

MUDRA IN PAN-ASIAN BUDDHISM
PART 1:
PRIMARY MUDRAS OF THE MAJOR
BUDDHAS

John C. Huntington

Mudraa (mudra)

Mudra:

- 1) seal or any instrument used for sealing or stamping, a seal-ring, an image, sign, badge, token (esp. a token or mark of divine attributes impressed upon the body).
- 2) Positions or intertwinings of the fingers, commonly practiced in religious worship, and supposed to possess an occult meaning and magical efficacy.
- 3) The CJK character 印 for “seal” implying a personal distinguishing mark, is also used to translate mudra in to Chinese.

Mudra (mudra)

An inventory of mudras in the greater Indic sphere

Part 1: Gandhara 2nd cent. BCE to 5th cent. CE

Part 2: Mathura region 1st cent. to ca 3 cent. CE

Part 3: The Gupta period ca 3 cent. to ca 500 CE

Part 4: Mudras of the five Jina Buddhas Beginning
about 500 CE

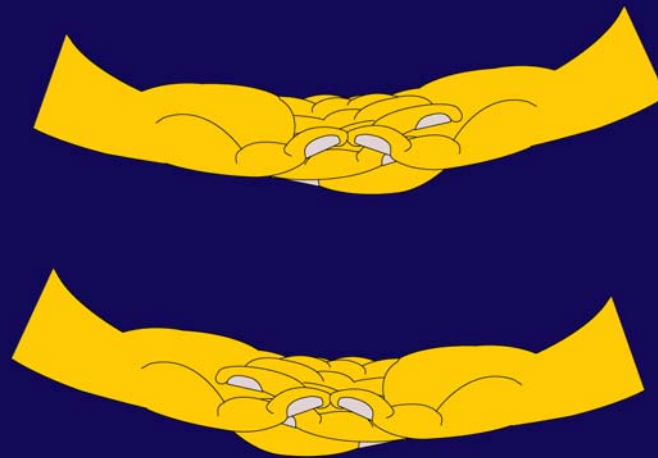
Part 1 Gandhara

Dhyanamudra or the gesture of Meditation

A profoundly Common mudra to the present day, it is made by Shakyamuni, Amitabha, Amitayus, Vairocana and a number of other deities. There are many variants.

Dhyānamudrā

- A. Right hand on top
- B. Left hand on top



Part 1 Gandhara

Dhyanamudra or the gesture of Meditation

Swat valley, Northern
Pakistan, ca. 200-100 BCE

One of the earliest
Buddha images known,
this Gai collection piece
from Swat Valley shows
the awakened one
(Buddha) being
venerated by Indra,
viewer's left and
Brahma, viewer's right.
It depicts the mudra
with the left hand on top
and no particular
positioning of the
fingers.



Part 1 Gandhara

Dhyanamudra or the gesture of meditation (variant)

Swat valley, Northern Pakistan, ca. 200-100 BCE

Similar in date and location to the previous slide, this image has the dhyana mudra depicted with left hand on top and the thumbs raised and pressed together



Part 1 Gandhara

Anjali Mudra the gesture of respectful greeting

Swat valley, Northern Pakistan, ca. 100 BCE

The attendants to the Buddha, Indra to the viewer's right and Brahma to the viewer's left, display a greeting that is still used to the present day. In spite of its "prayer-like" appearance, it is simply a respectful, deferential greeting used in all walks of life in South and Southeast Asia



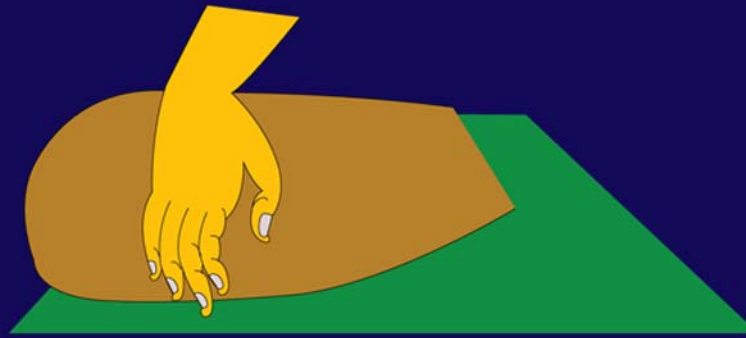
Part 1 Gandhara

Bhumishparsha mudra

A defining moment in Buddhism, the touching of the earth goddess (to call her to witness the right of Siddhartha Gotama to enlightenment) is the transition in the life of the Buddha-to-be to Buddha. It is eternally celebrated at the Mahābodhi temple at Bodhgaya.

Bhūmisparśamudrā Earth touching Gesture

Defining the moment of calling the earth goddess Pṛithivī or Bhū devī to witness to the right to enlightenment by the Buddha to be, Siddhartha Gotama.



Part 1 Gandhara

Swat valley Northern Pakistan, ca. 200 CE (see next page)



Part 1 Gandhara

Peshawar Valley ca. 200-250 CE

This scene of the victory over Mara (Maravijaya) depicts the Buddha-to-be at the moment of overcoming Mara and attaining the right to enlightenment. He does so by calling the Earth goddess Prithivi devi or Bhudevi to witness his past lives of perfecting himself to the point where he no longer has egoistic cravings and delusions. He calls the goddess by simply touching the earth (Bhumisparsha) with his right hand



Part 1 Gandhara

Peshawar Valley ca. 200-250 CE

Teaching Gestures:

Dharmachakraparvartana “putting the wheel of the Dharmic methodologies into motion”

- 1) Giving the old wheel a spin!
- 2) Abhaya mudra (with urna mudra)
- 3) Dharmachakra-parvartana mudra
[or Bodhyangi mudra ?]



