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The Five Dhyani Mudra in the Visual Arts of Vajrayāna Buddhism

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Abstract

Mudras refer to sacred hand gestures as well as to female tantric deities that are paired with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in Vajrayāna Buddhist art and ritual from the 10th century onward. This development has led to the five principal meditation deities of Vairocana, Aksobhya Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, and Amoghasiddhi being coupled with their corresponding mudras; Dharmachakra, Bhumisparśa, Varada, Dhyana and Abhaya each representing qualities of enlightenment. This paper will explore the ways in which the rich existential symbolism of the Five Dhyani Mudras has influenced the modern and contemporary Asian art, in particular the works of Marcel Duchamp, Bill Viola, Gonkar Gyatso, Ang Tsering Sherpa, Arpana Caur, Zhang Huan and Nilima Sikhrakar. The paper will further address the inner symbolism of the Dhyani Mudras and their potential applications with visual art therapy.

Chapter 1: Introduction on Mudra

Mudra is a non-verbal communication, a mystic sign and a symbolic hand gesture seen along with the body posture. Origin of Mudras can be traced back to Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Jainism. Mudra has been depicted in many iconographic arts and in sacred ritual practices, having its own significant and symbolic meaning.

"Etymologically, Mudra means that which bestows (ra) bliss (mud), that is, the realisation of one's own nature and, through the body, that of the (universal) self" (Sudhi, 1988, pp.57). "The roots in Sanskrit are "Mud" and "Dru". Mud means delight or pleasure, and Dru means to draw forth" (Dunn, 2013, pp. 2).

"Mudra is a method of citta-bhavana, or cultivating a specific state of mind" (Mcgonigal, 2008, pp.6). Researchers have concluded that the Mudras act directly on the brain and mind. Mudra helps us to synthesize the two sides of our brain by acting directly on the nervous system. Hence, Mudras are mystic signs made by the particular position of hand and fingers, which plays a vital role in esoteric Buddhism. Some of the Mudras can be shown in one hand such as Abhaya, Varada, Gyan, etc. while the others require both the hands such as Anjali, Dharmachakra, etc (Sudhi, 1988, p. 54, 55, 68).

The two hands represent the mandalas of the two worlds, the womb world and the diamond world. The two hands joined are also believed to represent the union of the world of Beings (left hand) and the world of the Buddha (right hand) (McArthur, 2004, pp.117).

References of Mudras in Tantric Buddhism can be found in Gherand Samhiti and Guhyasamaja Tantra (also known as a Secret Conclave). According to the Gherand Samhiti and the Vajrayāna Tantra, mudras are capable of bestowing great power and psychic abilities called "Siddhies". Hence, the monks practice mudras which symbolize forces or divine manifestation in their meditation. Mudras are considered to create forces and to invoke the deity. They are used routinely by the monks in their ritual practices of worship, incantation and concentration (Moharana, 2001, pp. 6, 7, & 9).

Mudra is also used as a sakti (cosmic woman - symbol), with whom the male symbol (guru) or Bodhisattva will unite during cakra puja (Lysebeth, 2001, p.275).

The mid-7th Century C.E. Mahavairocana-sutra, chapter IX makes note of over hundred and thirty separate mudras: thirty-one for the Great Buddhas, fifty-seven for the great deities, and forty-five for others. In Chapter XIV it is indicated that the nine esoteric mudras correspond to the five Buddhas of Wisdom (Dhyani) and to their four great acolytes (Frederic, 1995, pp.40).

According to Fredrick W. Bunce (2005), in "Mudras in Buddhist and Hindu Practices" states seven hundred and fifteen mudras including hasta (dance) mudras, Buddhist mudras and Hindu mudras. But, Fredrick has also mentioned that compilation of these mudras may be an error and invites any correction or addition. In addition, Fredrick has also mentioned that there are 40 mudras established during the reign of Rama III as being acceptable for the depiction of images of The Lord Buddha (p. Intro: xxix).

In meditation, Mudra is used for awakening of the chakra for spiritual benefits. In dance, it is used for the expression of particular emotions or situation. In Ayurveda and yoga, mudras have been used for therapeutic purposes. (Hirschi, 2000, p. 31). Hence, Mudra is used for the balancing of five elements inside of the body for physical and spiritual benefits. Five fingers have characteristic of five elements and each of these five elements serves a specific and important function within the body.

The five fingers of the hands representing five elements are as follows:

1. The Thumb symbolises the Fire
2. The Forefinger symbolises the Wind
3. The Middle Finger symbolises the Ether
4. The Ring Finger symbolises the Earth
5. The Little or small Finger symbolises the Water (Rao, p. 16, 19, 28 & 29)

Colors in Mudra

Colors influence our mind and our lives on every level. In color therapy, various shades of colors are specifically applied to regenerate the organs and glands, as well as to activate the processes of elimination, respiration, and circulation. Colors also influence our moods and every type of mental activity. Basically, there are no bad colors; in every aura has its own color in our energy body. While practicing mudra one should visualize a color or concentrate on the color of an object (Hirschi, 2000, p. 18, 19).

