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# Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism

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Some Modern Religious Groups and Teachers

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# Mudrās

*Mudrā* in different texts and contexts might mean not only coin (money), fingerring or earring, mark, and sign of recognition but also a method of calculation and a decoration of poetry. Such meanings as “seal” and “sign of recognition” can be found in Kauṭilya’s *Arthaśāstra* (13.4.41; 2nd–3rd cents. CE; Olivelle, 2013, 29, 31). *Mudrā* as the gesture sign will be discussed on the basis of three different kinds of sources:

1. texts on → dance and performance (see also → drama and theatre);
2. texts on iconography (see → images and iconography); and
3. tantric texts (→ Tantras).

## Mudrās in Theatre

According to secondary literature hand gestures play an important role in the performance traditions and in the corresponding manuals (e.g. Satkunaratham, 2010, 603; Pati, 2010, 610), but when it comes to tracing the word *mudrā* in these manuals, it can be surmised that it did not mean gesture.

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a text ascribed to Bharata-muni (c. 3rd cent. CE; Bansat-Boudon, 1992, 25–38), hand gestures serve as an aesthetic enhancer and as a nonverbal means of communication, displayed by the precise position of the fingers in conjunction with the whole body posture, the movement, and the gaze. Chapter 9 of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *Hastābhinaya*, deals with the 67 meaningful gestures (*hastas*; Unni, 2003). These *hastas* constitute but one part of the *āṅgikābhinaya*, or expression by various parts of the body (*aṅga*). The other three aspects of *abhinaya* (acting in theatre) include speech (*vācika*), costume or decor (*āharya*), and demeanor (*sāttvikābhinaya*; Malinar, 2010, 7f.), the latter often identified with emotions transmitted by the actors through actions of physical nature, such as goose bumps or fainting.

The word *mudrā* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* does not mean gesture but rather earring or ring (*NāṭŚā*. 21.17, 25, 35–36). Noteworthy is that → Abhinavagupta, who commented on the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in

his *Abhinavabhārati* (Nagar & Joshi, 1988), also used *hasta* instead of *mudrā* when referring to a hand gesture.

The *Abhinayadarpaṇa* of Nandikeśvara (post-5th cent. CE) is considered to be later than the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Ghosh, 1957, 33–34). The description of the *hastas* and their meanings occupy half of this relatively short text. It follows the *Nāṭyaśāstra* classification of gestures (*asaṃyuta*, *saṃyuta*, and *nṛtta*, which are, respectively, disjoined, or single-hand gestures, joined, or done with both hands, and “dance” gestures), but their numbers and applications differ. Nandikeśvara uses the word *mudrā* only once (*AbhiD*. 162) but in the meaning of coin, that is, describing a gesture in which the fingers are displayed as if holding a coin (*mudrā*). This gesture is again called *hasta*. Thus, all hand gestures without exception are called *hastas* and not *mudrās*. Additionally, the *Abhinayadarpaṇa* includes *āyudhas* – hand gestures that symbolize the weapons (*āyudhas*) wielded by various deities, such as sword, trident, conch, or disk – and hand gestures representing the incarnations (→ *avatāras*) of → Viṣṇu.

*Mudrā* in the sense of gesture sign cannot be found in either of these two texts. It is only later that the term *mudrā* instead of *hasta* is used for hand gesture in theatrical performance. One of the first texts to do so is the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, which was written before the 10th–11th centuries, with some parts as old as the 5th century CE (Rocher, 1986, 103, 250ff.). This text, as if trying to update the material of the non-extant *Nāṭyasūtra* that it cites, introduces in the middle of the text on theatrical performance two chapters on ritual *mudrās* (*ViDhP*. 3.32–33), both of which are tinted by tantric influence.

The anonymous *Hastalakṣaṇadīpikā* (or *Hastamudrādīpikā*; 10th–15th century CE; Sudha, 2001, 202–208; Venu, 2000, 38) seems to not only combine the classical hand gestures of the earlier texts but also include the hand gestures used in the tantric traditions of Kerala. This text uses both of the terms and calls one of the *hastas mudrā* (*mudrākhyā*). It presents the dancer with a vocabulary of almost one thousand signs to be displayed by means of dynamic hand gestures.