Part 1 Gandhara

Gandhara ca. 200 CE

Dharmachakra parvartana: "Setting the wheel of the teachings in motion:" In this version the Buddha seems to be ready to give the wheel a spin.



Abhaya Mudra

Another very early symbolic gesture is the abhaya mudra, “gesture of granting the absence of fear. It is one of the major teaching gestures for Shakyamuni Buddha in Gandharan imagery.

When displaying it, the right hand is raised to somewhere near shoulder level and the palm faces outward. It also figures prominently in several two handed gestures.



Part 1 Gandhara

Gandhara ca. 200 CE

Dharmachakra parvartana: "Setting the wheel of the teachings in motion:".

In this version the Buddha makes what is known as abhaya mudra, a symbolic gesture of fearlessness. It was one of the first teaching gestures and grants the absence of fear of death (and rebirth) through the teaching of the Dharmic methodologies

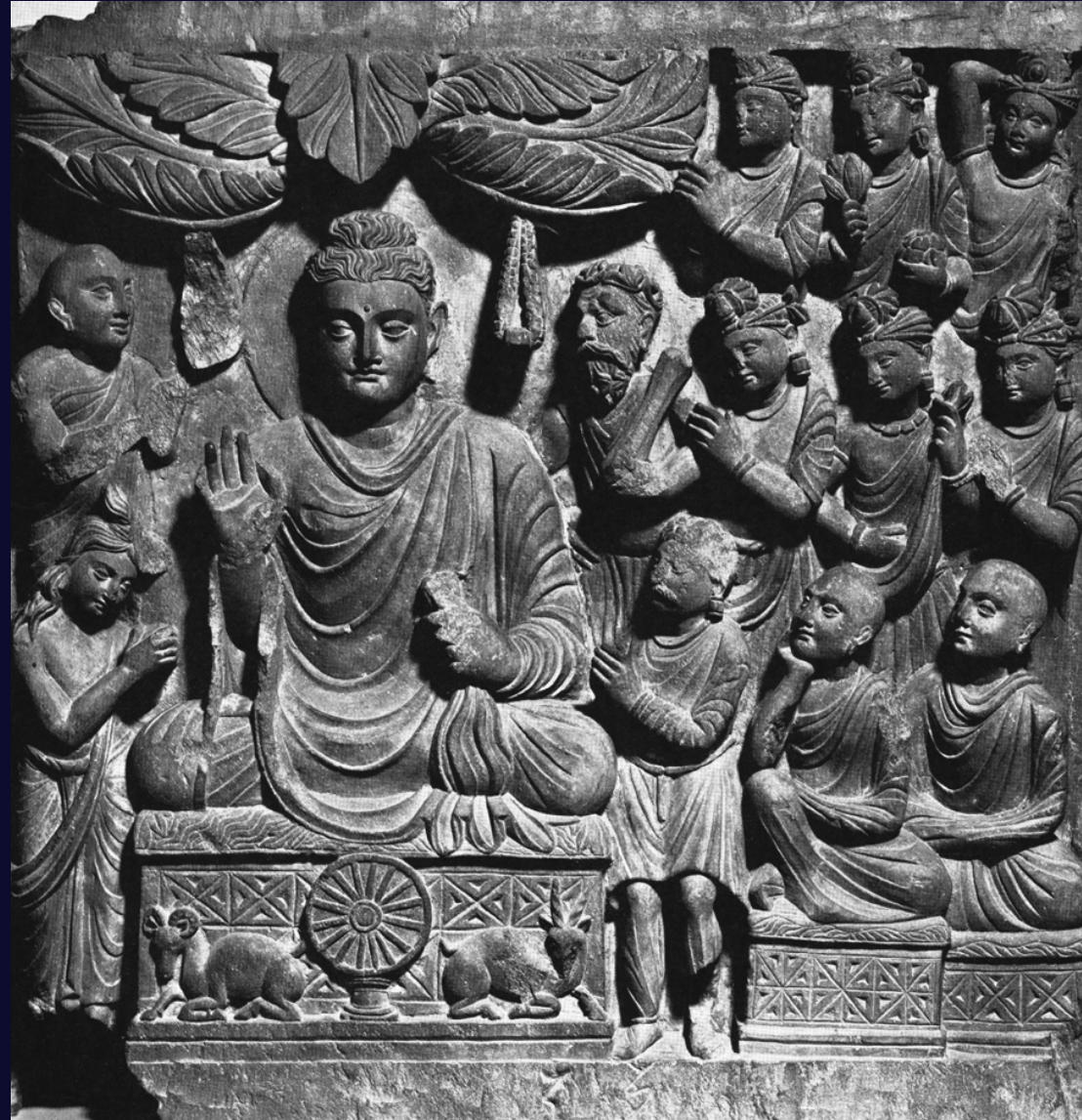


Part 1 Gandhara

Gandhara ca. 200 CE

Vyakarana Mudra: prediction mudra (also visvavyakaran)“universal prediction.”

The combined gesture of the right hand displaying abhaya mudra and the left hand displaying urna (wool) mudra, grasping the hem of the garment, is also known as the prediction of enlightenment. Thus this image has an obvious double meaning, both the first sermon and the prediction of the observer's own enlightenment.