Classification of Mudras in Buddhist Art

The traditional classification in Buddhist art recognizes two categories of Mudras:

1. Formless – without accessories such as characteristic ritual implements or symbols
2. With Forms – with accessories

Formless Mudras are further divided into three classes:

1. Mudras of the Great Buddhas
2. Mudras used chiefly by minor deities and Bodhisattva
3. Mudra of the wrathful forces (Frederic, 1995, p. 39, 40)

Five Dhyani Mudra

The theory of five Dhyani Buddha was first time introduced in The Guhyasamaja Tantra (Moharana, 2001, p. 8).

It emerged along with the idea of Vajrasattva in Vajrayāna, the sub-sect of Mahayana Buddhism. Vajrayāna literally means “adamantine path or vehicle”, but technically means “Sunya Vehicle”, where sunya is used in a special sense to represent vajra. The Vajrasattva was regarded as the primal enlightened one, also known as the Adi – Buddha (Moharana, 2001, pp. 31).

The Guhyasamaja Tantra gives instruction for attaining salvation as well as taught to satisfy the popular needs by prescribing a number of mantra (Charm), mudra (mystic signs), mandala (circles of deities), and so forth, and by showing the way of attaining success in all normal human activities, including victory over rivals by miraculous means (Lokeswarananda, 1989, pp. 91, 94).

Adi – Buddha is in possessions of five kinds of knowledge which are like five attributes of the lord. From these five attributes proceed five kinds of dhyana (meditation) and there emanate five deities who are known as the five Dhyani- All the five Dhyani Buddhas are said to have originated from Vajrasattva himself” (Moharana, 2001, pp. 31).

Dr. Benoytosh Bhattacharyya (1958), in his book "The Indian Buddhist Iconography" mentioned that Alexander Csoma de Koros places the introduction of this conception of Adi Buddha in central Asia in the latter half of the 10th century. According to him, it originated at Nalanda University in the beginning of the 10th century (p. 43).

The Dhyani Buddhas, like the skandhas (aggregates) are considered eternal and they manifest themselves without passing through the intermediate stage of Bodhisattva or in other words, without depending upon others for their origin. These five skandhas, according to the Guhyasamaja-tantra, are presided over the Five Dhyani-Buddhas (Moharana, 2001, p. 31, 32). They are Vairocana (skt. Rupa) - Form, Akshobhaya (skt. Vijnana) - Ego-Consciousness, Ratnasambhava (skt. Vedana) - Feeling, Amitabha (skt. Samjna) - Perception and, Amogasiddhi (skt. Samskara) - Impression (Lokeswarananda, 1989, p. 92). According to Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedia (2015), the term "dhyani-buddha" was first recorded in English by the British Resident in Nepal, Brian Hodgson in the early 19th century, and is unattested in any surviving traditional primary sources.

Chapter 2: Visual Representations of Mudras in Vajrayāna Buddhism

This Chapter introduces the Five Dhyani Buddha and their significant uses of Mudra in Painting. Significance study of iconography and uses of visual images painted in Buddhist religion for worship, particularly emphasising on their colors, forms, elements and symbolic meaning. Mudra plays an important role in denoting each dhyani Buddha.

Abhaya mudra was the first mudra which was seen depicted in a gold coin developed under the reign of King Kanishk, Kushan Dynasty (C.AD 120-62), Fig. 1, dated around 1st century AD. Until then, Buddha was not represented in

human forms in the art. Only symbols to worship Buddha like – empty throne, a lotus, a footprint, etc, in the initial phase of when Hinayana Buddhism was dominant (Frederic, 1995, p. 22, 23).



Fig. 1: Kanishka – BODDO coin, Gold, Shah-ji-Dheri reliquary, Peshwar, Pakistan, London: British Museum (Sengupta, 2013, p. 63).

Basically, there are three types of paintings in Buddhist art where depiction of mudras can be seen:

Murals in Monasteries



Fig. 2: Dharmachakra Mudra, Ajanta Caves (Courtesy: Dr. Soumya Manjunath Chavan)

One of the earliest surviving paintings in Buddhist art are found in the caves of Ajanta, created in the fifth and sixth centuries in Gupta period (Pande, 2008, p. 121). Artists have depicted mudras in wall paintings and sculpture. For example, cave no. II, Fig. 2, Buddha is seen repeatedly in Dharmachakra Mudra. The purpose of art in Ajanta wall paintings was to sharpen the perception of a state of conscious mind achieved through meditation or ecstatic vision. The aesthetics of wall paintings are similar to the yogic disciplines practiced to attain higher consciousness. Artist who have created the art of the caves have put together the imitation of the visualization of their dreams.



