

# Theory and Practice of *Hastha Yoga*

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## Abstract

*Hastha Yoga* is an integral part of *Hatha Yoga*. It is translated as Yoga in Hands. Fingers and palm are connected with various vital organs of the body. Manipulating and massaging the fingers and palm the internal organs can be revitalized and several chronic ailments can be cured. This is done by performing *Mudras* with fingers and hands. *Mudra* is a mystic position of the hands, a seal, or even a symbol. *Mudras* in *Natya* express emotions and feelings while in Yoga they are used to channel the stream of flow of energy in body. *Mudras* depict certain states or processes of consciousness that they symbolize. They have a therapeutic value and specific effect on the practitioner, can influence the energy at physical, emotional and spiritual levels. We can effectively engage and influence our body and our mind by bending, crossing, extending, stretching and touching the fingers with other fingers. *Mudras* can be performed while doing *Pranyama* or meditation. Important *Mudras* have been discussed and their significance in terms of benefits on body and mind. The paper however does not discuss the *mudras* performed while doing *asanas* as mentioned in Yogic Texts, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, *Gheranda Samhita*, *Shiva Samhita* and *Tirumandiram*.

**Key words:** *Hastha Mudra, Mystic symbol, Pranayama, Meditation, Therapeutic Value*

Article Received: 08-08-2016, Published: 10-09-2016

Conflict of interest: None declared

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International Journal of Science and Consciousness (IJSC): a Bio-Psycho-Spiritual approach  
Published by the Research Foundation for Science & Consciousness, Uttarakhand, India

## Theory and Practice of Hastha Yoga

### ***Kriyas, Asanas, Bandhas and Mudras: Distinction***

Before I take you into *hastha yoga*, I would like to clarify the differences of the important key terms *Kriyas, Asanas, Bandhas* and *Mudras*. *Kriyas* are cleansing processes. They are part of Hatha Yoga. Gheranda in his treatise *Gheranda Samhita* recognizes seven such preparatory practices before performing *Asanas*. They are: *dhauti* consisting of cleansing the teeth, tongue, ears, throat, stomach, intestinal tract and rectum; *vasti* consisting in contracting and dilating the sphincter muscle to cure constipation; *netiis* inserting a thin thread or rubber tube into the nostrils to remove rheum; *nauli* a technique of rotating the abdominal muscles to massage the inner organs; *trataka* a relaxed gazing at a small object, such as the flame or candle or a lamp, which is thought to stabilize the mind and cure certain eye diseases; and *kapalabhati* a breathing technique and the practice of drawing up water through the nostrils and expelling it through the mouth or sipping it and then expelling it through the nasal passages, which is thought to rid the body of rheum. *Asanas* are body postures. Patanjali has never dealt with so many *asanas* that are in practice now. These were developed by Svami Svata-marama (15<sup>th</sup> Century), a disciple of Goraknath in his treatise, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, Gheranda in his *Gheranda Samhita* (17<sup>th</sup> Century), *Shiva samhita* (18<sup>th</sup> Century) and of late Srinivasa bhatta Mahayogaindra in *Hatharatnavalli*. Patanjali has never mentioned about and discussed *asanas* in his treatise *Sutras*. In fact, he defines *asana* as *sthira sukham asanam* in *Sadhana Pada* (2. 46), steady and comfortable posture is *asana*. *Bandhas* are body locks. Specific *bandhas* are *Mula Bandha, Uddiyana Bandha, Jalandhara Bandha* and *Maha Bandha*. These are performed while doing *Pranayama*.

### ***Mudra: It's Origin***

What is *Mudra*? *Mudra* is a Sanskrit word containing '*mud*' meaning joy and '*ra*' produce.

