



CINMUDRĀ: ORIGINS, EVOLUTION, AND MEANING

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Abstract

This paper examines *cinmudrā*, the practice of joining the index finger and thumb together, adopted throughout the 20th century in seated postures such as *padmāsana* to facilitate the practice of meditation or *prāṇāyāma*. In the *haṭhayoga* corpus, although *padmāsana* is well documented, there are scant references to *cinmudrā*. Yoga scholarship to date has not addressed this omission. This paper attempts to uncover the first textual attestation of *cinmudrā* within a yoga context, using *haṭhayoga* texts of the 18th and 19th centuries, with consideration also given to tantric and dance literature. In tracing the evolution of *cinmudrā* to the present day, parallel research is undertaken into material culture, focusing on sculptural, pictorial, and archaeological evidence. Accompanying this inquiry will be the question of why *cinmudrā* became included in yoga practice, and implicit here is the symbolism the gesture holds for practitioners. Finally, it will be questioned whether *cinmudrā* could have had early origins despite its apparent historical absence, and if so, its subsequent assimilation into *haṭhayoga* will be explored.

KEYWORDS

mudrā, *cinmudrā*, *jñānamudrā*, hand gesture, *haṭhayoga*, meditation, *prāṇāyāma*, modern postural yoga

1. Introduction

Ask a layperson to think of yoga, and the prevailing image is of someone sitting with their legs crossed, eyes closed, and hands on the knees with the index finger and thumb touching. This quintessential image is not historically inaccurate; it is generally agreed that yoga has always involved sitting in some position or another. However, the configuration of the present-day archetype is likely to include one feature that has had less than a prevalent role in pre-modern yoga: the gesture known, among other designations, as *cinmudrā*, or joining the index finger and thumb together.

This research will affirm that during the 20th century, *cinmudrā* was practised extensively, regularly accompanying postures such as *padmāsana* to facilitate the practice of meditation or *prāṇāyāma*. Among prominent yoga pioneers such as B. K. S. Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, and Swami Sivananda, there was a near-unanimous adoption of the gesture. However, in pre-modern accounts of *padmāsana*, references to *cinmudrā* are conspicuous by their absence.

No yoga-specific scholarship to date has been undertaken on the origins or significance of *cinmudrā*. Addressing this oversight, this paper will trace the development of the gesture from its earliest appearance within *haṭhayoga* to its pervasive presence in the 20th century. Acknowledging that this research represents a preliminary exploration, it is hoped that future investigations on the history and symbolism of *cinmudrā* will yield a deeper understanding of this now ubiquitous gesture.

In exploring the provenance of *cinmudrā*, this paper will make use of textual evidence, essentially 18th- and 19th-century texts and unpublished manuscripts from the *haṭhayoga* corpus. Recognising that hand gestures also occupy the milieus of iconography, dance and ritual, consideration will be given to literature from these traditions. Parallel research is undertaken into visual culture, including paintings and unpublished images that appear to confirm *cinmudrā*'s presence during the early modern period. Sculptural records will also be considered, and it will be questioned whether the available architectural evidence corroborates the claim that *cinmudrā* was part of *Nātha* or *siddha* iconography.

The hypothesis of this paper is that *cinmudrā* could have had earlier origins than that suggested by textual and material sources from the early modern and tantric periods. References from the ancient treatise, the *Nāṭya Śāstra*, will be presented alongside archaeological evidence that appears to contradict the non-occurrence of the gesture in pre-modern *haṭhayoga* texts.

Embracing the fields of iconography, dance and ritual, this research offers an interdisciplinary approach to a neglected area of yoga studies. Following existing research by dance and art historians, this essay will contribute to the understanding of gesture by adopting the lens of yoga and meditation. While inevitably focused on one specific *mudrā*, this paper hopes to shed new light on the history of yoga posture practice, and the shifting means of facilitating meditation and *prāṇāyāma*.

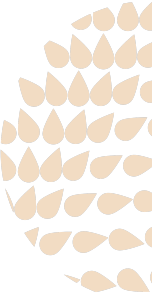
The research is presented along roughly reverse chronological lines, although a certain degree of flexibility with the presentation has been allowed; for example, early and late dance literature are discussed together to allow a seamless comparison between texts.

The structure is as follows:

- 1.1 Note on Terminology
2. CINMUDRĀ IN THE 20TH CENTURY
3. THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD
 - 3.1 *Haṭhayoga* in Texts
 - 3.2 Pictorial Representations
 - 3.3 Jain Yoga
 - 3.4 The Yoga *Upaniṣads*
4. TANTRA
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5. EARLY REPRESENTATIONS OF CINMUDRĀ
 - 5.1 Dance Literature
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1.1 Note on Terminology

When considering the history of a hand gesture, as in many aspects of yoga, nomenclature itself creates complexities that need to be addressed. This research will demonstrate that joining the index finger and thumb together is known by different names in different contexts. Some *haṭhayoga* texts use the term *cinmudrā*, the gesture of *cit*, or consciousness; the term *jñānamudrā* also occurs, referring to the gesture of knowledge.





There are clear differences in meaning here, but these terms refer to the same gesture. Not all *haṭhayoga* texts are specific about terminology, so effectively the terms are used interchangeably. For clarity, it will be stated now that all these terms are identical to what this paper refers to as *cinmudrā*.