Fig. 3: a. Prajnaparamita Sutra Manuscript, Cover, (Ohler, 2010).



Fig. 3: (b.) Prajnaparamita Sutra Manuscript, First page. (Ohler, 2010).

Illustrations for manuscript and their covers

Bhumisparsha Mudra in fig. 3 (a. & b.), seen represented by historical Buddha in the folios of Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sanskrit palm-leaf manuscript dated around early 12th century. Fig. 3 (a.), border of the manuscript cover contains the celestial Buddhas. Prajnaparamita in the central, right seated in Bhumisparsha mudra is historical Buddha and on left is Vignantaka. (Ohler, 2010).

Thang



Fig. 4: Thangka Painting, Courtesy: Anima Sikhrakar

Being icon painting, Thangka are bound by iconography, conventions and auspicious subjects matter and motifs (Sharma, 1994, p. 103). Both historical and transcendental Buddhas are generally represented as idealized, but essential human monks with supra-normal characteristics, such as a cranial bump, elongated earlobes and an auspicious urna (dot) in the middle of the forehead (Pal, 1990, p. 41). Fig 4, the postures (Asana) may vary according to the characteristic and nature of the deity. Generally, in lotus posture (Padmasana) are seen while depicting the feature of Five Dhyani Buddha (Frederic, 1995, p.55).

Five Dhyani Mudra: Bylakuppe Thangka Wall Painting Study

Kyabje Penor Rinpoche in 1963 established a monastery in Bylakuppe for Tibetan refugees. The monastery is located in Mysore district, Karnataka, India and is the spiritual place of worship. The walls and ceilings of the monasteries are richly painted with murals. Murals are painted in Thangka style, depicting celestial beings, Bodhisattvas, wrathful deities, Tara, Mythology of tantric Buddhism as subject and many more. Some Paintings depicts the lifestyle of the Buddha and his spiritual journey and others depicts the wrath of the Buddha fight among the gods and demons. And also, the depictions of the cultural background which are highly influenced by the Tantric Buddhism.

- ❖ Interview with Ajith, Thubten Lekshey Ling Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Centre, a city centre of Golden Monastery, Bylakuppe, (all pictures taken at Bylakuppe)- Ajith, works with “Thubten Lekshey Ling

Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Centre, Ulsoor road, Bangalore, India”, he speaks about thangka painting and Buddhism in brief. He says:

Aim of Buddhism is to remove veil of ignorance and negative emotions in spiritual path. Mudra practice is a branch of the tantric Buddhism. The main practice is to cultivate wisdom and compassion towards all beings. To achieve this, in tantric Buddhism, after the initiation from the enlightened master, one may evoke the primordial perfection through meditation involving visualization and mantra practice. To do so, one should have right knowledge and right practice. In this whole process, hand mudras help in communicating certain experience, and thus to stabilize certain state of mind that has been generated through meditation.

Ajith also gives an example stating that when Buddha is visualized in the Bhumisparsa (earth-touching) Mudra, it conveys of being unshaken by circumstances and being able to view the world with perfect evenness rooted in clear wisdom. Similarly, when a Buddha is visualized with Varada mudra (gesture of giving), it invokes the experience of bringing benefit to all beings with loving kindness and equanimity. Such experiences stabilize and enrich the main practice of meditation. Therefore, Mudra practices in visual arts enhance the meditative experience.

Ajith says:

Thangka artist practice the path of the spiritual experience through the thangka art as an expression. Artist themselves were traditionally practitioners of the path. He quotes, “the crucial points of a thangka are not coming from the creativity of the artists instead the mudras, hand emblems, ornaments, posture, colours etc., are as prescribed in specific tantric practices - always revealed by enlightened Buddhas. And, each has certain meaning that the practitioner should be aware about. However, even with all these crucial points, the power to communicate certain experience, in other words, the life of thangka, comes with the creativity of the artist. When an artist who with experience on the practice of a particular deity does the painting that makes thangka special; then it really becomes a strong support for others to rely on this for visualizations.

Hence, the traditional thangka practitioner followed certain rules of Tantric Buddhism.

❖ Interview with Thangka Artist Konchok Dhondup, Bylakuppe (Fig.5)



Fig. 5: Artist Konchok Dhondup at his Studio, 2016.

Born in 1976 in Tibet, now lives and works in Tibetan Camp, Bylakuppe, Karnataka, India. Dhondup has been practicing thangka art for 35 years, out of which he has spent 25 years practicing in India. He has taught many national and international students. At present, he is one of the senior most thangka artists in Bylakuppe. In conversation about discipline in thangka painting, he quotes:

One should have a good heart and mind to become an artist to create the work. Even the teacher should have a good heart to teach the student and be useful for others without any bad intention. Then, the real work of art emerges and is appreciated.