Hence *mudra* means gestures that produce joy and happiness. In Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism *mudras* are extensively used during meditation and blessing. *Mudra* is a term with many meanings. It is a mystic position of the hands, a seal, or even a symbol. *Mudras* depict certain states or processes of consciousness that they symbolize. They have a specific effect on the practitioner; can influence the energy at physical, emotional and spiritual levels. We can effectively engage and influence our body and our mind by bending, crossing, extending, stretching and touching the fingers with other fingers. These are known as *Mudras* are integral part of Indian classical dances. Without *mudras*, *natya* is incomplete, unemotional, and crooked. Bharata in his treatise, *the Natya Sastra* describes 24 *mudras*, while Abhinaya Dharpana of *Natya Keshvara* identifies 28 *mudras*. There are 28 (or 32) root *mudras* in Bharata *Natyam*, 24 in Kathakali and 20 in Odissi. These *mudras* in *natya* express inner emotions and feelings.

### ***Mudras in Yogic Texts:***

*Mudras* in yoga are found in *Hatha Yoga*. The classical sources for the *Mudras* in Yoga are *Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Gheranda Samhita, Shiva Samhita*, and *Tirumandiram*. *Gheranda Samhita* is the most encyclopaedic of all the root texts of *Hatha Yoga*. In the third chapter in the text Gheranda teaches twenty five *mudras* after describing six types of cleansing techniques in the first chapter by which purification is achieved, and thirty two *asanas* in the second chapter by which strength is attained. The twenty five *mudras* include: *Mahamudra, Nobhomudra, Uddiyabna, Jalandhra, Mulabandha, Mahabandha, Mahavedha, Khechari, Viparitakarani, Yoni, Vajroli, Shaktichalani, Tadagi, Mandukimudra, Shambhavi*, and the five *dharanas, Ashvini, Pashini, Kaki, Matani and Bhujangini*. In the text Lord Shiva instructs Goddess Parvati on the *mudras* and says that by practising these *mudras*, the Yogi becomes an adept. It gives great happiness and bliss to the Yogi.

*Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, written by Svātmanama in the fifteenth century is yet another classic text on *Hatha Yoga*. In this text, in chapter three, ten *mudras* are described. These are *Mahamudra*, *Mahabhandha*, *Maha Vedha*, *Khechhari*, *Udiyana Bandha*, *Mula Bandha*, *Jalandhara Bandha*, *Viprita Karani*, *Vajroli*, and *Shakti Chalana*. These *mudras* are performed not only to annihilate old age and death but also awaken *Kundalini*. By performing these *mudras* eight *Aiswarikas* are attained. They are: *Anima* (becoming small, like an atom), *Mahima* (becoming great, like *akas*, by drawing in atoms of *prakriti*), *Garima* (light things, like cotton becoming very heavy like mountains), *Prapti* (coming within easy reach of everything; as touching the moon with the little finger, while standing on the earth), *Prakamya* (non-resistance to the desires, as entering the earth like water), *Isata* (mastery over matter and objects made of it) and *Vasitwa* (controlling the animate and inanimate objects). *Mudras* along with *asanas* are employed statically in meditation and dynamically in *Natya* practice. It is said that the practice of *mudras* lead to awakening of the *Kundalini Shakti*. *Adhinatha* (Shiva) declares that through practice of *mudras*, the *Yogi* attains all the *siddhis* or occult powers (eight supernatural powers). Benefits of such *mudras* are also discussed in the text. For example *Mahamudra* cures consumption, enlargement of spleen, indigestion and fever, removes decay and fear of death; *Nabomudra* corrects all problems in the body and cures all diseases; *Kechari* prevents ageing, fills the body with divine nectar (*amrita*) and is used to attain higher states of consciousness – *Dharana*, *Dhyana* and *Samadhi* and awakens *Kundalini*.

*Shiva Samhita* text whose authorship is unknown discusses, eleven *mudras* in chapter four. These are used in awakening of *Kundalini*. The eleven *mudras* are: *Mahamudra*, *Mahabhandha*, *Maha Vedha*, *Khechhari*, *Udiyana Bandha*, *Mula Bandha*, *Jalandhara Bandha*, *Viprita Karani*, *Vajroli*, *Yoni* and *Shakti Chalana*. Of these *Yoni mudra* is powerful, and not found in other *Yogic* texts. By applying this *mudra*, the *Yogi* obtains mastery of whatever he utters in the form of mantra, auspicious or otherwise. By this *mudra* the *Yogi*

is freed from all sins, he is not bound by alcohol, stealing, sleeping with his guru's wife or killing his guru.