## Mudrās in Iconography

Hand positions are either called *hastas* or *mudrās* in iconographical texts. The most popular include boon-giving (*varadamudrā*) and protective gestures (*abhayamudrā*), while others, such as greeting (*añjalimudrā*), threatening (*tarjanīmudrā*), consciousness (*cinmudrā*), and explanation (*vyākhyānamudrā*) are hardly mentioned in iconographical context (Bühnemann, 2013, personal communication). Singular occurrences include *jñānamudrā*, or the “gesture of knowledge,” displayed by some → *yoginīs* in the → *Ṣaṭsāhasrasaṃhitā* (15.129) and the *krodhamudrā*, or the “gesture of anger” represented by a folded fist, displayed by the tantric forms of Gaṇeśa (Bühnemann, 1988, 32, 92). It is far more common for deities to hold objects in their hands.

Similar to the gestures in the context of theatrical performance, the fact that the early tantric and puranic literature calls the objects held by deities *mudrās*, appears to be a later practice. The *pratiṣṭhā* (installation) manuals, such as the *Pratiṣṭhālakṣaṇasārasamuccaya* (Bühnemann, 2004), the *Caturvargacintāmaṇi*, and the *Kṛtyakalpataru*, usually do not use the word *mudrā* to describe the hands of deities.

Gestures denoting objects and weapons of the deities seem to be called *mudrās* only in the tantric texts. In these texts *mudrā* is a technical term applied only to the gestures displayed by a human practitioner in a ritual context. A good example illustrating this is the *Svacchandatantra*, which already existed in some form before the 6th century CE because it is referred to by the → *Brahmayāmala* (39.33) and attained its current form in about the 9th century. The *Svacchandatantra* (2.90–93) mentions the objects that Svachchanda-bhairava (see → Bhairava) holds in his 18 arms, but does not call them *mudrās*, but “weapons” (*āyudhas*). However, in another passage (ch. 14) these very same objects become the gestures to be displayed by the practitioner with bare hands (without the actual objects), and in this case these gestures are called *mudrās*. Showing the objects through gestures, the practitioner allows himself to be pervaded by the qualities or powers of the deity. Such settings appear to be foreign in the context of vedic literature (and it is not surprising that the word *mudrā* does not occur there), but they do resonate with the very core of the tantric ideas. It confirms that *mudrās* in the

sense of agents of transformation most likely originated in the tantric tradition.

## Mudrās in the Tantric Texts and Rituals

The word *mudrā* with the meaning of a ritual gesture displayed by the hands and fingers occurs in the texts that testify to the emergence of the early Śaiva tantric tradition (4th–6th cents.; on the general lines of development of the Śaiva traditions, see Sanderson, 1988, 663). Within this period, the number of occurrences of the word as well as of its various meanings rose tremendously. By the 6th and early 7th centuries, a whole spectrum of tantric meanings of *mudrā* had been formed, and these meanings shall be described below following the differences between the Śaiva texts and the Śākta-oriented texts reflecting the *yoginī* cult. The range of meanings in the tantric texts has been summarized by A. Padoux (1990, 66), who defines *mudrā* as “actions which combine postures or gestures or spiritual elements; as bodily actions which at the same time are moments of religious and/or mystical experience.”

## Mudrās in the Śiva-/Bhairava-Oriented Texts

This group of early Śaiva tantric texts includes the earliest strata of the → Śaiva Siddhānta and the Mantrapīṭha (see below) part of the Mantramārga (Way of *Mantras*; Sanderson, 1988, 669). These are the traditions worshipping Śiva in his Sadāśiva or Bhairava forms, by means of → *mantras*, *mudrās*, and complicated ritual arrangements (→ *maṇḍalas*), aiming to achieve an afterdeath proximity to the deity (often as becoming a *gaṇa*, servant, of the deity), or → liberation.