In Fig. 6, painting done by two different artists, he explains that every art created by an individual artist has its own essence and meaning to it.



Fig. 6: Artist Konchok Dhondup Students work, 2016. Most of the wall paintings inside Fig. 7 & 8, "Padmasambhava Buddhist Vihara" have five dhyani mudras. This research focused on the brief study of the mudra and its meaning with the colors in visual arts. Below are the five Dhyani Buddhas Mudras depicted at Padmasambhava Buddhist Vihar, Golden Temple Monastery, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka (arranged in order according to Newari Buddhist, Nepal):



Fig. 7: Padmasambhava Buddhist Vihara, Golden Temple, Bylakuppe, 2016.



Fig. 8: Paintings inside Padmasambhava Buddhist Vihara, 2016

Dharmachakra Mudra – Vairocana (Tibetan: “Namnang”)



Fig. 9: Dharmachakra Mudra

Dharmachakra Mudra represents upholding of the dharma beyond space and time, in Yogic language, the sanatan dharma; the eternal laws. In fig. 9, the right hand is held in a vitarkamudra like gesture, in front of the chest. The left hand clutches the hem of the robe between the thumb and the first three fingers, while the fourth, or little finger, points to the circle formed by the touching fingers of the right hand. The circle represents the Wheel of Dharma, or in metaphysical terms, the union of method and wisdom. The little finger of the left hand lies alongside the thumb of the right hand and the tips of the two digits are capped by the forefingers of the proper right hand. The three fingers come together at precisely the point where the conceptual centre is the seat of the heart-mind, the core essence that transforms and individual into a Buddha (Huntington, 2000, pp 4).

These fingers are themselves rich in symbolic significance: the three extended fingers of the right hand represent the three vehicles of the Buddha's teaching, namely:

- The middle finger represents the 'hearers' of the teachings
- The index finger represents the 'realizes' of the teachings
- 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
- 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 symbolizes the historical moment of the Buddha, the first sermon after his enlightenment in the Deer Park at Sarnath, denoting setting motion of the wheel of the teaching of the Dharma (2000-2016, pp. 6).

Symbolic Chart:

English Name	Family	Consort	Delusion	Enlightenment Mind	Medical / Physical
Illuminating	Buddha	White Tara	Ignorance, Delusion	All-encompassing Dharmadatu wisdom	Energy Channels

Direction	Attachments	Seed syllable	Vehicle	Color	Symbol	Sense
Central	Form	Om	Dragon	White	Wheel	Sight

Chakra	Season	Elements	Mantra
Crown	n/a	Space	Om Vairocana Hum!

Bhumisparsa Mudra – Aksobhya (Tibetan: “Mikyopa”)



Fig. 1: Bhumisparsa Mudra

Five Dhyani Mudra in the Visual Arts of Vajrayana Buddhism

Bhumisparsa literally means earth witness or touching the earth. It is in this posture that Shakyamuni overcame the obstructions of Mara while meditating on Truth. It denotes that incident in the life of Buddha in which he called the Mother Earth as witness to his virtues due to which he remained unmoved even when the wicked Mara and his beautiful heavenly damsels, the daughters of Mara, tried to disturb his resolve when he was meditating under the bodhi tree. In this posture his right hand dangles in front of his right crossed leg and touches the lotus seat padmasana or the earth with palm open and facing inward (Wisdom Library, 2008, pp. 1).

As shown in Fig. 10:

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 and complemented by the left hand – which is held flat in the lap in the Dhyana mudra of meditation, symbolizes the union method and wisdom, samasara and nirvana, and also the realizations of the conventional and ultimate truths. Aksobhya, the mirror to our souls, is believed to transform the human failing of anger into a clear mirror-like wisdom (Wisdom Library, 2008, pp. 1).

Symbolic Chart:

English Name	Family	Consort	Delusion	Enlightenment Mind	Medical / Physical
Unshakable	Vajra	Locana	Anger - hatred	Mirror-like Wisdom	Blood flow

Direction	Attachments	Seed syllable	Vehicle	Color	Symbol	Sense
East	Consciousness	Hum	Elephant	Blue	Sceptic / Vajra	Sound

Chakra	Season	Elements	Mantra
Heart	Winter	Water	Om Akshobhya Hum !