As this paper will consider literature from other fields, it is noted that in iconography, joining the index finger and thumb together can be known as *vyākhyānamudrā* or *vitarkamudrā*, although in this context the meaning refers to teaching and has no yogic or meditative connotation.

Further, hand gestures are known as *hastas* in dance literature, but as *mudrās* in tantric and iconography texts. Again, it is made clear that these are synonymous terms, and in this paper it is largely the term *mudrā* that will be used to refer to a hand gesture. Lastly, it is noted that *mudrā* has alternative meanings in *haṭhayoga*, including a whole-body position, or a method of manipulating vital energies. In this paper, the term *mudrā* will be used solely to refer to a hand gesture, and not to any of these alternative meanings.

2. *Cinmudrā* in the 20th century

In 20th-century yoga, *cinmudrā* was most often incorporated into seated positions to facilitate the practice of meditation or *prāṇāyāma*. Sivananda for example, recommended four postures for *japa* and meditation, the most superior of which was *padmāsana*. The hands are placed in *cinmudrā* (Sivananda 2004: 9), a gesture his disciple, Swami Chidananda also adopted (fig. 1). Many of Sivananda's postures were practised by Calcutta-based Buddha Bose, who also incorporated *cinmudrā* in *padmāsana* (fig. 2), although unusually, with the hands facing downwards.

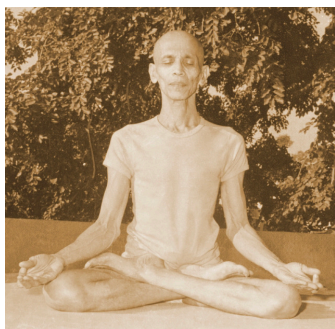


Fig. 1: Swami Chidananda.
Photograph: The Divine Life Society.

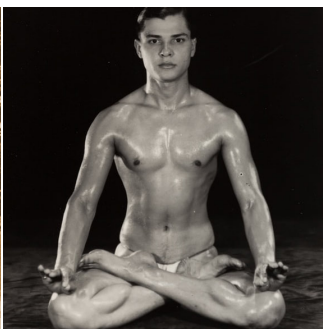


Fig. 2: Buddha Bose.
Photograph: Michael Shapiro and Ghosh Yoga.

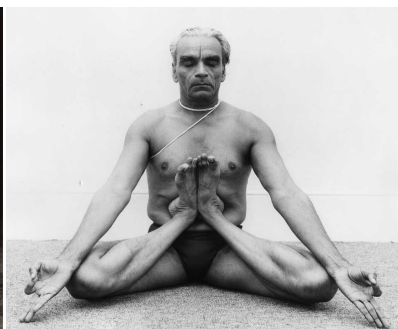


Fig. 3: B.K.S. Iyengar. Photograph: Ramamani Iyengar, Memorial Yoga Institute.

T. Krishnamacharya, the 20th-century guru who probably exerted the greatest influence on modern globalised yoga, included *padmāsana* in *Yoga Makaranda* (1934), but without *cinmudrā* (Krishnamacharya et al. 2011: 164–6); and in *Yogāsanaḡaḡu* (1941), he did not include *cinmudrā* either (Krishnamacharya 1972: 50–2). However, his renowned student, B.K.S. Iyengar, did incorporate the gesture in *Light on Yoga* (1966), recommending its use in *padmāsana* (Iyengar 2001: 101), *siddhāsana* (ibid. 90), and *vīrāsana* (ibid. 92), which are all postures ideal for *prāṇāyāma* (ibid. 362–63). The gesture also features in *kandāsana* (fig. 3, ibid. 291).

Another of Krishnamacharya’s students, Pattabhi Jois did not go as far as mentioning *cinmudrā* in his description of *padmāsana* in *Yoga Mala* (Jois 1999: 125), but in the accompanying illustration (ibid. 122), *cinmudrā* does seem to feature, and photographic evidence verifies that he included the gesture in his practice (fig. 4). His contemporary, Swami Kripalvananda, the founder of Kripalu Yoga, was also known to have practised the gesture (fig. 5).



Fig. 4: Pattabhi Jois.
Photograph: K. Pattabhi
Jois, Ashtanga Yoga Shala.

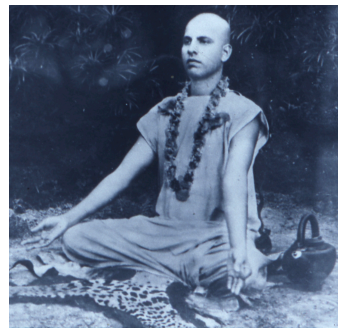


Fig. 5: Swami Kripalvananda.
Photograph: Umesh Eric
Baldwin.

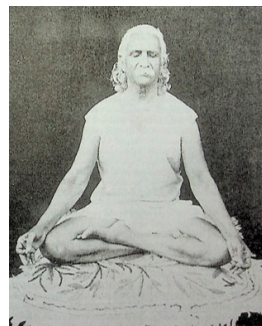


Fig. 6: Kunalayananda.
Photograph:
Kaivalyadhama.

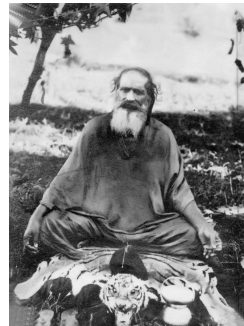


Fig. 7: Paramahansa.
Madhavdas. Photograph:
The Yoga Institute.

