannon in Japan. Kannon is the Japanese name for Kuan Yin, the goddess of mercy. Buddhas are no longer depicted with the praying hands because they do not have to show devotion to anything.

Sources and Further Reading

- [Explanation of Buddhist Mudras | Light of Asia](#)

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are frequently shown with their hands forming several different ritualized and stylized poses (Mudrâs). They may be holding different objects as well within these poses. Learn the meanings of these gestures.

- [Bodhi Tree | Definition & Facts | Britannica](#)

Bodhi tree, according to Buddhist tradition, is the specific sacred fig (*Ficus religiosa*) under which the Buddha sat when he attained Enlightenment (Bodhi) at Bodh Gaya in Bihar, India.

- [Gopal, Madan. \(1990\). India Through the Ages. Internet Archive.](#)

Page 176 of Gopal's book describes the Bodhi tree, where Gautama Buddha is said to have received enlightenment.

- [An Overview of the Great Buddha | Kotoku-in](#)

- [The Five Dhyani Buddhas: Symbols of Consciousness | Learn Religions](#)

Many Buddhists choose to meditate on one of the Five Dhyani Buddhas. Each Buddha represents an aspect of enlightened consciousness, represented by symbols.

M u d r â s



Buddhas and Bodisattvas and frequently other deities are shown with their hands forming a number of different ritualized and stylized poses (Mudrâs). They may be holding different objects as well within these poses. Each by itself and in combination with others have specific meanings. Some of the more common ones are depicted below.



Right-Hand Gestures

"Gesture of Protection"

(abhaya) This gesture is also called "Gesture of Fearlessness" or "blessing" or "fearless mudra". Generally, this position is shown with the palms(s) facing outward and the fingers extended upwards. The arm is elevated and slightly bent. You can find abhayamudrâ sometimes also as a left-hand gesture. This mudra is characteristic of Buddha Shakyamuni and Dhyani Buddha Amogasiddhi.



"Gesture of Argument"

(vitarka) Also called "The Gesture of Debate" or "discussion" mudra. In this gesture the tips of thumb and index finger touched forming a circle. All the other fingers are extended upwards. This is the mystic gesture of Taras and Bodhisattvas, often used when explaining the Buddha's teachings.



"Gesture of Witness"

(bhumisparsha) This gesture is also called "touching the earth" mudra or "calling the earth to witness" mudra. The right arm hangs down over the right knee. The hand with the palm turned inward and all the fingers extended downward with the finger touching the lotus throne. The left hand lies on the lap with palm upward. This gesture symbolizes Shakyamunis victory over Mara. The Dhyani Buddha Akshobhya shows the same Mudra.



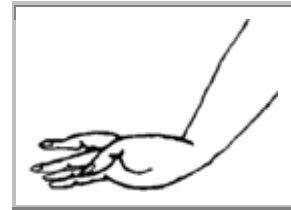
"Gesture of Charity"

(varada) This gesture is also called "Gift bestowing Gesture of Compassion" or "conferring boon" or "grace" mudra. The arm is extended all way down with palm facing outwards. You can find varadamudrâ sometimes also as a left-hand gesture. This is the mudra of Dhyani Buddha Ratnasamhava, Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara and (sometimes) standing Buddha Shakyamuni.



"Gesture of ascetic"

(shramanamudrâ) This gesture is also called renunciation mudra. The hand points downward away from the body as a symbol for renunciation of secular pleasures.



"Gesture of Understanding"

(cincihna) In this mudra, the thumb and index finger grasp a fine object as a grain of truth. This is a symbol for spiritual understanding.



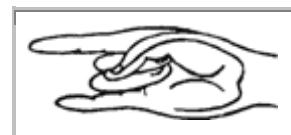
"Gesture of Threatning"

(tarjana) This gesture is also called "warning" mudra. Only the index finger is raised either horizontally or vertically, while the other fingers are locked up in the fist. You can find abhayamudrâ sometimes also as a left-hand gesture. This mudra is characteristic of most of the wrathful deities.