Varada Mudra – Ratnasambhava (Tibetan: “Gyalwa Rinjung”)



Fig. 11: Varada Mudra

Varada 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 (Tortora, 2000-2016, pp.5):

1. Generosity
2. Morality
3. Patience
4. Effort and
5. Meditative Concentration

Ratnasambhava means ‘Born from the Jewel’, ratna signifying jewel in Sanskrit – ‘The Gem of the Buddha’ (Kumar, 2003, para. 25). Ratnasambhava is believed to transform the negative human trait of pride into the wisdom of sameness (Kumar, 2003, para. 26). This wisdom brings out the common features of human experience and makes us see the common humanity underlying all men and women. Fig. 11 shows that this mudra is rarely used alone, but usually in combination with another made with the right hand, often the Abhaya Mudra. This combination of Abhaya and Varada mudra is called Segan Semui – in or Yogan Semui- in, in Japan (Tortora, 2000-2016, para.5). Ratnasambhava first appears, along with Amoghasiddhi, in the Sarvatathāgata Tattvasaṃgraha

Tantra in the late 7th or early 8th century (Jayarava, 2008, para.3). Symbolic Chart:

English Name	Family	Consort	Delusion	Enlightenment Mind	Medical / Physical
Jewel born	Ratna	Mamaki	Pride, Miserliness	Wisdom of equality	Flesh

Direction	Attachments	Seed syllable	Vehicle	Color	Symbol	Sense
South	Feeling	Tram	Lion	Gold / Yellow	Jewel	Smell

Chakra	Season	Elements	Mantra
Abdomen	Spring	Earth	Om Ratnasambhava Tram!

Dhyan Mudra – Amitabha (Tibetan: “opame”)

The Dhyan Mudra (fig.12) 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 (Kumar, 2001, pp. 15).

With both 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 (Tortora, 2000-2016, pp.12).

Symbolic Chart:

English Name	Family	Consort	Delusion	Enlightenment Mind	Medical /Physical
Infinite light	Padma	Pandara	Desire, Lust	Discriminating Wisdom	Body heat

Direction	Attachments	Seed syllable	Vehicle	Color	Symbol	Sense
West	Perception	Hrih	Peacock	Red	Lotus	Taste

Chakra	Season	Elements	Mantra
Throat	Summer	Fire	Om Amitabha Hrih!



Fig. 12: Dhyana Mudra

Abhaya Mudra – Amoghasiddhi (Tibetan: “Donyo drub pa ”)

The Abhya mudra is displayed by the fifth Dhyani Buddha, Amoghasiddhi, who is also the Lord of Karma in the Buddhist pantheon. Amoghasiddhi helps in overcoming the delusion of jealousy. By meditation on him, the delusion of jealousy is transformed into the wisdom of accomplishment. This transformation is hence the primary function of the Abhya Mudra (Hays, 2014, pp. 51).



Fig. 13: Abhaya Mudra

Abhaya in Sanskrit means fearlessness. In another word, it means gesture for promising protection. Thus, this mudra symbolizes protection, peace and the dispelling of fear. Fig. 13, 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’). This mudra has been used in the prehistoric times as a sign of good intention (Tortora, 2000 - 2016, pp. 15).

According to the legend of the Buddhist tradition:

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 losing a rampaging elephant into the Buddha’s path. But as the elephant approached him, Buddha displayed the Abhya mudra, which immediately calmed the animal, therefore indicating the absence of fear (Tortora, 2000 - 2016, pp. 17).

Symbolic Chart:

English Name	Family	Consort	Delusion	Enlightenment Mind	Medical / Physical
Conqueror	Karma	Green Tara	Jealousy fear	All-accomplishing wisdom	Inner wind

Direction	Attachments	Seed syllable	Vehicle	Color	Symbol	Sense
North	Mental formation,	Ah	Garuda	Green	Double Vajra	Touch

	Concept					
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Chakra	Season	Elements	Mantra
Root	Autumn	Air/Wind	Om Amoghasiddhi An!

The actual color representation by artists of the five dhyanī Buddhas and its mudras are not seen in the painting inside Padmasambhava Buddhist Vihara. Abhaya Mudra is replaced by yellow color, Bhūmisparsa Mudra in yellow and Varada Mudra in blue.

Chapter 3: Influence of Five Dhyanī Mudras on Contemporary Visual Art

Global influence and search for identity in the field of visual arts gave the opportunity for artist to conceptualize their work. The present paper focuses on the five dhyanī mudras and its application and influence in the contemporary art. There are several artists who are expressing the essence of mudras in their art work. In west, Marcel Duchamp and Bill Viola is the finest example in contemporary art whose conceptual works have been profoundly influenced by Buddhism. In east, Arpan Caur, Zhang Huan, Gyönkar Gatso and Ang Tsering Sherpa are few names who have been practicing artworks.

Marcel Duchamp

The key figure in the modernist movement, Marcel Duchamp born in 1887 and died at 1968 is considered to be the germinal source of conceptual art, paving the way for the postmodern period. Asian influences have been identified by the critics in Duchamp's work. Duchamp once wrote to his brother-in-law, the artist Jean Crotti, "being esoteric is the only salvation," and in interview by Dorothy Norman in *"Art in America"* (July-August 1969), Duchamp quotes, "The true artist, true art, is always esoteric" (Bass, & Jacob, 2004, p. 123, 126).