Spearheading the scientific study of yoga, Swami Kuvalayananda also incorporated the gesture into *siddhāsana* and *svastikāsana*, (Kuvalayananda 1933: 57, 59), and was also known to have adopted it in *padmāsana* (fig. 6). He credited much of his yoga insight to Paramahansa Madhavdas, another practitioner of *cinmudrā* (fig. 7), whose disciple Sri Yogendra also recommended the gesture, this time in *bhadrāsana* (fig. 8, Yogendra 1956: 139).

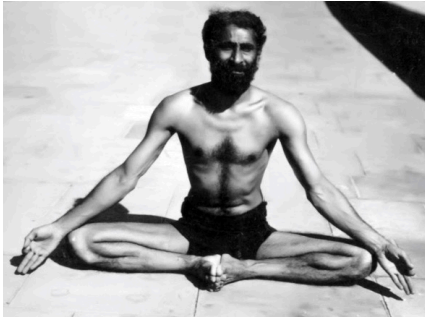


Fig. 8: Sri Yogendra. Photograph: The Yoga Institute.



Fig. 9: Rishi Singh Gherwal. Photograph: Supplied by Philip Deslippe.



Fig. 10: Acarya. Mahaprajna Photograph: © Jainpedia 2024.

In the field of Sikh yoga, Rishi Singh Gherwal, who was influenced by Kuvalayananda, also incorporated *cinmudrā* into *siddhāsana*, a posture he advised for the practice of *uḍḍiyana bandha* (fig. 9, Gherwal 1930: 10). And in the arena of Jain yoga, Acarya Mahaprajna also included *cinmudrā* in the meditation system *prekṣā dhyāna* (fig. 10, Mahaprajna 1994: 3), although an alternative gesture, *brahma mudrā*, is offered, which entails placing the hands on the lap, palms upwards, with the right over left.

The practice of *cinmudrā* continues to this day. In particular, the popular yoga guru and businessman Ramdev recommended *cinmudrā* for *siddhāsana* (Ramdev 2005: 94) and *gorakṣāsana* (ibid. 104), highlighting its particular benefits for meditation (ibid. 134). Indeed, *cinmudrā* is so ubiquitous that it is only a minority of yoga pioneers who are not known to include the gesture. However, in pre-modern accounts of meditation or seated posture practice, *cinmudrā* is non-existent.

One of the earliest textual references to a sitting position for meditation appears in the 1st-century *Buddhacarita* where Buddha is described in an “unshakeable” *paryāṅka* position, like “coils of a sleeping snake” (Maas 2018: 72).¹ This apparent reference to the

¹ BC 12.120: “Then, he took up the posture with folded legs, supreme, unshakeable, drawn together like the coils of a sleeping snake” (*tataḥ sa paryāṅkam akampyam uttamam babandha suptoragabhogapiṇḍitam*) (trans. Olivelle 2008: 369).

lotus posture does not provide any information on the hands, although sculptural evidence from approximately the same period indicates that the hands may have been placed in the lap, on top of one another (fig. 11). Although Saunders (1958: 49, 51) notes that a strict codification of hand gestures was not yet established, *dhyānamudrā*, as it came to be known, when accompanied by the lotus position, was an indication of meditation throughout in the *Kuṣāna* period, and remained in use until at least the 15th century (fig. 12).



Fig. 11: “Meditating Buddha,” early 3rd century.
Photograph: V&A Museum, London.

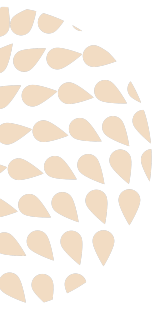


Fig. 12: “Tīrthaṅkara Kuntunātha,” 1476 CE.
Photograph: © Ashmolean Museum.

Some textual records also verify that this gesture was in use in seated meditative postures. For example, the *Sarvayogasamuccaya* in the *Yogayājñavalkya*, dating from the 7th or 8th century, describes the lotus position with the hands in the lap, the right over the left,² and the contemporaneous *Dharmaputrikā* also describes *padmāsana* with the same hand position.³ By the 15th century, the *Haṭhapradīpikā* was compiled by

² *Sarvayogasamuccaya* in the *Yogayājñavalkya* 188: “One should have the feet facing upwards on the thighs, and place the opposite hand on the left” (*ūrusthottānacaraṇaḥ savye nyasyetaraṃ karaṃ*) (trans. Wujastyk 2017: 166).

³ DhP 2.6: “[the yogin] must place the upturned fingers of the left hand on the two heels, [and] having



Svātmārāma who, procuring information from earlier texts, explained different variations of *padmāsana*, including with the hands on top of one another.⁴

That is not to say that hand gestures were completely absent from pre-modern texts on yoga. The *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*, which is often regarded as yoga’s most authoritative text, also includes the lotus posture. Although no details are given, Śaṅkara’s commentary, the *Pātañjalayogaśāstravivaraṇa*, explains that the hands should make either the “tortoise”⁵ or *brahmāñjali* gesture.⁶ Also, the commentary by Vācaspati Miśra, the *Tattvavaiśārādī*, describes *bhadrāsana*, the good fortune posture, as requiring the “hand-tortoise,”⁷ and the aforementioned *Dharmaputrikā* prescribes *svastikāsana* with the *mṛgaśīrṣa* gesture.⁸

Hand gestures were undeniably present within pre-modern yoga and meditation, and clearly some meaning or significance was attached to these gestures.⁹ Similarly, for *cinmudrā* to be so comprehensively integrated into 20th-century *haṭhayoga*, it must have had some significance that was understood and shared by its practitioners.