"Gesture of Banishing"

(karana) also called the "The Gesture Warding off Evil", this mudra indicates with the hand stretched out, either horizontally or vertically, palm turned forward. The thumb presses down the middle two fingers (like the horns of a Yak against an enemy), while the index and little fingers extend straight upwards. You can find abhayamudrâ sometimes also as a left-hand gesture. Ekajata and Yama, as well as Vajrapani and Bhutadamaravajrapani are frequently shown in this mudra.



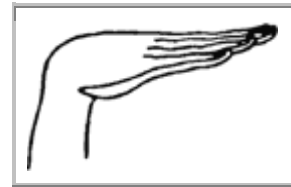
"Gesture Beyond Misery "

(Buddhashramana) Also called the ascetic's Gesture of Renunciation.. In this mudra the right hand is lifted in line with the shoulder, the wrist bends backwards and the fingers and the palm face upwards. The fingers point outward, away from the body. The is the gesture of Vasudhara and Usnishijaya.



"The Performance of Homage Gesture"

(tarpana) The arms are bent at the elbow with hands raised even with shoulders. The fingers are slightly bent with the fingertips extending toward the shoulders. The palms of the hands face downwards. A mudra frequently used by Namasangiti.



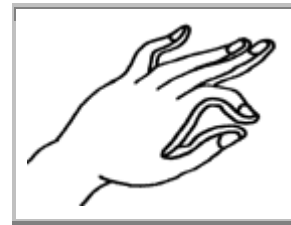
"The Lion Gesture"

(harina) In this mudra the thumb along with the second and third fingers touch the tips, forming a ring. The little and the index fingers extend upwards. Frequently, symbols or emblems are held in this manner. Also denotes rabbit or hare, or elephant.



"Gesture of Knowledge"

(Jnana) The tips of the index finger and the thumb join, forming a circle, the other fingers are extended straight. This mudra is held against the chest, palm towards the chest. In this way, it differs from the vitarka mudra in which the palm faces away from the body.



"Gesture of Discord"

(kartari) This mudra is held with the hands at shoulder level. The thumb and the ring finger (third finger) touch the tips forming a circle. The index and middle finger extend straight resembling rabbits ears or the horns of a deer. Frequently, symbols appear between these two fingers.



Left-Hand Gestures

"Gesture of leisure"

(avakasha) The sitting person is holding the left hand on his/her lap, palm upwards.



"Flower-holding Gesture"

(kataka) A fist-like mudra in which the fingers bend together until the thumb and the index finger meet, forming an open tube. This position is frequently used in icons in which fresh flowers or other venerated objects are inserted.



Both hands Gestures

"Gesture of Meditation"

(dhyana) It is also called Samadhi or Yoga Mudra. Both hands are placed on the lap, right hand on left with fingers fully stretched and the palms facing upwards. This is the characteristic gesture of Buddha Shakyamuni, Dhyani Buddha Amitaba and the Medicine Buddhas.



"Gesture of Meditation with bowl"

The Gesture of Meditation is also shown with a begging bowl, but not with any other kind of bowl.



"Gesture of Teaching"

(dharmacakrapravartana) In this gesture both hands are held against the chest, the left facing inward, covering the right facing outward. The index finger and the thumb of each hand making a circle. It is characteristic of Dhyani Buddha Vairocana. It is also a gesture of hands exhibited by Lord Buddha while preaching the first sermon in Sarnath.



"The Embracing Gesture"

(vajrahûmkara) also called "The Om Sound Gesture". The wrists are crossed at the breast. The hands hold the Vajra (=thunderbolt, male) and Ghanta (= bell, female). The right hand crosses over the left at the wrist, palms facing inwards towards the chest and usually over the heart, symbolizing the union of method and wisdom. This is the gesture of Adi Buddha Vajradara, Samvara and Trailokyavijaya.



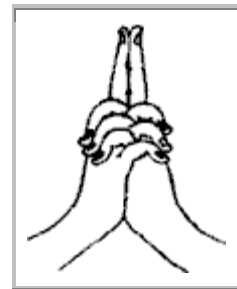
"Gesture of Knowledge Fist"

(vajramudra) The right hand makes a fist, thumb enclosed, index finger extended upward, palm out; the left hand forms a fist, palm inward and encloses the extended index finger. You will find this gesture very often mirror-inverted.