In 1967, a poster for the Paris, Fig. 14, retrospective of his work showing a montage of his hand, palm facing us, a cigar with smoke rising above it between his first two fingers. The smoke is, in fact, not from Duchamp's cigar, but from another photograph, of the singer George Brassen's smoking pipe. A genius for wordplay, Duchamp grasped the potential of this Sanskrit name for Kuan Yin – Abhayamdada, the Giver of Fearlessness – to express his concern for human suffering in the world. In the original Sanskrit text, the one who confers the gift of fearlessness is Abhayamdada: abhayam means "fearless", and dada means "giver." An interpretation in terms of the Mahayana Buddhist concept of the bodhisattva, however, makes sense anyone can be a bodhisattva or a *savoir* all that is necessary is the determination to remain in the cycle of life until all beings are saved from suffering (Bass, & Jacob, 2004, p. 138).

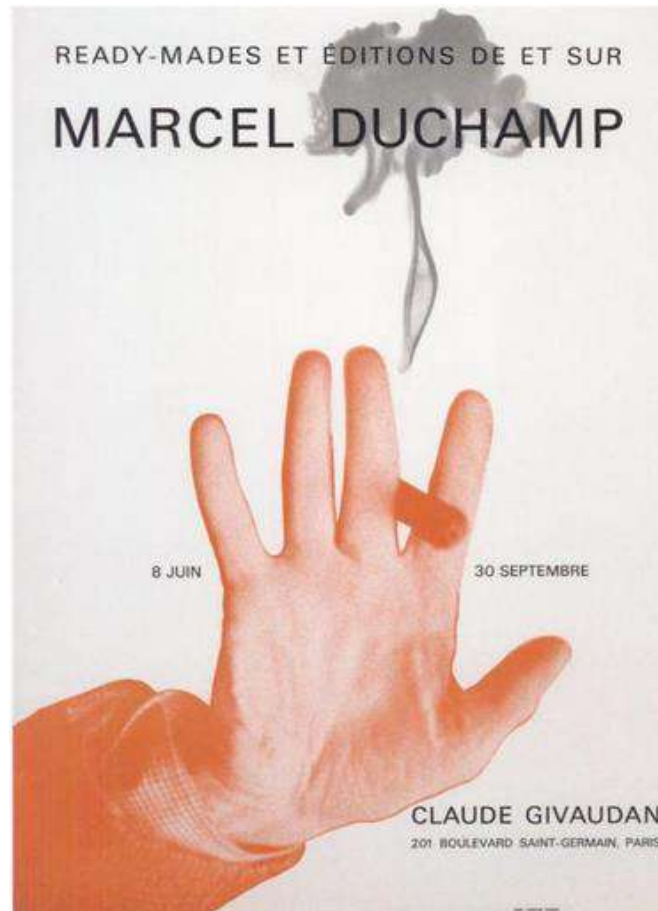


Fig. 14: Marcel Duchamp, "Ready-mades et Editions de et Sur," 1967 (Baas, & Jane, 2004, p.139)

Bill Viola

Born in 1951, lives and works in New York, USA. Fig. 15 represents the four sets of hands – a young boy's, two middle-aged people's and those of an elderly woman – run through a gamut of gestures; some are familiar and others rhetorical, some are associated with prayer or supplication, while others resemble Hindu and Buddhist mudras. The use of a range of ages implies a continuous tradition, the teaching of the young by the old, the sequence of gestures complementing but also departing from one another. Viola's use of extreme close-up draws attention to the elegance and sculptural qualities of this part of the human body. The hand gestures of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara represent a visual vocabulary that is seen and understood by adherents of the Buddhist and Hindu faiths. Just as Christian saints serve as intermediaries between humans and God, a bodhisattva postpones Buddha hood in order to guide those seeking enlightenment, thus, embodying compassion and benevolence. Viola references diverse art historical traditions and the history of human societies and cultures. (Gestures and Details, 2005, Para. 1, 2).



Fig. 15: 'Four Hands' 2001, video polyptych on four LCD flat panels mounted on a shelf, artist's proof, collection of the artist, photograph: Kira Perov (The Passion: Gestures and Details, 2005).

