

What actually is a mudra? We may be familiar with some of those hand gestures that our yoga teacher encourages us to use in class; perhaps bringing the thumb and index finger tip together or bringing the hands into a prayer position to name two of the most common hand positions, but what are they, why do we do them and do they make a difference to our practice?

Mudras have been in the background of my practice since first discovering yoga 20 years ago, and I had already been introduced to mudras before that through a meditation practice where on the first course I attended we were encouraged to rest our hands in our lap one on top of the other with the palms up. It was never explained at that time as having any particular significance other than resting the hands, but this hand gesture is used in yoga as a mudra under several names most commonly Dhyana (meditation) mudra. So, are they simply a comfortable position to place our hands, something to do with our hands to look yogic, or is there more meaning behind these gestures?

Mudras date back as early as the Vedic era so their use may be over 3000 years old. The gestures were used in Vedic ceremony but not in the context that we use them in a yoga class but as a means of stressing rhythm and intonation whilst chanting the Vedas. Mudras are common in Hindu and Buddhist practices and of course yoga. They are mentioned in several yoga texts notably the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the Gheranda Samhita and Shiva Samhita but also within tantric texts and the yoga Upanishads. The term 'mudra' (a Sanskrit word) can be translated to mean 'seal', 'gesture', 'mark', 'sign', or 'closing' to name but a few of the translations. This is referencing what the mudra is creating in terms of the energy (prana) flow within the body. Prana is a primary focus in the practice of Hatha yoga, which is essentially a practice of directing and channelling prana towards the realisation of unified consciousness. Modern postural yoga has

essentially taken influence from Vedanta, Tantra and Hatha yoga and we therefore find ourselves practising a varied mixture of techniques that we may be unsure of the origins and the purpose.

The term mudra although more familiar as a hand gesture, also includes movement of the body (akin to yoga asana), head and postural techniques as well as bandhas (energy locks). The hand positions are the practices that have become the most known and accessible form of mudra practice today. If you read about hand mudras on some websites, you would find information that ranges from mudras that can cure cancer (even rid the body of all known disease!) to leading to samadhi (ultimate absorption). Whether or not there is any

scientific basis or truth in these claims, I have certainly found mudras to provide a wonderful experience of absorption in my own practice and teaching. The teaching that mudras provide a seal so we can direct and retain our pranic flows within the body, is the main purpose that is given for these practices and the various hand gestures are said to arouse particular states and direct us towards particular experiences. The name of the mudra is usually an indicator of what sort of energy and intention you are working with. I have found that there are definitely different qualities to different hand positions I have adopted in my practice whether they have been specific placements

with an idea of practising a particular mudra or whether they have spontaneously arisen during practice, which is actually the original source of these hand gestures.

Chris Wallis states in his book 'Tantra Illuminated' that "a spontaneous mudra is a sign of attainment.... one can use a mudra to seal the experience of awakened consciousness ....a mudra is both a reflection of an inner state and a means of realising