The display of *mudrās* by the officiant becomes a necessary part of everyday ritual. *Mudrās* here are the attributes that are displayed by the practitioner and that are ascribed to the deity as well, allowing the connection between the two through emulation. The display of *mudrās* also marks the membership of practitioners in the community (see → *sampradāya*). There are sets of five and six *mudrās* (*pañcamudrā* and *ṣaṣṭmudrā*, respectively) approximating a Kāpālīka-like attire. → Kāpālīkas, still belonging to the Atimārga (Sanderson, 1988, 666–669), are represented in medieval Indian

literature looking as horrible as their deities and carrying a set of five *mudrās*, namely, a human skull held in the hand and a *khaṭvāṅga* (a club, often represented as a skull-topped staff) as well as with decorations made of human bone, in particular, earrings, anklets and bracelets. The application of ashes (→ *vibhūti*) from a funeral pyre to the body is the sixth *mudrā* (Lorenzen, 1991, 23). The five *mudrās* in the context of tantric iconography, both Śaiva and Buddhist, are applied to all deities without exception, while the sixth *mudrā* usually characterizes the main deity (always male) of the *maṇḍala*. Ashes are never applied to female deities.

The *mudrās* as gestures affect the psychophysical state of a person and the person's very nature in the context of initiation (*dīkṣā*). Furthermore, they are also used in aggressive or black magic (*ṣaṭkarma*, *abhicāra*). They empower the person through identification with the deity in both kinds of procedures.

The *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā* is an early, if not the earliest, tantric text of the Siddhānta tradition, redacted between the 4th and the 6th century CE (Goodall & Isaacson, 2007). In it, the *mudrā* constitutes a link between the *mantra* of the deity and the body of the practitioner, not only allowing the invocation of a deity but also implying a certain degree of embodiment. The practitioner appears to assume the *sakala* form of a deity – that is, a form with physical shape as opposed to the absolute or aspect-less (*niṣkala*) form of the deity – by means of *mudrās* (*NiśTSa*. 3.4.10–23; 5.16.53–56; 17.11–16). In the last book of the *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā*, a particular *mudrā* is used in the process of yogic death, that is, voluntary leaving the physical body by a yogic procedure, the mastery of which was necessary in early Śaiva traditions. It is called *kṣurikāmudrā* or *kartarimudrā* (knife *mudrā*).

The “knife” is known to be fivefold, affording immediate separation from the body (*utkrānti*). Those who visualize that become liberated and enter Śiva...It [tentatively the principle of awareness] is brought upwards in the body (*utkramayet*) of the practitioner or the bound soul (*paśu*) when joined with “*puruṣa*” [this might refer to the syllable to be added to the *vidyā*, or invocation]. By means of the seed syllable, enlightened by “two fires” [coded *vidyā*], one can destroy trees. By means of “*tattva*” [coded syllable] joined with sound

“*ham*,” which has been previously explained by me, O Beloved, he can cut off the vital breath (*prāṇa*) even in the navel [tentatively *kṛkkāpi*] when joined with the *kartarimudrā*. Having repeated the *vidyā* for one *lakṣa* of times [i.e. 100.000] one achieves success in [lit. by] the practices related to wind and fire elements (*vāyavyāgneyadhāranaiḥ*). One should concentrate upon the water element (*varuṇenanibhandhyante*) if one wants to live long (*NiśTSa*. 5.8.119–123; trans. by author).

This passage demonstrates that as early as the 6th century CE, there was a link between the display of the *mudrās* and particular states related to fundamental transformation in yogic and tantric practice.

The already-mentioned *Svacchandatantra* discusses in chapters 3 and 4 the usage of *mudrās* in the context of initiation. Displayed by the *guru*, these signs are said to have immediate repercussions on the psychophysical state of the disciple (Serbaeva, 2010, 69–72). This aspect becomes particularly important in the goddesses-oriented Vidyāpīṭha (“Throne of the Invocations or *Vidyās*”), the main deities of which are all female, contrary to the Mantrapīṭha (“Throne of the *Mantras*”), where the male forms of Śiva/Bhairava are the center of the cult.