Gonkar Gyatso

Born in 1961 in Lhasa, Tibet, lives and works in Beijing, New York, and London. He is the founder of the Sweet Tea House, a contemporary art gallery, London (gyatso). With an intense study on Buddhism Gonkar Gyatso has been highly influenced by Bhumisparsha Mudra. He has continuously depicted Bhumisparsha mudra in all his artwork using different medium to explore. He has experimented with the stickers to neon lights (Fig. 16) using the same dhyani posture. Early works of Gyatso including his Thangka painting has a traditional influence. Later phase of his work reflects more of the environment and his own personal experience in life. Gonkar's artworks on Bhumisparsha mudra is quite a fuse of subject and the concept between the history and the contemporary situation in today's scenario.



Fig. 16: Neon Buddha Plus, Gonkar Gyatso, 2010, Neon light, 120 X 120 cm. (gonkargyatso.com)

Zhang Huan

Zhang Huan, born in 1965, China, is internationally renowned as one of the most influential contemporary artists of today. He currently lives and works in Shanghai and New York. The most popular mudra of all, Abhaya mudra along with Varada mudra in fig. 17 (a & b) is one of the fascinating sculptures of Zhang Huan's work. The drapery is mould like a silk and the expression of the Buddha is maintained in this work. Huan works with mudras and parts of the body with experimenting installation on larger scale with highly influenced by Buddhism.

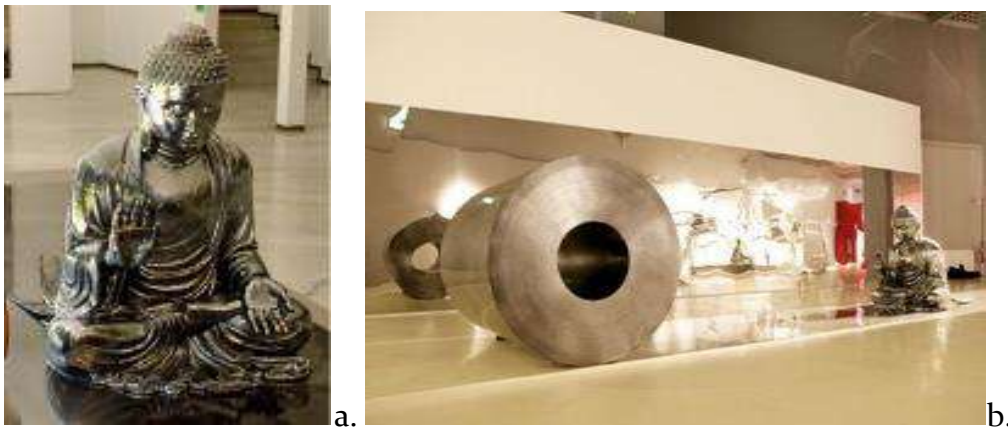


Fig. 17 (a & b): Buddha of Steel Life, (Steel and Copper), 2006, Milan, Italy, Fig a. Courtesy: Marco Secchi | Fig b. (zhanghuan.com)

Arpana Caur

Arpana Caur, a contemporary Indian artist was born in 1954, Delhi. She is a distinguished Indian painter and has been exhibited since 1974 across the globe (Sikhiwiki, 2010). Although Caur identifies herself as Sikh, she has made it her signature style to fuse elements from various world religions including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and many more. The artist's technique is a reflection of the Sikh religion's tolerance and belief in the spirit of one universal God. In fig. 18, the figure of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, a spiritual teacher whose teachings inspired the Buddhist religion, can be identified by his long earlobes and signature lotus poses. The congestion traffic of vehicle is seen in the spiral surrounded around Buddha. Caur has painted buddha as blue in color and mudra denoting Dhyana (meditation).



Fig. 18: 'Buddha Mural', Picture taken outside the Venkatappa Art Gallery, Bangalore, India 2014.

Ang Tsherin Sherpa

Ang Tsherin Sherpa was born in 1968 in Kathmandu, Nepal, currently, lives and works in California.

In conversation with Tsherin via an email interview, he writes:

He is a trained in the traditional Tibetan Art and during that phase of traditional thangka painting, he painted mudras like the Dharmachakra, Varada, Abhaya, Vajra etc. All Buddhists believe in the Protector Spirits that safeguard Buddhism and Buddhist practitioners. The sacred belief in these spirits has always fascinated him since childhood. Therefore he have manipulatively transformed their features and mudras to create his own iconographic paintings. The concept behind the contemporary mudras of his paintings is to question the real representation of "The Spirit", the term itself could mean a deity, a ghost, a good attitude, a drink or even kerosene. The mudras of these spirits depict his social messages affected by his surrounding experiences which due complements with the urban psychology and is apparently accessible to all.



Fig. 19: Preservation Project # 1, created in 2010. (Van. 2011).

