

Mudra: Yoga for the fingers.

Mudras are a gesture language capable of expressing ideas and suggesting symbols. Eastern cultures who perform religious dance often use elaborate hand language. The Sanskrit word mudra means seal or symbol. From the earliest times, mudra were used to “seal” a pattern of energy. They can be used to increase the power of prayer, or to create an energy field that can be used in healing. The ultimate goal of mudra is a higher state of consciousness.

In Hatha Yoga, mudras are powerful yoga postures performed with the hands. Detailed descriptions of mudras can be found in many yogic texts, and images of them appear throughout eastern devotional art. The Buddha, for example, is often pictured with hands in various mudra postures. Like asanas, mudras are scientifically designed to influence both the dense physical and subtle ethereal bodies. By holding the hands in a particular way, even for a few seconds, very significant energy movements can be affected, helping the practitioner to heal illness, rejuvenate the immune system and increase well being at every level.

There is a tremendous flow of energy in our hands and each finger represents an element: thumb = agni (fire), forefinger = vayu (air), middle finger = akash (ether), ring finger = prithvi (earth), little finger = jal (water). Some yogis believe the roots of all disease lie in an imbalance of the elements, and can be corrected with medicines, willpower and mudras. Mudras never generate an excess of energy; they seek an optimal balancing of prana, like a thermostat.

We have ~ 4000 nerve endings at the tips of our fingers. This is what makes mudras so effective, because the nerve endings are connected with organs and can influence, relax, stimulate or balance them, depending on the individual need. Each area of the hand is connected to an area of the brain and gives clear messages to that brain center. The hands are like a keyboard connected to our internal computer. Before speech, hand gestures were the primary form of communication. The language of hand movements is the oldest in the world. We use hand gestures to this day to express moods and communicate ideas. In yoga, the sacred hand positions relate to the energy flow of a particular meditation. They enhance both the asana and sound current (mantra).

How do we use mudra?

There are more than 100 mudras. Wherever you go, whatever you are doing, you can recharge your batteries with mudra. The mudras are easily learned and with a little practice you can do them at any time and place. It's best to perform the mudras in a standing position. Once your hands are properly placed, relax the upper body as much as possible, remove concentration from the posture, and focus on the "whole body" experience. With a little practice, the different inner states associated with the mudras become clearly discernible.

Many people perform mudras spontaneously, like the Hakini mudra, where the tips of all fingers from the right hand touch the corresponding fingertips from the left.

Equally common to almost every yoga class is Anjali mudra, which is hands in prayer position. Anjali means offering, and this mudra literally connects the right and left hemispheres of the brain, so it is centering, and great for calming and grounding. Use it to begin or end a task, or to regain composure when you are under stress.

Some mudras are simple enough so that you can even do them with your hands in your pockets, like the set of four mudras below. You can do these anywhere without attracting attention, and many hand gestures in everyday life are mudras: think peace symbol, OK sign, thumbs up!

Mudra set for balancing energy.

Alternately touch the tip of each finger with the tip of your thumb. If seated, take a comfortable seat with a straight spine; place the hands on the thighs or knees in a comfortable position. Spend a minute or 2 focusing on your natural breathing rhythm, and then begin to count the inhale and exhale breath for 5 – 6 seconds, in and out. Working from the index finger to the pinky finger and back again, take 5 – 6 breaths on each mudra. Work through each finger, and then back again. Practice with both hands simultaneously. This is a simple way of balancing your energy that you can do almost anywhere, while sitting, standing, walking, lying down. The overall effect is that you get calmer, more relaxed and concentrated.

Gyan: Thumb and index finger: opens the Root chakra, and moves more energy to the legs and lower body. Makes one calmer and more concentrated.

Apan: Thumb and middle finger: fosters patience.

Prithvi: Thumb and ring finger: builds energy, stability and self-confidence.

Pran: Thumb and pinky finger: stimulates intuition and feeling.