In the third chapter of *Tirumandiram* written by the *Siddha Tirumular*, it is said that the practice of *Sambhavi mudra* and *Kechari mudra* lead the *Yogi* to the state of *Samadhi*. Also these *mudras* give youthfulness; graying of hair and wrinkling of the skin disappears. *Mudras* are also mentioned in the *Upanishads*. The important *mudras* discussed in the *Upanishads* are *Jnana Mudra* and *Chin Mudra*. In the *Maitryani Upanishad* a reference is made to *Nabo mudra* and *Kechari mudra*. By practicing these two *mudras* one can realize *Brahman*, the Ultimate Reality.

The subject of *mudras* however is not directly dealt with by *Patanjali* in his *Yoga Sutras*. These *Sutras* mostly deal with the theory of *Yoga*, while *Gheranda Samhita*, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, and *Tirumandiram* with the practical aspects of *Yoga*.

### **Mudras: their Nature and Symbolic Significance:**

*Mudras* in *Hatha yoga* are performed while doing *Pranayama* and meditation, in sitting position. Hence they are described as static and prolonged unlike in classical dances where *mudras* are performed to convey symbolically emotions and feelings. In meditation they are constant, the more they are prolonged the more the effect would be upon mind and body.

Originally *mudras* were used in rituals and *yajnas* in Vedic times. Slowly they were absorbed into meditation since the effects felt upon body and mind was more pronounced. All Hindu Gods and Goddesses have some form of *mudras*. The most important and popular *mudra* among Hindu Gods and Goddesses are *Abhaya mudra* and *Varada mudra*, the former represents protection and freedom from fear, and the latter forgiveness and mercy. It is estimated that there are 400 *mudras*, with 75 being important and of them 12 are most important. *Tantra Yoga* follows 58 *mudras* in Tantric rituals. These

*mudras* stimulate different parts of brain and effectively calm the mind while releasing the past karma seeds and impressions. These are known as *Bhairabhi Sadhana*. The general public may not know them and understand the deep implications. *Mudras* are a silent language of self-expressions used in *Hatha Yoga*. They are used to channel balance and restore energy level of our body. They have therapeutic or curative powers. They soothe, stimulate, energize, cure and increase the vitality. The effect of *Mudras* is expressed on many different levels: Physical, Vital, Mental, Psychic, and Spiritual. Each human being is an individual energy field or sphere. Different levels of energy resonate within. These energy fields are subject to various vibrations. At the Physical level these vibrations are quickly felt. Some vibrations are imperceptible. These are *chakras* (energy transformers) and *nadis* (subtle streams of energy). *Mudras* affect these invisible energy transformers and subtle streams of energy. However their degree of effectiveness depends on the frequency or regularity of practice, quality of food that we take, and the quality of life that we lead.

### **Mudras and their Relationship with Cosmos:**

There is a relationship between individual and Cosmos. Indeed every individual is an expression of Cosmos. The ultimate object of Yoga is to connect the individual or restore the individual to the Cosmos which he has lost or make him realize that he is no other than the Cosmos. In Yoga this Awareness (Pure Intelligence) is created, and in the Awareness he is absorbed and this is known as Liberation. This realization is also known as Self-realization, realizing the Pure Intelligence. This is achieved only when mind is silenced. Silencing the mind is done through a great will power in meditation. This will power is not given to all. Hence this crooked mind is brought to silence through hand gestures, popularly known as *Mudras* in *Hatha Yoga*.

### **Human Hand and its Mystery:**

Hand is a beautiful organ of human body. It is deeply associated with action. Every human

action is performed through hand. Interestingly this hand is connected to various vital organs inside the body. Hence, Yoginis, astrologers, reflexologists, establish a direct relationship between the individual organs and the hands and fingers. Let's look at the very concrete effect that the hands and fingers have on other areas of the body. There is a direct relationship between the hands and the neck. The flexibility of the hands always effects the flexibility of the neck. Therefore hand exercises relieve tensions in the neck. Spreading the ten fingers creates a reflex that causes the thoracic (chest) vertebrae to spread out. This increases the tidal volume of the lungs. Similarly the hands/fingers also have an additional direct relationship to the heart and lungs. With increasing age, many people can no longer properly stretch their fingers. This shows tension in the heart area. The result is that the optimum amount of air is not drawn into the lungs, especially into the lung borders.