One such interpretation came from Iyengar (1983: 210–11):

The gesture is the symbol of knowledge (jñāna). The index finger is the symbol of the individual soul, the thumb signifies the Supreme Universal, and the union of these two symbolises true knowledge.

placed again the fingers of the right [hand] on the [fingers of the left hand] in the same way” (*uttānaṃ vāmahastāgraṃ pārṣṇyor upari vinyaset / tasyopari punas tadvat sthāpya dakṣiṇapallavam*) (trans. Barois 2017).

⁴ HP 1.48: “A man should put his hands together in a bowl shape, very firmly assume *padmāsana*” (*kṛtvā saṃpuṭitau karau dṛḍhataṃ baddhvā tu padmāsanaṃ*) (trans. Mallinson, et al. 2024).

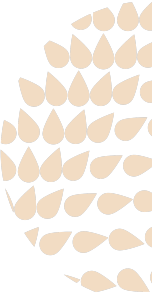
⁵ Although the configuration of the “tortoise” or *kacchapaka* gesture is unclear, it is known to feature in Pali literature as a gesture of greeting (Maas 2018: 63, n. 46).

⁶ PYŚV 2.46: “holding the hands in either the (representation of) the tortoise or folded together over the heels” (*hastau ca pārṣṇyor upari kacchapakaṃ brahmāñjaliṃ vā kṛtvā*) (trans. Rukmani 2001: 368).

⁷ TV 2.46: “Make a hollow of the soles of the feet, close to the scrotum, and place the Hand Tortoise above it” (*pādānta dve vṛṣṇasamīpe saṃpuṭikṛtya tasyopari pāṇikacchapikāṃ kuryād etad bhadrāsanaṃ*) (trans. Maas 2018: 66).

⁸ DhP 2.11: “having put both hands, one facing the other in the *mṛgaśīrṣa* position.” (*anyonyābhimukhaṃ kṛtvā mṛgaśīrṣakaradvayam*) (trans. Barois 2017).

⁹ It is possible that the “tortoise” gesture related to the meditative concept of withdrawing the senses (*pratyāhāra*) (Kooij 1972: 14, n. 2).



Although this research has not identified the precise origin of this idea, there is a historical precedent for considering certain places in the hand as sacred. Eino (2002: 20) has noted that in the *dharmaśāstra* tradition, parts of the auspicious, right hand were associated with gods, sages, or the souls of dead ancestors. These were referred to as *tīrthas*, a term which also referred to river fords, or crossing places that were considered to be sacred locations or pilgrimage sites. There were, however, different understandings of where the *tīrthas* of the hands were, and what they symbolised, and there is no evidence that a *tīrtha* could be created by joining the fingers together in a specific gesture.

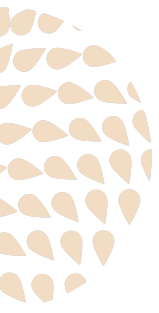
One thing common to many texts however, was that the root of the thumb was sacred to Brahman (ibid. 21, 24). A parallel can be found in some Śaiva tantric literature, where the thumb itself represented supreme consciousness, a concept that may have inspired Iyengar's interpretation of *cinmudrā*. However, discrepancies exist. Amṛtānanda's commentary to the *Yoginīhṛdaya* states that oneness with pure consciousness—Śiva and Śakti—comes from joining the thumb and little finger (Padoux and Jeanty 2013: 139), and the *Kulārṇavatantra* recommends the thumb and ring finger.¹⁰ So, the exact source of Iyengar's explanation, if there was one, remains unclear.

In the Jain system of *prekṣā* meditation, *cinmudrā* was understood along different lines. The *muni* Kisanalala was influential in the creation of *prekṣā dhyāna* (Pragya 2017: 200) and asserted that each finger represented one of the five elements: the thumb symbolised fire, and the index finger, air (Kisanalala 2011: 116). He recommended joining the fingers together, in *jñānamudrā* or *cinmayamudrā*, while in meditation, and, if held for forty-eight minutes, this would enhance knowledge and facilitate a peaceful disposition. Believing the tips of the fingers to be directly connected to the pituitary and pineal glands, he advised applying a small amount of pressure on the fingertips to improve brain power and consciousness.¹¹

Ramdev also shared the view that the fingers connected to different elements, and cited similar physical benefits from practising *cinmudrā*, referred to as *gyāna* or *dhyāna mudrā*. However, in his view, the gain could be felt instantaneously, and it was the opposite side of the body to that of the hand gesture that benefited (Ramdev 2005: 133–34).

¹⁰ KT 6.97: “O my beloved! The thumb is the form of Bhairava and the Anāmikā the form of Caṇḍikā. Hence joining the thumb and Anāmikā one should offer libations to the entire family of Śakti (Kulasantatiḥ)” (*aṅguṣṭho bhairavo devo anāmā caṇḍikā priye | anāmāṅguṣṭhayogena tarpayet kulasantatim ||*) (trans. Rai 1983: 124).