In fig. 19:

He often works with deities, and this time [in Preservation Project #1] with the limbs of deities. He made this painting as he was reflecting on Tibetan society. When he was growing up, he used to think that everything needed to be preserved in a specific way...we talk a lot of about preservation. But, don't know how we are preserving things without understanding the essence of our traditions. Now, we are in a globalized world where we have to interact with different people, different cultures, languages, all kinds of things, and some of the functions of these traditions, he feels, should have or would have transformed by now. If one were to understand the essence of a tradition and its role in society, then the method or ritualizing of the tradition is made less important and the essential vision is made more important, that is, tradition's overall contribution to society and humankind.

In fig. 20, Conqueror (Gangnam Style), acrylic, ink and white gold leaf on wood, 122 x 91.5 cm (48 x 36 in), depicts a figure performing the notorious dance move while wearing a mask of Vajrabhairava, a wrathful form of Mañjushrī. Sherpa said:

The Vajrabhairava may seem like an odd pairing with an international pop culture sensation but we live in a disposable culture where anything long-lived is unusual. In Tibetan manifestation, the dance mirrors a new global consciousness originating from the desperation felt by self-immolating Tibetans (rossirossi, 2013).



Fig. 20: Conqueror (Gangnam style) 2013, (rossirossi.com, 2013).



Fig. 21: "Kumari I" 2013 | Medium: Acrylic on Canvas.

Present researcher, has been practicing the concept of mudra in her artwork, through the medium of painting on canvas and installation. The artworks gradually developed and shaped on the concept along with the current research topic on mudra. It has not only helped to understand the practice of the mudra in the painting but also, on her scope to comprehend the ancient philosophy of the uses of mudra in the benefits of the human mind and body and also the image worshipping method by the tantric Buddhism.

Fig. 21, is the expression of the state of Kumari (unmarried Women hood) in the meditative state. Meditation is the only path to the liberation from self. Kumari is the living goddess in Nepal, highly respected and thought to have

been possess by the godly powers. Kumari is worshipped as manifestation of divine female energy. Therefore, this painting intends to show the state of the artist's being Kumari at the time of painting and using dhyana mudra signifies the transformation of negative energy into positivity. It is a metaphorical expression of inner self-realization. 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 peepal tree before his Enlightenment. This gesture was also adopted since time immemorable, by yogis during their meditation and concentration exercises. It indicates the perfect balance of thought, rest of the senses, and tranquillity.

Fig. 22 and 23, "Label I & II" shows that we are being labelled or identified with the names, with the words, color, shape, height, weight and also the character of ethics in the eye of the people. We have been victimized every day worldwide with the label as business class and economy class. At the end, it is all about how you perceive life as, what you learn from it and how you want to be. The use of the metaphor representation of the umbrella being the protector, with the abhya mudra being fearless, bhumisparsa mudra stating of being aware, bulb as the symbol of hope and the glass bottle as the transformation of the character of the being fro, evil to good.



Fig. 22: "Label I" 2013 | Medium Acrylic on Canvas.



Fig. 23: "Label II."

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Art in Buddhism has been the path of sacred practice. In Tantric Buddhism, art goes beyond practice and becomes contemplation, worship and travel towards individual being. Buddhism as a culture has been recognized globally and this research is focused on Vajrayāna Buddhist "Mudra" in traditional thangka and contemporary art, analysis of practicing artists. Traditional artists follow what has been prescribed in Tantric Buddhist text. But, Contemporary artists retain the aesthetic value of Buddhism in art and metaphorically symbolize the meaning to the milieu. The cross-cultural practices in art, religion and philosophy of Buddhism can be traced back to the 5th to 7th century. From Gupta to Pala, from India, Nepal and Tibet, Asian countries played an important role to sustain the art of the Buddhism.

This paper focuses on the western and eastern artists who have been influenced by Buddhism. The artists have been relating Buddhism and iconographical symbols metaphorically in their artwork to relate to the situation, environment, and self-enquiry or to the political issues. As Aristotle says "Art is an Imitation". Through imitation and practice one can grow and express what exactly one conveys. Gonkar has been practicing Bhumisparsha mudra in his work and he has continuously used only one mudra. But, he has experimented only with the different medium, posture and presentation. Zhang Huan is the artist who relates his cultural background in his artwork but also relates to workers or natural disaster expressed through the crush hands and dirt figures. Arpana Caur's mural in Venkatapa Art Gallery is a message to the people. The small sketches of the vehicles around the Buddha, indicates the growing pollution and Buddha in his silent posture with the dhyana mudra indicates meditation for everyone. When compared to the west, Marcel

Duchamp creates a work which is contradictory to the Buddhist mudra and its meaning. But it is closely related to the Buddhist philosophy, and Duchamp's work with abhaya mudra, with the cigarette defines the world with restless beings.

According to the email conversation, Ang Tsherin Sherpa says that his work is a spiritual journey. Being a thangka traditional artist, Tsherin has applied these techniques in his work. Artists are influenced with the surroundings they grew up and the political and spiritual background and, this work of art will carry the essence of their experiences.

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