Further, respiratory therapists say that the index fingers and thumbs influence breathing in the upper area of the lungs, the middle finger in the middle area, and the little finger in the lower region. Furthermore, cerebral activity is activated by touching and feeling especially with the fingertips. When *mudras* are practiced consciously they activate large areas of the brain.

### **Five Fingers and their Associations**

Five fingers are mysterious. Each one is important as much as other fingers. If any one finger is dislocated, not only it affects doing but also it results in direct impact on the vital organ to which it is connected. Let us examine how these fingers are associated with elements, planets, vital organs in the body, chakras (phluseses), khoshas (sheaths) and traits. It is said that five fingers represent **five elements**, Thumb *agni* (fire), Index *vayu* (air), Middle *shunya* (space), Ring *prithvi* (earth), and Little *jal* (water); **five chakras** (energy transformers), Thumb *manipura* (solar plexus), Index finger *anahata* (heart plexus), Middle finger *vishuddha* (throat plexus), Ring finger *swadhisthana* (sacral plexus) and Little finger *muladhara* (root plexus);

**five Koshas(sheaths):** Thumb *anandamaya*, Index finger *vijnanamaya*, Middle finger *manonmaya*, Ring finger *pranamaya*, Little finger *annamaya*; **planetary classification**, Thumb *mangala*(Mars), Index finger *brihaspati* (Jupiter), Middle finger *shani* (Saturn), Ring finger *Shukra*(Venus), Little finger *budha* (Mercury), Middle of the palm *dhara* (Earth), Little down the Mercury mount is Pluto, Little down the Pluto is Lunar mount (*Soma*), Little down the Lunar mount is Uranus, and Right to the Uranus is Neptune; **Character traits** Thumb the will, instinctiveness, and vitality, Index finger intellectual faculty, individuality and striving powers, Middle finger security, sobriety, initiative, love and order, Ring finger family, the ability to love, Little finger creativity, a sense of beauty and inner clarity. According to Ayurveda the left hand is for peace, the right hand for discernment. The left represents concentration, the right wisdom. Similarly, in right hand little finger represents wisdom, void judgment, the environment and will; the index finger is for power and the thumb for knowledge. In the left hand, little finger is for charity, the ring finger discipline, patience, the index finger energy, and thumb contemplation.

The palm represents reflex zones which correspond to the foot reflex zones. **The upper part of the Thumb** is related to pineal gland, pituitary gland, brain, below it to head and neck, **from wedge to wrist throat**, thyroid, pancreas, bladder, lumber, uterus, the edge of the thumb spinal column, **the base or web of the middle and ring finger** chest, lungs, bronchial tubes, adrenal gland, kidneys, intestines, **the base or web of the little finger down to the wrist arms and shoulder**, heart, spleen, hips and thighs, **below the index finger** stomach, **from the tip of the index finger and middle finger to the base or the root** eyes, **from the tip of the little finger and ring finger to the base or the root** of ears.

### Preparatory Exercises:

The direct relationship between fingers and hands to the vital parts of human body show how

intricately human body has been made by the Creator. Hence activating fingers and palms is nothing but activating the internal parts of human body. This activating can be done by performing some exercises which are as follows:

Hold hands in front of chest with fingers spread while inhaling. Hold breath and stretch out arms horizontally at your side. Now exhale and vigorously make a fist with each hand. Then breathe normally, open the fists and lower arms. Repeat three times. This exercise expands the bronchial tubes, opens the lungs, strengthens the heart and refreshes the mind. Some more exercises include squeeze fingers vigorously, press the four fingers of one hand together with the other hand and turn the fingers holding to both sides, make fists and release, spread the fingers and down, rub the palms together, cross fingers with each other, turn the palms outward, and stretch arms (this will refreshes, improves breathing and strengthens heart), press and massage the finger webs with thumb (for those who sit longer period of time and your neck becomes tense or painful), place the index finger, middle finger, and ring finger of one hand on the longitudinal grooves of the back of the other hand and gently massage back and forth (this will have a regulating effect on the blood pressure), clap or tap hands at least eight times in rhythm. At first tap in the usual way, then let the hands hang down and clap the backs of the hands together, then the back of the fingers, the finger tips, the outer side of the hand, the inner side of the hand, the wrists, the knuckles, etc. These exercises will warm up and activate the internal parts. After these exercises the *Mudras* can be performed.

### Important Mudras and their Benefits:

Now let me deal with some important mudras, their symbolic significance, their effect on the body and mind and the benefits. To start with the first mudra is *Atmanjali Mudra*. This Mudra also is known as *Namaskar Mudra*. This is done by joining the two palms and bringing them close to the chest. In Hindu tradition we use this gesture to express reverence and gratitude.

Unfortunately this has been replaced by the western mode of greeting the people with salute. Symbolically two palms joining represent uniting the individual soul with the Cosmic, thereby suggesting that I am one with the Cosmic. It is sacred because we pay our humble salutation before God in temples. Its benefits include that it creates harmony, balance, repose, silence and peace, activates and harmonizes the left and right brain hemispheres.

Atmanjali Mudra



The next most important mudra is **Jnana Mudra**. It also is popularly known among Buddhists as **Vitarka Mudra**. This is performed by placing the tip of the thumb on index fingertip and extend other fingers. Lay hand on thigh in a relaxed way. This should be done with each hand. When fingers point upward, it is called **Jnana Mudra**, when fingers point down to Earth, it is called the **Chin Mudra**. This Mudra is best known in Hatha Yoga and Raja Yoga, and performed in meditation. We find this Mudra in many of the Hindu portrayals of deities. The Buddhists perform it by raising the right hand to the heart, both the thumb and the index finger facing the practitioner. Its effects include that it improves states of mental tension and disorder, promotes memory and concentration, controls insomnia, blood pressure, depression.

Jnana Mudra



Chin Mudra



**Vayu Mudra** is performed by bending the index finger against the ball of the thumb and pressing lightly on it. The other fingers should be extended in a relaxed way. This Mudra prevents accumulated flatulence in the body which causes breathing disorders. By this **Mudra** sensation of fullness in all parts of body is felt. It is best for chronic complaints such as gout, sciatica, rheumatism and trembling in the hands, throat, and head.

Vayu Mudra



**Shunya Mudra (Heaven Mudra)** is done by bending the middle finger until it touches the ball of the thumb and then lightly press down on the middle finger with thumb. The other fingers are extended and relaxed. This Mudra effectively works upon all diseases of the ear such as earache and hearing problem.

Sunya Mudra



**Prithivi Mudra (Earth Mudra)** is done by placing the tip of the thumb and ring finger on top of each other, using light pressure. The other fingers are extended in a relaxed way. This Mudra eliminates energy deficit in the root chakra, intensifies the sense of smell and is good for nails, skin, hair, and bones. We can use it when we feel insecure and need inner stability and self-assurance. This Mudra can give us everything that we need for a meaningful life.

Prithivi Mudra (Earth Mudra)



**Varuna Mudra:** Varuna is the God of water. Water in Hindu tradition is sacred. Hence rivers are worshipped. Holy dip is taken with the belief that it cleanses sins. Besides it sustains life and stores the energy of thoughts and words. Hence it is taken with reverence and gratitude. It is practiced by bending the little finger until the tip touches the ball of thumb and then place the thumb on it. Alternately it is done by encircling the right hand lightly from below and pressing the little finger and thumb slightly with left hand. This Mudra checks too much mucous congestion in stomach and lungs.