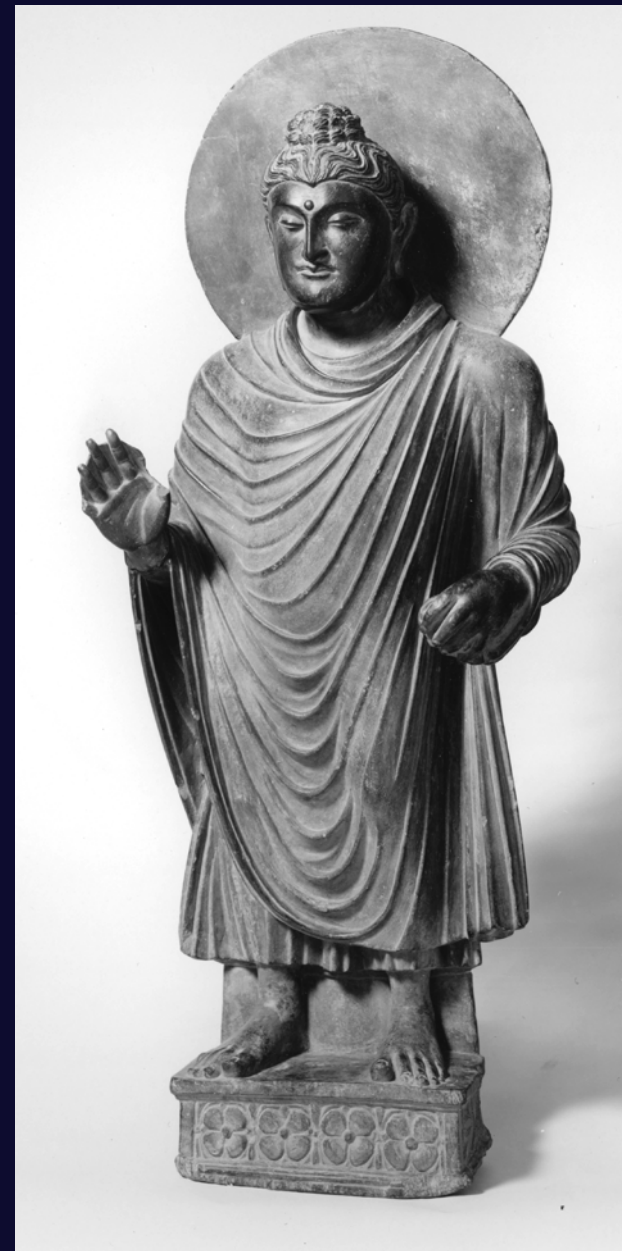


Part 1 Gandhara

Gandhara ca. 75-150 CE

Vyakarana Mudra: prediction mudra
(also visvavyalaran)“universal prediction.”

In standing images such as this one, the prediction aspect is the only implication of the image. The combined gesture of the right hand displaying abhaya mudra and the left hand displaying urna (wool) mudra, grasping the hem of the garment, is the prediction of enlightenment.



Asian Art Museum, San Francisco©

Part 1 Gandhara

Gandhara ca. 75-150 CE

“Dharmachakra [Bodhyangi?]” Mudra.”

Universally, among western scholars, called Dharmachakra mudra, there is no actual documentation of this term for the combined gesture in the Gandharan sphere. The position of the gesture and the shape of the right hand suggest the Bodhyangi (“enlightenment now”) that is still in use to the present day. (C.f. *infra.* and the next page.)



Asian Art Museum, San Francisco©

Part 1 Gandhara

Gandhara ca. 75-150 CE

“Dharmachakra [Bodhyangi?] Mudra.”



As can be seen in these details, unlike any other version of the Dharmachakra mudra, this gesture depicts the right hand grasping the four fingers of the left hand and is, therefore, much more closely related to early versions of the bodhyangi mudra.

Part 2 Mathura

Mathura ca late 2nd- mid 1st cent BCE

This crudely formed Buddha image sits on a Mount Meru throne and is attended by the four Lokapala who are presenting him with begging bowls (which the Buddha will collapse into a single bowl).

His right hand displays abhaya mudra and his left hand position is undistinguishable



Part 2 Mathura
Mathura 2nd CE

This 2nd cent CE image displays the same basic gestures as the previous piece. All known “iconic” images of the Buddha in the Mathura region make this set of gestures.



Part 2 Mathura

Mathura 2nd-3rd CE

Narrative images at Mathura contain the same mudras as we have seen in Gandhara.
abhaya & prediction | prediction | bhumisparsha



Death

| First Sermon

| Descent from Heaven

| Enlightenment

| Birth

Part 2 Mathura

Mathura 2nd-3rd CE

Narrative images at Mathura contain the same mudras as we have seen in Gandhara.