### ***Mudrās* in the *Yoginī* Cult of the Vidyāpīṭha**

A whole new list of *mudrās* was introduced in the Vidyāpīṭha (see below). There are fewer than 10 *mudrās* in the *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā* and about 20 in the *Svacchandatantra*, but they amount to 85 in the → *Brahmayāmala*, and more than 270 in the *Jayadrathayāmala*.

Two interconnected aspects define the goddess-oriented early tantric traditions in relation to *mudrās*. First, *mudrās* are linked to particular psychophysical states often identified with → possession (*stobha*, *āveśa*, etc.; see Smith, 2006). Second, they are related to nonhuman beings such as *yoginīs*, *ḍākinīs*, and so on (Serbaeva, 2006; White, 2009). In comparison with the earlier Śaiva texts, in the *yoginī*-related corpus that constitutes the main body of the Vidyāpīṭha (Sander-son, 1988, 670ff.), new and additional meanings of *mudrās* are to be found.

The *mudrā* as an emblem worn on the body obtained a new, esoteric meaning as soon as the tantric tradition started to be practiced not only

in lonely and secluded places but also in the palaces of kings and in the households of ministers. In this connection, the objects and practices, usually rejected as impure and transgressive by society, are being replaced by *mudrā* equivalents (on the domestication of the tantric traditions, see Sanderson, 1988, 663). The process of “esoterization” did not stop there, and the *mudrās* started to denote, in addition to physical objects and their gesture synonyms, the particular states of consciousness aroused by the display of corresponding *mudrās*. For instance, in chapter 15 of the → *Tantrasadbhāvatāntra* belonging to the Trika tradition (Sanderson, 1988, 672; see also parallels in *Kubjikāmatatantra* 25), the esoteric meanings of such objects as skull, *khaṭvāṅga*, and others are being explained. Whereas in the beginning of the chapter (*TSadT.* 15.23), when the solitary ritual observance is discussed, the *khaṭvāṅga* means a skull-topped staff, further on (*TSadT.* 15. 97–98) in relation to yogic practices, it denotes the whole body of the practitioner and the control over it.

The spontaneous and unlearned display of *mudrās* by a person who is being initiated is a proof (*cihna*, *lakṣaṇa*) of successful initiation (*dīkṣā*). It is a physical sign that the initiate is entering a nondiscursive state of consciousness that transforms the mind and visibly affects the body.

Object *mudrās* are related to particular classes of *yoginīs*, and they are displayed with the utmost precision in the rituals invoking them. Each class of *yoginīs*, *ḍākinīs*, and other such beings has a preference for some particular gestures. Most often, like the *yoginīs* themselves, these gestures are classified in accordance with the weapons held by the *mātrkās*, or the mother-goddesses. For example, Vaiṣṇavī, and other *yoginīs* related to her, prefers the conch and disk *mudrās* (*śaṅkhamudrā* and *cakramudrā*), and this is reflected in the rituals as well as in the iconography. The human-born *yoginīs* mark the doors of their houses with such signs, while in the process of mutual recognition of a *yoginī* and a tantric practitioner (*sādhaka*), which is strictly nonverbal, a whole set of gestures is used. The display of *mudrās* in this case becomes a secret language, which is called *chommā*, used in order to talk with the *yoginīs* and among the initiated. The time, place, and conditions of the next meeting (*melaka* or *melāpa*) can be thus conveyed. Transgressive substances and practices – such as human flesh, alcohol, and ritual intercourse –

are hidden behind innocent-looking words and gestures.

In the → *Brahmayāmala*, *mudrās* are obligatory for a long period of post-initiation practice, play the role of body-related equivalents of *mantras*, and are linked to provoked possession. They open the psychophysical doors to visionary states and to seeing and conversing with the *yoginīs*. The → *Brahmayāmala* is the earliest text that refers to the *Mudrāpīṭha*. The → *Tantras* of the *Mantramārga* are traditionally split in four major groups:

1. *Mudrāpīṭha* (Throne of the *Mudrās*);
2. *Maṅḍalapīṭha* (Throne of the *Maṅḍalas*);
3. *Mantrapīṭha* (Throne of the *Mantras*); and
4. *Vidyāpīṭha* (Throne of the *Invocations*).