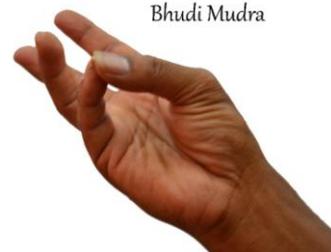
Varuna Mudra



**Bhudi Mudra** is slightly different. It is performed by placing the tip of thumb and little finger together by extending the other fingers in a relaxed way. Its benefits are immense - restores or maintains equilibrium in the fluid balance. It can be used against a dry mouth, eyes that are too dry and burning, or disorders in the

kidney and bladder areas. It also improves the sense of taste.

Bhudi Mudra



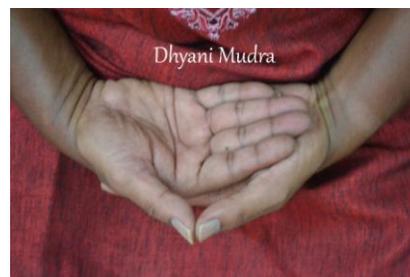
**Hakini Mudra:** Hakini is the god of the sixth Forehead Chakra (Ajna). It is the simplest Mudra. It is done by placing all the fingers together. It can be practiced at any time anywhere. Its benefits include it improves memory and sharpens it, builds up the energy of the lungs. This Mudra can also be done by shifting the finger contact by one finger to the other.

Hakini Mudra



**Dhyani Mudra** is frequently used in meditation after Jnana Mudra. This is performed by placing both hands like bowls and placed in lap. The left hand lies in the right hand and the thumbs touch each other. This is the classical meditation pose. The bowl formed in this Mudra symbolizes inward freedom, purity and emptiness in order to receive everything that we need on our spiritual path. One feels filled with new energy, esoteric thoughts and feelings of nothingness.

Dhyani Mudra



**Apan Mudra** is translated as Energy Mudra. It is done by placing the thumb, middle finger, and ring finger together by extending the other fingers. This Mudra has a balancing effect on the mind, gives us patience, serenity, confidence, inner balance and harmony, removes waste materials and toxins from the body as well as eliminates urinary problems.

Apan Mudra



**Ushas Mudra** represents break of the dawn, further symbolizing dawning of wisdom and pure knowledge leading to enlightenment. This particular mudra is worked out by clasping fingers so that the right thumb lies above the left. The right thumb presses slightly on the left thumb. This mudra is also best suited for meditation. Its benefits include mental alertness, pleasure, and new impulses, and harmonize hormonal system.



**Chinmaya Mudra** is performed by joining the tip of little finger with the tip of thumb forming into a perfect circle like in *Chin Mudra* or *Jnana Mudra*. The other fingers should be curled inward as if making a fist. It stimulates femoral area and digestion, and improves flow of energy in the body.

Chinmaya Mudra



**Adhi Mudra** is done by bending thumbs into and then closing the other fingers into a fist over thumb. When it is constantly performed it relaxes nervous system, helps reduce snoring, increases capacity of the lungs healing the *pranic* energy into head.

Adhi Mudra



**Brahma Mudra** is performed by making hands into a fist as in *Adhi Mudra* with both fists touching at the knuckles. The fists should face up. This Mudra opens the whole lungs, realizes the whole system. It stimulates neuromuscular system as well as respiratory system.

Brahma Mudra



### Conclusion:

*Mudras* should be practiced with both hands at once. They can be practiced anywhere and any place. For best results each *mudra* can be performed for fifteen to forty five minutes, the minimum being five minutes. Alternately three

*mudras* can be performed in forty five minutes, each stretching for fifteen minutes. It is important to note that if these *mudras* are done two hours after taking food since they consume energy in the digestion process and divert attention of energy. They are not total healers, but best support when they are done along with *asanas* and *pranayama*.

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#### Acknowledgement:

I express my thanks to my research scholar Mr. Jerin Issac and Mr. T. P. Girishwaran of IT Department, Central University of Tamil Nadu for taking photos of *Mudras*.

**Cite this paper as: Raghupathi, K. V. (2016). Theory and Practice of *Hastha Yoga*. *International Journal of Science and Consciousness*; 2(3): 33- 41.**