¹¹ Personal communication with Samani Pratibha Pragya, 08.03.23.



Although the particular details clearly vary, both interpretations were based on the concept of *pañcamahābhūta*, or five elements that make up the physical universe. The theory was recorded in one of the oldest Jain texts, the *Sūyagaḍo*, or *Sūtrakṛtāṅga*, where a particular combination of the five elements (earth, water, fire, air and space) could create a living being.¹² This is an idea that was not exclusive to Jainism: the *Vaikhānasagṛhyasūtra* had a similar view, connecting specific deities, which were metaphorically representative of different elements, with individual fingers:

The deity which presides over the thumb is Agni, over the index, Vāyu, over the middle finger, Prajāpati, over the ring finger, Sūrya, and over the little finger, Indra.¹³

The idea of the fingers representing different elements, and therefore the joining of the fingers as an act of balancing the body's elemental composition, was so enduring that its resonance was felt as far as Europe over a thousand years later. The alternative medicine system, Nature Cure, was a 19th-century European creation that combined holistic therapies and dietary advice with yoga principles, in particular the concept of *pañcamahābhūta* (Alter 2004: 109–10). The system, which included yoga *āsanas* and *kriyās*, was highly popular in India, not least due to the endorsement offered by Mohandas Gandhi (ibid.). In the journal of the Bapu Nature Cure Hospital, which was named after Gandhi, Chanana (1995: 59, in Alter 2004: 132) writes:

We all know that our body is composed of five elements – the earth, the water, the fire, the air, and the ether (*ākāśa*)... The imbalance of these elements causes disease. The five elements of our body are represented by the five fingers of our hands – the thumb representing the fire (sun); the index finger the air.... Joining of these fingers with each other makes the life current flow and bring changes in the body system removing imbalance.

¹² S 1.1.7–8: “Some philosophers (materialists) believe that the universe is constituted by five primary elements, viz. earth, water, fire, air and space... They believe that a conscious entity is created by the synthetical interaction of the above-mentioned five primary elements. The conscious entity perishes when these five elements disintegrate and dissociate” (*saṃti pañca mahabbhūyā, ihamegesimāhiyā. puḍhavi āu teū, vāu āgāsapañcamā. ee pañca mahabbhūyā, tebbho ego tti āhiyā. aha esiṃ viṇāse u, viṇāso hoi dehiṇo*) (trans. Kumar & Zaveri 2018: 26).

¹³ VGS 1.2: (*aṅguṣṭhasyāgñiḥ pradeśinyā vāyur madhyamasya prajāpatir anāmikāyāḥ sūryaḥ kaniṣṭhikasyendra ity adhidevatā bhavanti*) (trans. Caland 2002: 3).

In the Nature Cure system, *mudrās* were clearly understood in non-theistic, non-partisan, therapeutic terms. In the context of the 20th century, this interpretation undoubtedly added to *cinmudrā*'s appeal, as yoga shifted from prioritising spiritual goals to emphasising physical or healing benefits.

Whether for therapeutic reasons, cognitive enhancement, or as an embodiment of the *ātman-brahman* principle, *cinmudrā* was almost universally adopted. The practice of holding the hands in the lap that had lasted over a thousand years, was now replaced by a new gesture, and considering its continued use today, *cinmudrā* was here to stay.

3. The Early Modern Period

3.1 *Haṭhayoga in Texts*

One of the first textual attestations of *cinmudrā* within a *haṭhayoga* context is in the *Śrītattvanidhi*. This late 19th-century text is structured around nine *nidhis*, or treasures, the seventh of which, the *Śaivanidhi*, focuses on yoga practice. Information and illustrations are provided for several yoga postures, including *sukhāsana* (ŚTN *Śaivanidhi* 75 in Sjoman 1999: 80), which has the following description:

Now the form of *sukhāsana* [is taught in the chapter on] yoga. Having placed in *cinmudrā* the right hand on the right knee and the left hand on the left knee, [the yogi] whose eyes are half open should remain [thus]. [This] is *sukhāsana*.¹⁴

Although no other information is provided, it is possible to surmise that a meditative quality is intended as the eyes are half open. An illustration is also provided which, albeit faintly, shows the hand gesture as part of this posture (fig.13).

The text also introduces *siddhāsana* (posture no. 80, *ibid.*), and although the description does not mention the hands, the illustration shows the hands in the lap (fig. 14). *Padmāsana* is also included, and the description explains that the hands are crossed and holding the big toes (posture no. 79, *ibid.*), although the image shows the practitioner with the hands on the knees, without *cinmudrā* (fig. 15). There is a meditative gaze in

¹⁴ ŚTN *Śaivanidhi* 75: (atha *sukhāsanasvarūpaṃ* || yoga || *savyajānau savyahastaṃ vāmajānau vāmahastaṃ ca | sacinmudraṃ* (codex. *saciṃmudraṃ*) *nidhāya | ardhonmīlitalocanaṃ tiṣṭhet | sukhāsanaṃ bhavati* |) (trans. Jason Birch, personal communication, 12.03.25).

both postures: in *siddhāsana* one directs the gaze to the space between the eyebrows, while in *padmāsana* the gaze is directed towards the tip of the nose (ibid.).