"Gesture of Perfection"

(uttarabodhi) This gesture is also called "best-perfection" mudra. In this position all fingers are intertwined. The index fingers extend straight up and are together. Frequently, Shakyamuni Buddha as liberator of the Nagas presents this mudra



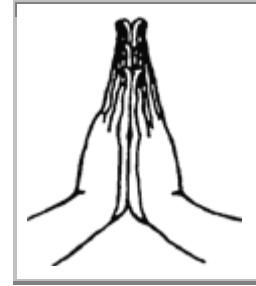
"Gesture of Nectar Sprinkling"

(kshepana) Also called "Sprinkling of Ambrosia" mudra. The two hands join, palm to palm, and the index fingers extend together and usually point downwards toward a vase or container. The other fingers and the thumbs are intertwined.



"Gesture of Praying"

(namaskara or anjali) Also called the simple namaste (prayer) position (means "I bow to you.") In this gesture, the hands are kept close to the chest in devotional attitude with the palms and fingers joined. This is the special gesture of Avalokiteshvara with more than two arms.



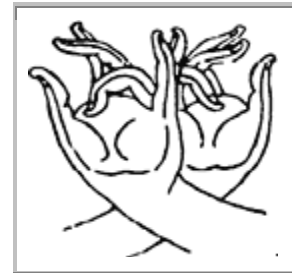
"Gesture of Holding the Jewel"

(manidhara) The hands are arched and hold a wishing jewel, which can not be seen because of its transparency. This is a mudra of Avalokiteshvara, and is often confused with the similar gesture of greeting.



"Warding Off Evil Gesture"

(Bhûtadâmara) Also called "Trailokyavijaya" or awe-inspiring mudra. It shows the hands crossed at the wrist, the right hand over the left hand, palms turned outwards. Usually the two middle fingers are slightly bent and the hands may both hold additional symbols like Vajras and Ghanta. This gesture is frequently seen in the representations of Vajrapani and Bhutadamaravajrapani



The Five Dhyani Buddhas

Heavenly Guides to Spiritual Transformation

The Five Dhyani Buddhas are icons of [Mahayana Buddhism](#). These transcendent Buddhas are visualized in tantric meditation and appear in Buddhist iconography.

The five Buddhas are Aksobhya, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, Ratnasambhava, and Vairocana. Each represents a different aspect of enlightened consciousness to aid in spiritual transformation.

Often in Vajrayana art, they are arranged in a mandala, with Vairocana in the center. The other Buddhas are depicted in each of the four directions (north, south, east, and west).

Each Dhyani Buddha has a specific color and symbol that represent his meanings and the purpose for meditating on him. Mudras, or hand gestures, are also used in Buddhist art to distinguish one Buddha from another and convey the appropriate teaching.

Akshobhya Buddha: "Immovable One"



Akshobhya was a monk who vowed never to feel anger or disgust toward another being. He was immovable in keeping this vow. After striving for a long period, he became a Buddha.

Akshobhya is a heavenly Buddha who reigns over the Eastern paradise, Abhirati. Those who fulfill Akshobhya's vow are reborn in Abhirati and cannot fall back into lower states of consciousness.

It's important to note that the directional 'paradises' are understood to be a state of mind, not physical places.

Depictions of Akshobhya

In Buddhist iconography, Akshobhya is usually blue though sometimes gold. He is most often pictured touching the earth with his right hand. This is the earth-touching mudra, which is the gesture used by the historical Buddha when he asked the earth to bear witness to his enlightenment.

In his left hand, Akshobhya [holds a vajra](#), the symbol of [shunyata](#) -- an absolute reality that is all things and beings, unmanifested. Akshobhya is also associated with the fifth [skandha, consciousness](#).

In Buddhist tantra, evoking Akshobhya in meditation helps overcome anger and hatred.

Amitabha Buddha: "Infinite Light"



Amitabha Buddha, who is also called Amita or Amida Buddha, is probably the best known of the Dhyani Buddhas. In particular, devotion to Amitabha is at the center of [Pure Land Buddhism](#), one of the largest schools of Mahayana Buddhism in Asia.