dhyana mudra

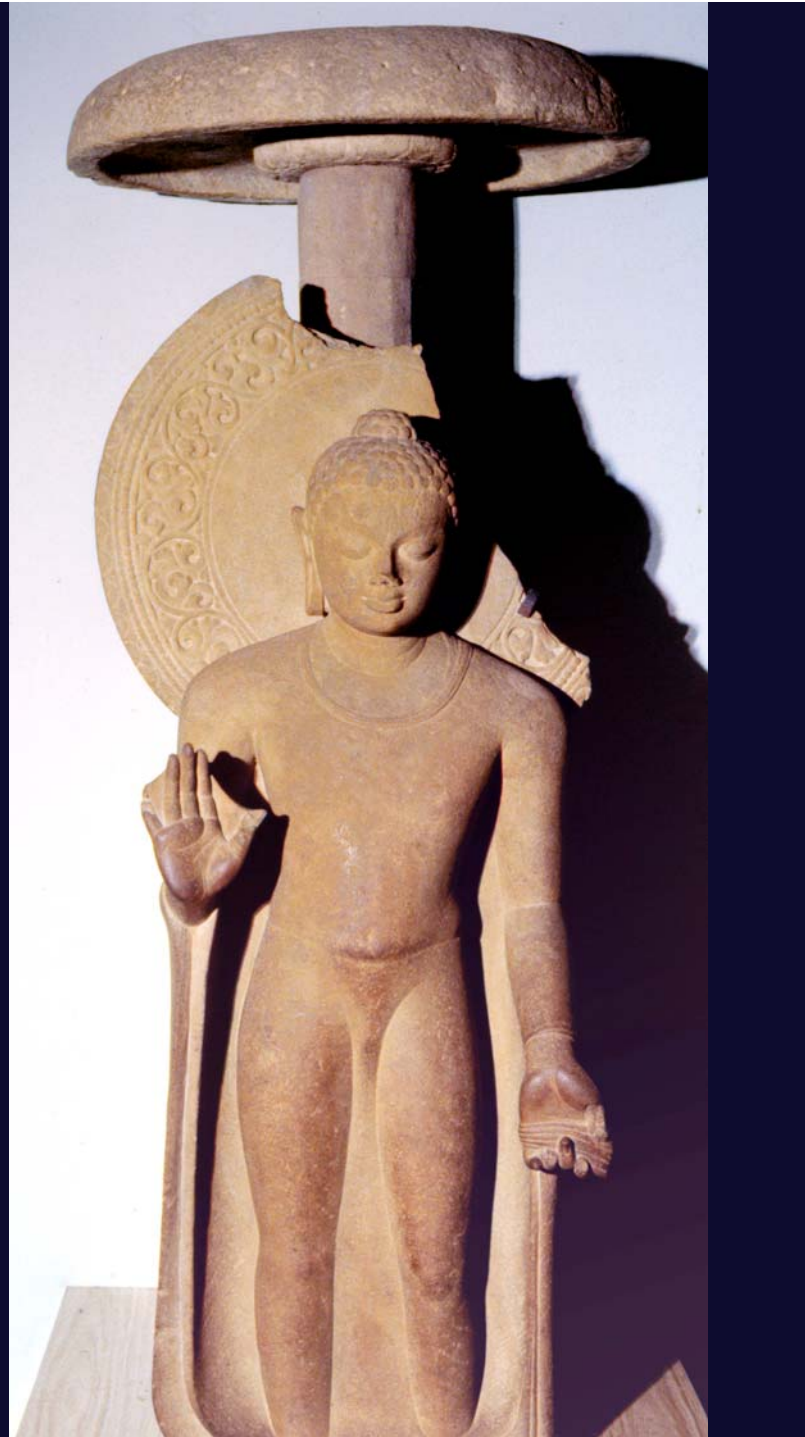
anjali mudra



Visit of Indra to the Buddha meditating in a cave

Part 3 Gupta period
Sarnath School: Vyakarana Mudra

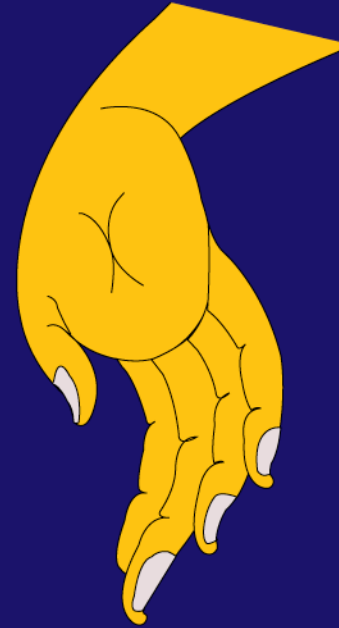
Standing Buddhas making the prediction of enlightenment (vyakarana mudra) are quite common in the Sarnath school of sculpture although very few survive with both hands intact



Part 3 Gupta period
Sarnath School: Varada Mudra

A gesture closely related to abhaya mudra appears in the 4th or 5th century (it may well have existed earlier, but apparently not on stone images). It is varadamudra, the gesture of bestowal, or granting permission.