A source of the *Śrītattvanidhi* is, among others, the 18th-century *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati* (Birch and Singleton 2019: 14). Although 112 postures are listed in the *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati*, *sukhāsana* is not one of them, and *cinmudrā* is not included. However, two different manuscripts of this text exist (one from Pune and one from Mysore), and the Mysore manuscript does contain two additional postures, one of which is *sukhāsana* (ibid. 9). The textual description is exactly as it is in the *Śrītattvanidhi*, and details keeping the eyes half open and adopting *cinmudrā*.¹⁵ An



Fig. 13: *Sukhāsana* in the *Śaivanidhi*, posture no. 75
Photograph: Norman Sjoman.



Fig. 14: *Siddhāsana* in the *Śaivanidhi*, posture no. 80
Photograph: Norman Sjoman.



Fig. 15: *Padmāsana* in the *Śaivanidhi*, posture no. 79.
Photograph: Norman Sjoman.

¹⁵ The Mysore manuscript describes *sukhāsana* (posture no. 112) as follows: “having placed in *cinmudrā* the right hand on the right knee and the left hand on the left knee, [the yogi] whose eyes are half open should remain [thus]. [This] is *sukhāsana*” (*savyajānau savyahastaṃ vāmajānau vāmahastaṃ ca | sacimnmudraṃ nidhāya | ardhonmilitalocanas tiṣṭhet | sukhāsanaṃ bhavati ||*) (from *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati* critical edition by Birch, Singleton and Mallinson, forthcoming, trans. Jason Birch, personal communication, 12.03.25).

illustration is also included, which confirms *cinmudrā* was part of the posture, although in contrast to the *Śrītattvanidhi*, the hands are shown facing downwards.

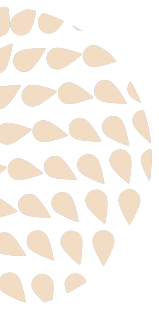
The Pune manuscript does not include *sukhāsana* or any posture performed with *cinmudrā*. *Siddhāsana* is also not included but *padmāsana* does feature, although it is referred to as *svastikāsana* (posture no. 107, Birch 2018: 168).

Krishnamacharya acknowledged the *Śrītattvanidhi* as a source of inspiration, and may also have been familiar with the Mysore manuscript of the *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati* (Birch and Singleton 2019: 49; Birch and Hargreaves 2023: 62–3). However, neither in *Yoga Makaranda* nor in *Yogāsanaḡaḡu* did he include *cinmudrā*, and *sukhāsana* was not included as a posture. However, as has been seen in the previous chapter, his two most famous students did incorporate *cinmudrā* – Pattabhi Jois in *padmāsana*, and B. K. S. Iyengar in many seated postures, although neither of them listed *sukhāsana* as a posture.



Fig. 16: *prauḡhāsana* / *vāmārdhapadmāsana* in the *Caurāśī Āsana*, 1911, posture no. 73.

Despite the evident presence of *cinmudrā* during this period, use of the gesture was hardly widespread. The *Caurāśī Āsana* is a text from 1897, which, despite its name, provides descriptions and illustrations of ninety-eight postures, none of which involves *cinmudrā*. However, the posture *prauḡhāsana*, or *vāmārdhapadmāsana*, is illustrated with *cinmudrā* with one hand only, although here with the hand facing neither up nor down,



but directed away from the body (fig. 16, posture no. 73). Considering the text does not mention the gesture, it is unclear why *cinmudrā* was added.

Many of the postures in the *Caurāśī Āsana* are exactly as those listed by Sivananda in *Yoga Asanas* (1931), although he never formally acknowledged his sources (Birch and Hargreaves 2023: 32, 56). Sivananda did, however, incorporate *cinmudrā* into *siddhāsana* and *padmāsana*, but in the *Caurāśī Āsana*, *siddhāsana* (posture no. 1) is done without *cinmudrā*, as is *padmāsana* (posture no. 38), which is called *svastikāsana* (Sivananda includes a different *svastikāsana*, which also has *cinmudrā*) (Sivananda 2004: 9, 11–12). Sivananda does not give any detail on *prauḍhāsana*, but does include it in his “exhaustive list of āsanās” (ibid. 105). Moreover, Sivananda also included *sukhāsana* (which is not in the *Caurāśī Āsana*); but the text does not mention *cinmudrā* (ibid. 12–3).

However, there was a certain flexibility in Sivananda’s approach. Photographs appended to *Yoga Asanas* show that *padmāsana* could be done with the hands in the lap (ibid. 120), and *sukhāsana* could indeed involve *cinmudrā* (ibid. 122). It is clear that Sivananda intended the gesture to be a part of meditation, but it seems to be a recommendation rather than a prescriptive rule. The gesture’s origin, however, is not clear. Sivananda may have added it himself, or another text may have inspired him. The *Śrīyogakaustubha* may also have been a source of information for Sivananda (Birch and Hargreaves 2023: 60), but to my knowledge, this text does not have *cinmudrā* either. So, the reason Sivananda added *cinmudrā* remains elusive.

3.2 Pictorial Representations

That *cinmudrā* was practised during the early modern period is further evidenced by material sources, including a 19th-century painting from Tanjore showing a practitioner sitting in *padmāsana*. His index finger and thumb, while not touching, are reaching towards one another, in what may be *cinmudrā* (fig. 17).