The 9th-century *Kubjikāmatatantra* and the 10th-century *Jayadrathayāmala* are said to be drawing on *Mudrāpīṭha* material. The *Jayadrathayāmala* stands apart in the tantric tradition as the most detailed manual on *mudrā* performance.

The *Jayadrathayāmala*, consisting of 24,000 *ślokas*, contains no fewer than 800 occurrences of the word *mudrā* and its derivations. Besides simple gestures, the *mudrās* here also refer to complicated composite practices, which were called *sādhana* or *vrata* (practice or observance) in earlier texts. The longest list of *mudrās* is to be found in chapters 1 and 2 of book 4 (100 or 121 *mudrās* according to two different versions).

The majority of these *mudrās* are linked to the transformation of the practitioner’s physical and cognitive apparatus (body and mind) and thus often to visionary experiences, as exemplified by the *phetkārīṇimudrā*, or the *mudrā* of the jackal’s howling:

Now I will explain the supreme *mudrā* called *phetkārīṇī*, making rise the fruits of all accomplishments. Satisfied with meat, stationed in *śmaśāna*, and holding his observances (*vratas*), one should display this queen of *mudrās* in the middle of the altar (*vedi*). [Otherwise] at the joining of the rivers or in the empty house; if performed in any other place, one makes a mistake in display. (*JY.* 4.2.573–575; trans. by author)

Further on (*JY.* 4.2.576–577) the technicalities of the body position (*āsana*) – and the *mudrā*, consisting in folding the fists near the ears, while the head is facing up – are described. Followed by:



The practitioner should shout terribly in the manner of the jackal, O Beloved, with cruel eyes, cruel expression on the face, he should shout a terrible cry... This is the manner to display *phetkārini*, by which one obtains a meeting (*melāpa*) with the *yoginīs* within two small measures of time (*ghaṭikā*); he will shake terribly the circle of *yoginīs*, and they will stand in front of him under control, as in front of Bhairava. This *mudrā* called *phetkārini*, all-accomplishing to men, has been explained to you. (JY. 4.2.578–583; trans. by author)

When in the *Jayadrathayāmala* the *sādhaka* is trying by means of *mudrās* to enter a special state, the aim is usually a *yoginī*-related transformation. The *sādhaka* closely imitates – one can say, plays the role of – a particular deity, such as a wildly shouting and dancing Bhairava or a blood-thirsty Cāmuṇḍā (see → Kālī) with her dry and shriveled belly, eagerly licking her lips. But such theatre-like performance is often not sufficient in itself to transpose the *sādhaka* into a visionary state. As is the case with some *mudrās*, the required positions and movements might heavily affect the blood circulation and vestibular system of the *sādhaka*.

According to the *Jayadrathayāmala*, hand gestures (*hastas*) of the kind that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and other texts describe are but one dimension of the tantric *mudrā*, which consists in a variety of empowering and consciousness-altering aspects. The *mantras*, the particularly horrible places, the most inauspicious moments of the lunar month, the alcohol, the use of transgressive substances in the context of worship, and the animal and human sacrifices together make the *mudrās* efficient.

Compared to the gestures of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *mudrās* are also performed in the Tantras, but their effects and contexts are quite different. Whereas an actor displaying a gesture in a theatre play is not affected by the emotions and physical aspect accompanying his or her role (Malinar, 2010, 17f.), the *sādhaka* actually turns into a chosen deity, he is transformed by the power of the deity. Furthermore, the audience is different: the display of secret *mudrās* by a *sādhaka* is not intended for human spectators but is aimed at pleasing nonhuman entities, such as *yoginīs* and *dākinīs*, who assemble around the solitary performer and actively participate in his visionary play, which takes place in the most desolate and

secluded places, such as deep forests, caves, abandoned temples, and cremation grounds.