Varada Mudra
Bestowal



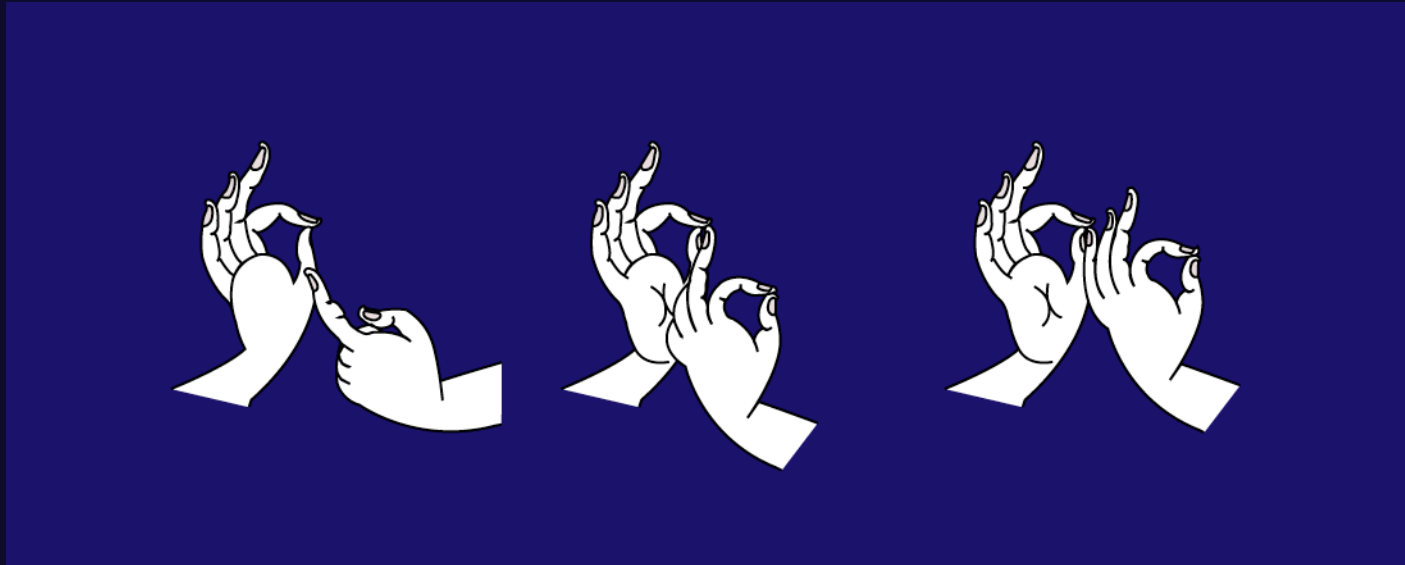
Part 3 Gupta period
Sarnath School: Varada Mudra

A nearly identical type of Buddha image displaying varada mudra and grasping the hem of his robe with his upraised left hand. Although not inscribed, such isolated images are usually Maitreya Buddha predicting enlightenment to practitioners at the time of Ketumati



Part 3 Gupta period

Sarnath School: Dharmachakra mudra



fore finger

middle finger

little finger

There are more than a dozen variants of Dharmachakra mudra. One cluster that seems significant is the variation of which finger of the left hand points to the right hand. If we consider them as markers of the three assemblies of Shakyamuni Buddha, or, since the ring finger gesture does exist albeit very rare, a unknown version of four assemblies, it would make perfect sense.

The 1st assembly = the Avatamsaka sutra in Akanistha

The 2nd assembly = the “first sermon” at the Mrigadava

The 3rd assembly = the esoteric teachings

Part 3 Gupta period
Sarnath School: Dharmachakra mudra

Fore finger
= 1st Assembly



Part 3 Gupta period

Sarnath School: Dharmachakra mudra

Fore finger
= 1st Assembly

Although clearly marked by the presence of the five ascetics at the base of the sculpture as the “first sermon” at Mrigadava , the presence of the two bodhisattvas also clearly indicate that the teaching is taking place in Akanishta Paradise. Thus, this is probably a “dual” image referenceing both the Avatamsaka in Akanishta and the “first sermon.”



Part 3 Gupta period
Sarnath School: Dharmachakra mudra

Middle finger
= 2nd Assembly



Part 3 Gupta period

Sarnath School: Dharmachakra mudra

Middle finger
= 2nd Assembly

In spite of the damage to the forefinger, it is still very clear that it is the middle finger that points to the circle formed by the thumb and forefinger of the right hand

Thus, this is the obvious “first sermon” at the Mrigadava according to the Avatamsaka scheme