In another image, reprinted in Sjoman’s translation of the *Śrītattvanidhi* (fig. 18, Sjoman 1999: 13), a practitioner in *sukhāsana* holds *cinmudrā*, with eight *cakras* marked along his body. Although the *cakras* suggest a tantric milieu, the image is framed by practitioners performing *haṭhayoga* postures. This painting, which Sjoman dates to ‘probably’ the 18th century (ibid.), thus appears to situate *cinmudrā* within a *haṭha* context. In another 19th-century painting from Tanjore, a practitioner also sits in *sukhāsana* holding *cinmudrā*, this time indicating six *cakras* in his body (fig. 19). It is clear from these paintings that *cinmudrā* played a role in South India in the early modern period, and possibly occupied both the tantric and the *haṭhayoga* worlds.



Fig. 17: “A *sādhu*,” Tanjore, 19th century. Photograph: © Luca Tettoni, Bridgeman Images.



Fig. 18: “A Mysore painting of the Eight Yoga *Cakras*,” Sjoman (1999), c. 18th century. Photograph: Norman Sjoman.

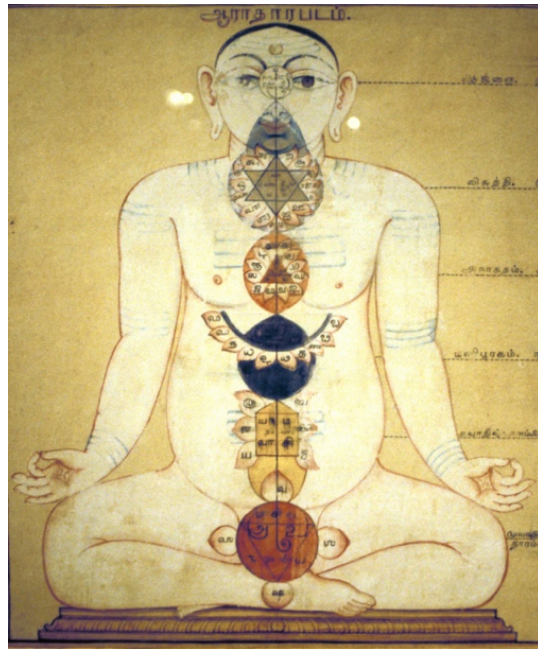


Fig. 19: “Six *Cakras* representing the plexuses of the human body,” Tanjore, c. 1850. Photograph: Hulton Archive, Getty Images.

Cinmudrā, or something resembling it, also appears at the Mahāmandir in Jodhpur. This Nāth temple dating from the early 19th century contains murals of *siddhas* performing several *āsanas*, none of which incorporate hand gestures.¹⁶ However, the temple contains additional murals which demonstrate practitioners in other contexts. In one example, a practitioner, clearly identifiable as a Nāth by the pointed cap and earrings, is practising *japa* with the right hand and appears to be holding *cinmudrā* with the left (fig. 20). There is also an image of Matsyendranātha emerging from a fish, holding *cinmudrā* (fig. 21); and in another example, a practitioner, wearing a characteristic horn around his neck, is shown in an unknown position, holding *cinmudrā* with both hands (fig. 22).

It is unclear from these murals what role the gesture played. The images do not appear to display specific postures, and neither is there any indication of meditation. It is possible the gesture was utilised in its iconographical sense as a representation of “knowledge” (this is discussed more fully in chapter 4.2). However, the inclusion of *japa* practice and the images of *āsanas* that abound on the interior walls of the temple certainly lend a “yogic” context to the gesture.



Fig. 20: Practitioner holding *cinmudrā*, Mahāmandir. Photograph: Rob Linrothe.



Fig. 21: Matsyendranātha emerging from a fish, Mahāmandir. Photograph: Rob Linrothe.



Fig. 22: Practitioner holding *cinmudrā*. Mahāmandir. Photograph: Rob Linrothe.

¹⁶ The murals are reproduced in Bühnemann 2007.

3.3 Jain Yoga

The unpublished 19th-century *Yogāsana* is a compilation of 108 *āsanas*, with descriptions and accompanying illustrations showing Jain ascetics performing many of the postures (Satapathy and Sahay 2014). Meditative postures such as *padmāsana* and *siddhāsana* are included, although *cinmudrā* does not feature; the illustrations reveal the hands are in the lap for both postures (fig. 23 & 24).

The last posture in the text, *vyākhyānāsana* (fig. 25), is described, which, as its name suggests, is the appropriate posture to maintain while teaching (ibid. 48). The illustration shows a Jain ascetic wearing a mouth covering (*mukhapatṭikā*), and there is a small broom (*daṇḍaproñcānaka*) in the background; these are clear iconographical markers of Śvetāmbara Jainism. That teaching is included as a part of yoga practice appears strange. It is possible that this posture was included to make the list add up to the auspicious number, 108. The posture features a gesture identical to *cinmudrā*, done with the right hand only, although it does not appear to be held statically on the knee. The text fails to provide information on this gesture, but it can be assumed that this gesture is *vyākhyānamudrā*, as described in earlier texts such as the *Mudrānighaṇṭu* (discussed fully in 4.1). This *mudrā* is in keeping with the idea of teaching; there is clearly nothing meditative or yogic associated with the gesture.