As a result, after some time ranging from minutes to weeks, in the descriptions of *mudrā* practice, the *sādhaka* hears sounds and sees falling meteors, and he feels that the ground under him trembles – these are the usual signs of the coming deities. The *sādhaka* finds himself surrounded by the terribly beautiful *yoginīs*, who sometimes have animal heads. In this situation, the *sādhaka* is to offer them a bloody *argha* – welcoming drink – for the preparation of which he makes a cut on his left arm. Satisfied, the *yoginīs* transform the *sādhaka* into a flying being (*khecara*) or even let the *sādhaka* occupy the central place – that of Bhairava – in their group. The *sādhaka* becomes all powerful and omniscient as the deity is supposed to be.

The *mudrās* in the Vidyāpīṭha text are also used by the practitioners in order to get the necessary materials for their transgressive and violent rituals. Both the *yoginīs* and the *sādhakas* are said to be able to put other beings under control or to drain their blood, often acting from within the very body of the victims. These “vampiric” practices (*raktākaraṣaṇa*; lit. blood extraction) can serve as one of the characteristic features of the Vidyāpīṭha. Interestingly, these feared vampiric practices are similar to the mode of operation to the actions of a *guru* performing *dikṣā*, and both procedures are fivefold and encoded by the same series of five *mudrās*, namely, *karāṅkiṇī*, *krodhini*, *leliḥānā*, *khecari* and *bhairavi*, respectively “skelton”, “anger”, “licking”, “flying” and “terrifying” (Serbaeva, 2010, 78–83). Both a person undergoing initiation as well as a victim of vampiric *yoginīs* or *sādhakas* are supposed to become possessed, “entered” (*āviṣṭa*) by another entity with the help of these *mudrās*. The results are different: in the first case, the person undergoing initiation experiences temporary access to the powers of the deity; in the second case, the *yoginī* or *sādhaka* aims at controlling or “sealing” (*mudraṇa*) the victim, who can then be sacrificed.

The strong emphasis on the transformative aspect and the change in body and consciousness suggest a connection to yogic practices. It seems, however, that there is no straightforward connection to the → Pātāñjala Yoga, since the word *mudrā* is absent in the *Yogasūtra*. Nor does it occur in the *Pāsupatasūtra* (or in the *Pāncārthabhāṣya*, Kauṇḍinya’s commentary on it), which can be

considered the earliest-known Śaiva *yoga* text (see → Pāśupatas).

*Mudrās*, however, do appear in large numbers in the corpus constituted by the Haṭha Yoga texts. They are said to have psychophysical effects, and sexual *mudrās* are also mentioned in these texts. *Khecarīmudrā* is of particular importance for both the tantric traditions and the Haṭha Yoga. One of the physical forms of this *mudrā* is inserting the tongue behind the palate, which leads to a variety of psychophysical results.

J. Mallinson (2007, 17–19) convincingly demonstrates that the *khecarīmudrā*, as a practice, is known from the early texts of the Pāli Canon, but it only started to be termed *mudrā* during the period following the time of coming into fashion of tantric Śaivism texts. Thus, it is most likely that it was the Haṭha Yoga texts that adopted the *mudrās* from the early Vidyāpīṭha texts, and not the other way around, but the Buddhist connections of both corpora are yet to be explored.

## The *Mudrās* as States of Consciousness in the Krama

The Krama tradition distinguishes itself within the Vidyāpīṭha by tending to interpret the *mudrās* as internal yogic states that have little to do with any external practice or physical display. Esoteric practices such as “coming out of the body” and “entering the body of the other being” and the identification with the absolute consciousness are performed with the help of *mudrās*, which are states of awareness and not gestures (*Devīdvīyārḍhaśatikā*, vv. 46–47; *Kramasadbhāvanā* 1.57; 5.88).

In a number of Krama texts, only one *mudrā* is mentioned – it represents the highest state and unites the means of immersion into such a state and the state itself. It’s called *vismayamudrā* (*mudrā* of astonishment) in the *Vātulānāthasūtra* (*sūtra* 13), *vyāpti* (pervasion) in the *Bhavopahāra* (v. 31), and *dhāmamudrā* (*mudrā* of splendor) in Arṇasiṃha’s *Mahānāyaprakāśa* (v. 151), denoting the totality of the universe (*vṛndacakra*). In another *Mahānāyaprakāśa*, published in Trivandrum (7.129–131), this single *mudrā* can be “displayed” by body, speech, and mind. These types of display are related to *aṇava*, *śākta*, and *śāmbhava* – the hierarchically arranged (from the lowest to the highest) types of pervasion (*samāveśa*), standing respectively for the way and

the means to achieve identification with a deity, as described by Abhinavagupta in chapters 1 to 4 of his *Tantrāloka* (see also → *śakti*).