Part 3 Gupta period

Ajanta cave 4 Shrine: Dharmachakra mudra

Little finger
= 3rd Assembly



Part 3 Gupta period

Ajanta, Cave 4 Shrine late 5th cent.: Dharmachakra mudra

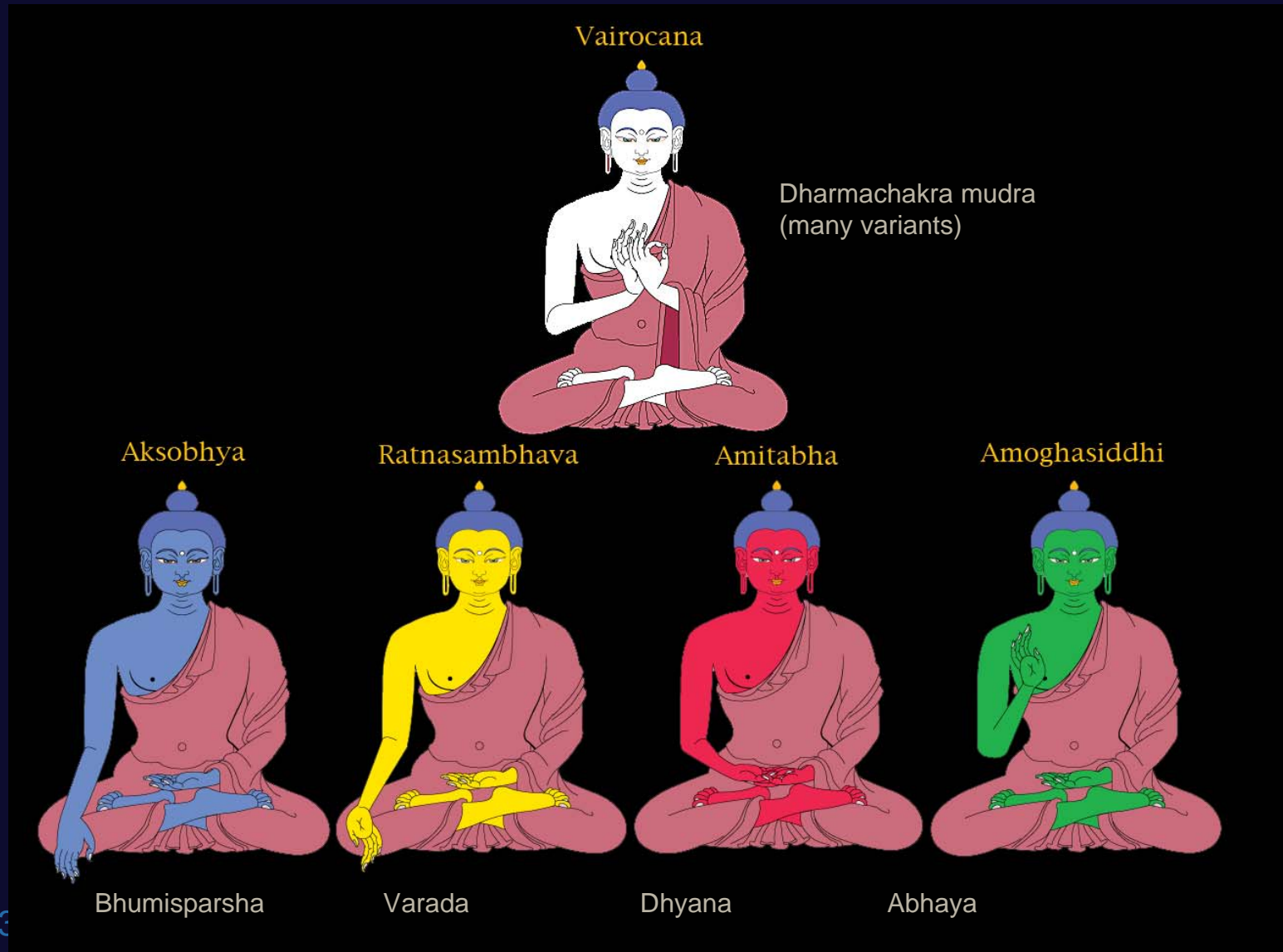
Little finger
= 3rd Assembly

The two attending
Bodhisattvas,
Avalokiteshvara and
Vajrapani, prove that the
place is again
Akanishta. The triad is
from the
*Mahavairocana
Abhisambodhi tantra*
demonstrating that this
is indeed an esoteric
teaching.



Mudra(s) of the Panca Jina Buddhas”.

The mudras of the five Buddhas who manifest the enlightenment of all Samyak Sambodhi Buddhas are very stable through out Buddhist Asia from about the fifth century on.



Mudra(s) of the Panca Jina Buddhas, Individual Jina Buddhas and their variations.

Although the Jina Buddhas have no direct independent existence from each other, a limited amount of variation exists (From the Circle of Bliss Didactics)

Forms of Akshobhya “Unshakable One”

Family Symbol



Symbolic Gesture (*mudra*): "Earth [goddess] touching" (*bhumisparsa mudra*)

Color: Blue

Direction: East/Center

Family (*kula*): Adamantine (*vajra*)

Vehicle (*vahana*): Elephant (*gaja*)

Paradise: "[Land of] Pleasure" (Abhirati)

Passion (*raga*): Wrath [anger] (*krodha*)

Aggregate (*skanda*): Form (*rupa*)

Sense (*ayatana*): Touch (*sparsha*)

Element (*dhatu*): Air (*marut*) and wind (*vayu*)

Akshobhya's transcendental insight is mirror-like insight (*adarsha jnana*), which reflects the world as it is, without egoistic distortion. It is the antidote to the poison of anger, or hatred.

It is through the attainment of Akshobhya's state of being that one achieves the will to seek enlightenment, the "heart-mind" of enlightenment ("*bodhichitta*")



Mudra(s) of the Panca Jina Buddhas, Individual Jina Buddhas and their variations.

Although the Jina Buddhas have no direct independent existence from each other, a limited amount of variation exists (From the Circle of Bliss Didactics)

Forms of Ratnasambhava “Born of the Gem”

Family Symbol



Symbolic Gesture (*mudra*): Bestowal (*vara* or *varada mudra*)

Color: Yellow

Direction: South

Family (*kula*): Treasure [of the Dharma] Gem (*ratna*)

Vehicle (*vahana*): Horse (*ashva*)

Paradise: “Land of Gems” (Ratnavati)

Passion (*raga*): Pride (*abhimana*)

Aggregate (*skanda*): Feelings (*vedana*)

Sense (*ayatana*): Hearing (*shabda* [shruta])

Element (*dhatu*): Fire (*agni* or *tejas*)

Ratnasambhava’s transcendental insight is the equality of all things (*samata jnana*). It is the antidote to pride.

It is through the attainment of Ratnasambhava’s state that one receives the ability to be a mendicant (*bhikshu*).



Mudra(s) of the Panca Jina Buddhas, Individual Jina Buddhas and their variations.

Although the Jina Buddhas have no direct independent existence from each other, a limited amount of variation exists (From the Circle of Bliss Didactics)

Forms of Amitabha “Infinite Light”

Family Symbol



Symbolic Gesture (*mudra*): Meditation (*dhyana mudra*)

Color: Red-orange

Direction: West

Family (*kula*): Lotus [of transcendence] (*dhyana*)
or “Buddhist methodology” (Dharma)

Vehicle (*vahana*): Peacock (*mayura*)

Paradise: “Land of Bliss” (Sukhavati)

Passion (*raga*): Passion (*raga*)

Aggregate (*skanda*): Discernment (*samjna*)

Sense (*ayatana*): Smell (*gandha*)

Element (*dhatu*): water (*apa*)

Amitabha’s transcendental insight is discriminating insight (*pratyaveksha jnana*), the antidote to selfish lust and greed.