In a long-ago time, Amitabha was a king who renounced his kingdom to become a monk. Called Dharmakara Bodhisattva, the monk practiced diligently for five eons and realized enlightenment, and became a Buddha.

Amitabha Buddha reigns over Sukhavati (the Western paradise), which is also called the Pure Land. Those reborn in the Pure Land experience the joy of hearing Amitabha teach the dharma until they are ready to enter Nirvana.

Depictions of Amitabha

Amitabha symbolizes mercy and wisdom. He is associated with the third [skandha, that of perception](#). Tantric meditation on Amitabha is an antidote to desire. He is sometimes pictured in between the bodhisattvas [Avalokiteshvara](#) and Mahasthamaprapta.

In Buddhist iconography, Amitabha's hands are most often in a meditation mudra: fingers barely touching and gently folded over the lap with palms facing upward. His red color symbolizes love and compassion, and his symbol is the lotus, representing gentleness and purity.

Amoghasiddhi Buddha: "Almighty Conqueror"



In the "*Bardo Thodol*" -- the "*Tibetan Book of the Dead*" -- Amoghasiddhi Buddha appears to represent the accomplishment of all action. His name means 'Infallible Success' and his consort is the well-known Green Tara, in the 'Noble Deliverer.'

Amoghasiddhi Buddha reigns in the North and is associated with the fourth [skandha](#), volition or mental formations. This can also be interpreted as impulses, which is strongly associated with action. Meditation on Amoghasiddhi Buddha vanquishes envy and jealousy, two often impulsive actions.

Depictions of Amoghasiddhi

Amoghasiddhi is most often depicted in Buddhist iconography as radiating a green light, which is the light of accomplishing wisdom and promoting peace.

His hand gesture is the mudra of fearlessness: his right hand in front of his chest and palm facing outward as if to say 'stop.'

He holds a crossed vajra, also called a *double dorje* or the thunderbolt. This represents accomplishment and fulfillment in all directions.

Ratnasambhava Buddha: "Jewel-Born One"



Ratnasambhava Buddha represents richness. His name translates to "Origin of Jewel" or the "Jewel-Born One." In Buddhism, [the Three Jewels](#) are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and Ratnasambhava is often thought of as the giving Buddha. He reigns in the South and is associated with the second skandha, sensation. Meditation on Ratnasambhava Buddha vanquishes pride and greed, focusing instead on equality.

Depictions of Ratnasambhava

Ratnasambhava Buddha has a yellow color, which symbolizes earth and fertility in Buddhist iconography. He often holds a wish-fulfilling jewel.

He holds his hands in the wish-fulfilling mudra: his right hand facing down and the palm outward, and his left in the mudra of meditation. This symbolizes generosity.

Vairocana Buddha: "Embodiment of Light"



[Vairocana](#) Buddha is sometimes called the primordial Buddha or Supreme Buddha. He is thought to be the embodiment of all the Dhyani Buddhas; also, everything and everywhere, omnipresent and omniscient.

He represents the wisdom of [shunyata](#), or emptiness. Vairocana is considered a personification of the [dharmakaya](#) -- everything, unmanifested, free of characteristics and distinctions.

He is associated with the first [skandha](#), form. Meditation on Vairocana vanquishes ignorance and delusion, leading to wisdom.

Depictions of Vairocana

When the Dhyani Buddhas are pictured together in a mandala, Vairocana is at the center.

Vairocana is white, representing all colors of light and all the Buddhas. His symbol is the [Dharma wheel](#), which, at its most basic, represents the study of the dharma, practice through meditation, and moral discipline.

His hand gesture is known as the Dharmachakra mudra and is often reserved for the iconography of either Vairocana or [the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni](#). The mudra represents the turning of the wheel and places the hands so that the thumbs and index fingers touch at the tips to form a wheel.

An Overview of the Great Buddha

Though it is unknown who built the Great Buddha, its style was clearly influenced by the Buddhist sculpture of the Kei School (Unkei [?-1224] and associated sculptors of Buddhist images), as well as one of the Song Dynasty (960–1279) of China. The Great Buddha is considered a typical example of the style of Kamakura period (1192–1333) Buddhist sculpture.