This single *mudrā* is also called *kramamudrā*, which refers to the highest and nondualistic state of consciousness, a state of the absolute awareness brought back from within into the outer aspect of reality, that is, when a yogic state, achieved internally, starts to be reflected with equal power in the external world. B. Bäumer (2007, 136) describes her personal experience of the *kramamudrā* under guidance of Swami → Lakshman Joo, the well-known 20th century-*guru* of → Kashmir Śaivism.

The second specificity of the Krama tradition is the presence of a stable sequence of five *mudrās* – *karāṅkinīmudrā*, *krodhinīmudrā*, *khecarīmudrā*, *lelihanāmudrā*, and *bhairavīmudrā* – encoding not the physical positions but the totality of the universe, with its *cakras*, the five types of *siddhās*, and the states of consciousness in which they dwell (see Arṇasiṃha’s *Mahānāyaprakāśa* 84–104; the Trivandrum *Mahānāyaprakāśa* 7.139–144; and especially *Mahārthamañjarī* v. 37, the structure of which is sorted out in Serbaeva, 2003, 60, 79, app.).

These aspects of the Krama tradition have influenced Kashmiri exegesis of the earlier Tantras, the most important exponents of which – Abhinavagupta and Kṣemarāja – commented on the earlier tantric *mudrās* at great length.

Abhinavagupta uses the word *mudrā* and its derivations 32 times in his *Tantrāloka*. His usage represents the whole spectrum of meanings ascribed to the word within the Vidyāpīṭha in general and the Krama tradition in particular. He uses the term *mudrita* to signify a person “sealed” by the way of *śāmbhava* (*TĀ.* 3.269). *Bhairavīmudrā* as provoking alteration in normal state of consciousness is referred to (*TĀ.* 4.200). *Mudrā* as secret language, *chommā*, is mentioned (*TĀ.* 4.268). *Mudrā* is also used to mean a sexual partner in chapter 15. Similar usage of the word *mudrā* can also be found in the Kaula-based → Śrīvidyā texts and the later Bengali Tantras, often stemming from the Vidyāpīṭha-rooted Kaula, where it in addition means the 4th “m” or the mysterious fourth element of transgressive worship variously identified with parched grain or various drugs. The other “m’s” being flesh (*māṃsa*), fish (*matsya*), alcohol (*madirā*), and intercourse (*maithuna*). Chapter 17 of the *Tantrāloka* deals with the possession-provoking *mudrās* in tantric

*dīkṣā*. The *mudrās* pleasing the *yoginīs* are mentioned in the context of esoteric sexual practice in chapter 29, while chapter 32 explains and illustrates all the aspects of *mudrā*.

According to chapter 32 of the *Tantrāloka* the main meaning of the term is “sign,” which refers to what is to be achieved – namely joy from obtaining the essence of the self by means of the “door” of the body (TĀ. 32.3). The *mudrā* in its *niṣkala*, or absolute, unmanifested form is the deity itself (TĀ. 32.4), while in its manifested form (*sakala*), it exists as a multitude of *mudrās*, but ultimately they are all that same *khecarīmudrā* (TĀ. 32.3–6), because a person being pervaded or possessed by it attracts the *yoginīs* and has all supernatural accomplishments (*siddhis*; TĀ. 32.7).

*Mudrās* are fourfold: they relate to body, hands, speech, and mind (TĀ. 32.9). Although this appears to follow the fourfold classification of the *abhinaya* (see above) of which Abhinavagupta was certainly aware, Jayaratha in his commentary, the *Tantrāloka* *viveka*, glosses these according to early Vidyāpīṭha representation:

1. body: *mudrās* worn on the body as emblems like those of the Kāpālikas (see above);

2. hand: gestures;

3. speech: *mantras*; and

4. those related to mind appear to be perceptible signs manifesting when the practitioner reaches a particular state in *dhyāna* (intuitive, spontaneous visualization; see also Padoux, 1990, 72).