It is through the accomplishment of Amitabha’s state that one ultimately attains Enlightenment (*bodhi*).



Mudra(s) of the Panca Jina Buddhas, Individual Jina Buddhas and their variations.

Although the Jina Buddhas have no direct independent existence from each other, a limited amount of variation exists (From the Circle of Bliss Didactics)

Forms of Amoghasiddhi “Unfailing Accomplishment”



Symbolic Gesture (*mudra*): [Teaching the] absence of fear [of death] (*abhaya mudra*)

Color: Green

Direction: North

Family (*kula*): Action [of teaching] (*karma*)

Vehicle (*vahana*): Mythic Raptor [who controls the waters of prosperity] (Garuda)

Paradise: "Land of the Unfailing Ones" (Amoghavati)

Passion (*raga*): Jealousy (*irshya*)

Aggregate (*skanda*): Collected aggregates (*samskara*)

Sense (*ayatana*): Taste (*rasa*)

Element (*dhatu*): Water (*varuna* or *apa*)

Amoghasiddhi's transcendental insight is perfected action (*kriyanushta jnana*). It is the antidote to envy and jealousy.

It is through the accomplishment of Amoghasiddhi's state that one teaches the methodology of attaining enlightenment to others (*bodhi*)



Mudra(s) of the Panca Jina Buddhas, Individual Jina Buddhas and their variations.

Although the Jina Buddhas have no direct independent existence from each other, a limited amount of variation exists (From the Circle of Bliss Didactics)

Forms of Vairochana “Intensely Luminescent”

Family Symbol



Symbolic Gesture (*mudra*): [Turning] the Wheel of the Buddhist teachings (*dharmachakra mudra*)

Color: White

Direction: Center/Zenith

Family (*kula*): State of Enlightenment (Buddha)

Vehicle (*vahana*): Lion (*simha*)

Paradise: “None Superior” (Akanistha)

Passion (*raga*): Delusion & Bewilderment (*moha*)

Aggregate (*skanda*): Consciousness(*vijñana*)

Sense (*ayatana*): Sight (*rupa*)

Element (*dhatu*): Ether (*vyoma*) or Space (*akasha*)

Vairochana’s transcendental insight is full understanding of truth and reality “Insight into the realm of Dharma”(*dharmadhatu jñana*), the final antidote to delusion and ignorance.

It is through the accomplishment of Vairochana’s state that one attains the final cessation and thereby the state of voidness (*shunyata*).

The Panca Jina Buddhas”.

Badriratna Vajracharya
demonstrating his identity
with the Five Jina Buddhas

Vairocana



Aksobhya



Ratnasambhava



Amitabha



Amoghasiddhi



The Panca Jina Buddhas”

Vairocana’s Mudras

One of the most technically difficult Buddha concepts to deal with is Vairocana and Mahavairocana. (“Intensely Luminescent” and “Great Intensely Luminescent”)

In short, he is:

- 1) Shakyamuni “in his Vairochana robes” from the Avatamsaka sutra
- 2) Mahavairochana from the Mahavairocana Abhisambodhi Tantra
- 3) Mahavairocana from the Vajrasekhara tantra
- 4) Sarvavid Vairocana from the Sarvadurgati Parishodana tantra (in which he has ten persona)
- 5a) Dharmadhatu Vagishvara Manjughosha based on the Manjusri Namasangiti
- 5b) Manjusri Namasangiti based on the Manjusri Namasangiti

The Panca Jina Buddhas”

Vairocana’s Mudras

1) Although a late painting this image of Vairochana is identifiable as Vairochana only by inscription. Is also clearly a reference the teaching form of Shakyamuni as seen in the Gupta period.



The Panca Jina Buddhas”

Vairocana’s Mudras

Dharmachakra

1) Although a late painting this image of Vairochana is identifiable as Vairochana only by inscription. Is also clearly a reference the teaching form of Shakyamuni as seen in the Gupta period.

Detail of previous



The Panca Jina Buddhas”

Vairocana’s Mudras

Dhyanamudra

2) Mahavairocana from
the Mahavairocana
Abhisambodhi Tantra



Detail of the center of the
Garbhadhatu mandala Toji
Monastery ©

The Panca Jina Buddhas”

Vairocana’s Mudras

Bodhyangi (Vajramusti)

3) Mahavairocana from the
Vajrasekhara tantra

Bodhyangi as displayed by
Mahavairocana in the
Karma mandala of the
Vajradhatu cycle according
to the tendai shu ca 17th
century
US Private Collection©



The Panca Jina Buddhas”

Vairocana’s Mudras

Bodhyangi etc

4) Sarvavid

Vairocana from the
Sarvadurgati

Parishodana tantra (in
which he has ten
persona)

Alchi, late 11th century
Second floor of the Sum
brtsegs in situ



The Panca Jina Buddhas”

Vairocana’s Mudras
Bodhyangi etc

4) Sarvavid
Vairocana from the
Sarvadurgati
Parishodana tantra
as Vajrini

Alchi, late 11th century
Second floor of the Sum
brtsegs in situ



The Panca Jina Buddhas”

Vairocana’s Mudras
Bodhyangi etc

4) Sarvavid
Vairocana from the
Sarvadurgati
Parishodana tantra
as Vajrasattva



Alchi, late 11th century
Second floor of the Sum
brtsegs in situ

The Panca Jina Buddhas”

Vairocana’s Mudras

Bodhyangi etc

4) Sarvavid

Vairocana from the

Sarvadurgati

Parishodana tantra

as Prajnaparamita



Alchi, late 11th century
Third level of the Sum
brtsegs in situ

The Panca Jina Buddhas”

Vairocana’s Mudras

Bodhyangi etc

4) Sarvavid

Vairocana from the

Sarvadurgati

Parishodana tantra

as Dharmadhatu

Vajrisvara

Manjughosa

Alchi, late 11th century
Third level of the Sum
brtsegs in situ



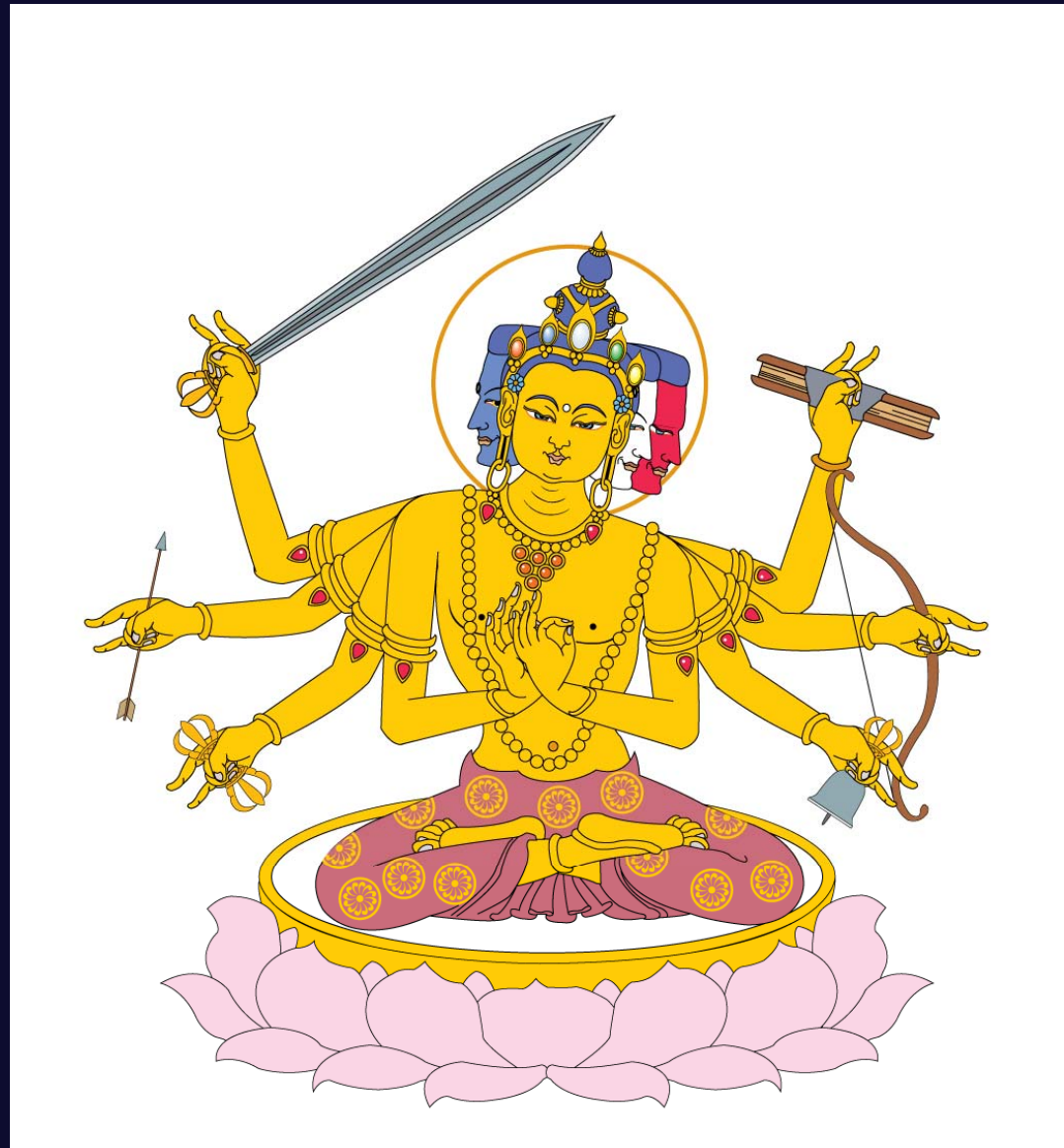
The Panca Jina Buddhas”

Vairocana’s Mudras

Dharmachakra (again)

5a) Dharmadhatu Vagishvara
Manjughoshha based on the
Manjusri Namasangiti

The vidhi to the ritual practice
declare that Manjusri is the
atman (self) of Vairocana



The Panca Jina Buddhas”

Vairocana’s Mudras

Symbols of all the Jinas plus
Vajrasattva

5b) Manjusri Namasangiti based
on the Manjusri Namasangiti.
Each pair of hands demonstrates
one of the Sambhogakaya
Buddhas:

Vairocana

Aksobhya

Ratnasambhava

Amitabha

Amoghasiddhi

And Vajrasattva

Unfortunately we have lost the
“key” to which is which

Sigh! (it is 80 hours of video
tape)