Next Abhinavagupta provides a description of the *khecarīmudrā*. Summarizing *Tantrāloka* 32.10–24:

The physical *āsana*, the quietness of the mind, leads to an altered state, in which the *yogī* ascends within the realms of his subtle body. Imitating the deity by moving the tongue and laughing like Bhairava, he enters the *vyoma* (a particular sort of emptiness) and transcends it. Having visualized himself as Bhairava, he casts off the dual divisions, doubts, and concerns of the world. He is in a state in which he has no consciousness of himself. In unity with the *mantra* he sees all deities within his own body.

Abhinavagupta then deals with the technicalities of the *karaṅkiṇīmudrā*, *javālinīmudrā*, *khacārīmudrā*, and other *sakalamudrās*, which were all listed in the beginning of the chapter. The majority of the *sakalamudrās* are said to induce

*kuṇḍalinī*-like symptoms in the *paśu* – that is, the person to be (but not yet) initiated – or in the *sādhaka*, resulting in particular visionary and tactile experiences, feeling ascend, entering the bodies of the other beings, and so on.

In the end of the chapter, Abhinavagupta returns to the initial definition, explaining that the *mudrā* is the body form that is spontaneously manifested when the practitioner is being pervaded by the circle of *khecarīs* (i.e. *yoginīs*), while all the rest of the *mudrās*, void of such pervasion, are just grimaces (*dehavikriyā*; TĀ. 32.65). The true *mudrā* is thus a “pervasion by awakening” (*bodhāveśa*) of the oneness with one’s own true essence (*svarūpa*; TĀ. 32.66–67).

Abhinavagupta thus overcodes *mudrās* as old Vidyāpīṭha physical techniques of provoked possession into a state of pure and spontaneous immersion into nondual consciousness, which consists in the realization of one’s identity with that very consciousness (see also Müller-Ortega, 2000, 581).

Kṣemarāja in the *Śivasūtravimarṣiṇī* 3.26 cites the lost *Trikasāra*, which compares the meaning of *mudrā* as a state of consciousness with its meaning as Kāpālika emblem worn on the body,

An awakened one (*buddha*) is constantly characterized (*mudrita*) by *mudrās* arising in the body. That supporter of *mudrās* is proclaimed. Indeed the rest are (just) holders of bones. (trans. by Flood, 1993, 243)

## New Field and Ancient Echoes

The possession-provoking *mudrās* from the Śaiva tantric texts constitute a new field, which opened thanks to the comparative approach of A. Sander-son (2001) and his introduction of the Vidyāpīṭha texts into Indology. A. Sanderson’s translations (1986, 178n40; 1995, 58; 2009, 133, 134n311), linking the *mudrās* with what is now classified as part of the domain of “altered states of consciousness” including such aspects as provoked possession and trance, were unprecedented. Before him, many scholars, although writing about the Vidyāpīṭha-related tantric texts, full or colorful description of possession-provoking *mudrās* (e.g. the *Kubjikāmatatantra* in T. Goudriaan’s and A. Schoterman’s edition [1988, introduction] and the *Jayadrathayāmala* in Goshal’s reading)

avoided such questions altogether, leaving the reader with the impression that these tantric texts are only about complicated ritual arrangements without any psychophysical results for the practitioner.

The question of *mudrās* in contemporary tantric practices remains largely unexplored, apart from the brief notes of J. McDaniel (2006, 79–80), who describes the links between the fingers and the deities in the tantric tradition in today's Bengal, demonstrating that her informants have inherited the old link between *mudrās* and trance.

To conclude, the *mudrās*, stemming from the early tantric strata, constitute a part of the mainstream ritual practice in various Hindu traditions from about the 10th century CE onward (probably even earlier), and this is one of the reasons why the term “*mudrā*” was adopted in later texts on theatrical performances and iconography, coexisting with, or even replacing, original terms such as *hasta* and *āyudha*.

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