Outwardly, then, it appears that *cinmudrā* played no role in Jain yoga and meditation in this period. However, a 19th-century image from the Tanjore area indicates otherwise. The panel painting shows a Jain *tīrthaṅkara* sitting in a posture identical to the *sukhāsana* of the *Śrītattvanidhi*. Further, similar to the paintings in fig. 18 and 19, he has *cakras* marked along his body, and is holding *cinmudrā* on his knees (fig. 26).

The existence of the painting raises interesting questions. Firstly, the *tīrthaṅkara* is seated in *sukhāsana*, a posture not mentioned in the *Yogāsana*. And, as has been demonstrated already, *cinmudrā* was also not included in the *Yogāsana*. It seems that neither *sukhāsana* nor *cinmudrā* played a part in 19th-century Jain *haṭhayoga*, so their inclusion in the painting suggests that both the posture and gesture may have been utilised in a different context. The *cakras* in the image certainly suggest a tantric provenance, but other possibilities exist, including different regional and sectarian practices: the text is North Indian and Śvetāmbara, but the image is from Tanjore, and Digambara.

As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, the 20th-century Jain meditation practice *prekṣā dhyāna* did incorporate *cinmudrā*. From the evidence so far assessed, it does not seem clear that the gesture originated from Jainism. However, Pragya has



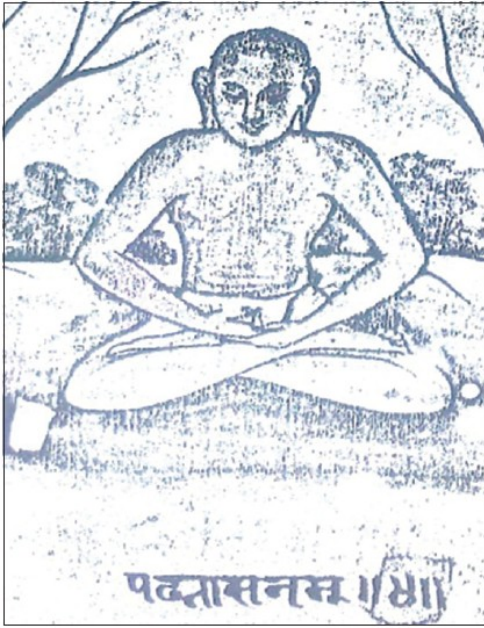


Fig. 23: *Padmāsana* in the *Yogāsana*, posture no. 4. Photo: Sahay Gyanshankar.



Fig. 24: *Siddhāsana* in the *Yogāsana*, posture no. 11. Photo: Sahay Gyanshankar.



Fig. 25: *Vyākhyānāsana* in the *Yogāsana*, posture no. 108. Photo: Sahay Gyanshankar.

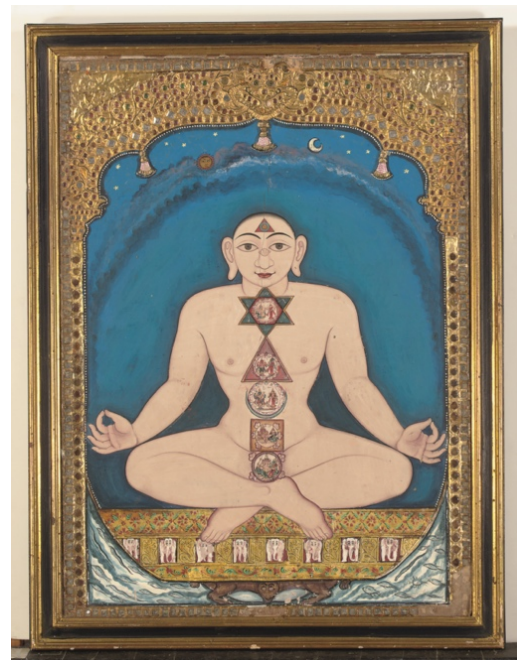


Fig. 26: Panel painting of a Jain *tirthankara*, Tanjore, 19th century. Photo: Christie's Images, Bridgeman Images.

shown that *prekṣā dhyāna* drew on many sources including Brahmanic, āyurvedic and modern scientific sources (Pragya 2017: 216–44), so the origin of *cinmudrā* may well come from somewhere else.

3.4 The Yoga Upaniṣads

The *Brahmavidyā Upaniṣad* is one of the so-called Yoga Upaniṣads, a collection of twenty-one texts believed to have been composed considerably later than the classical Upaniṣads. Two canons of the Yoga Upaniṣads exist so, consequently, there are two recensions of the *Brahmavidyā Upaniṣad*. The North Indian text is believed to date from 800–1100 CE and contains fourteen verses (Ruff 2012: 104, 107). The South Indian text was composed much later, probably in the 18th century, and is markedly expanded, with additional verses on breath work and meditation, in particular *haṁsa* meditation. In the “Practice of *samādhi* preceded by the memorising of the *haṁsa* mantra” the southern *Brahmavidyā Upaniṣad* advises the practitioner to be:

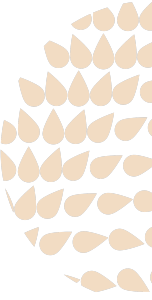
[F]acing the south and assume the *jñānamudrā* posture. He should ever be engaged in concentration, ever memorizing the *haṁsa* mantra, reflecting on that clear crystal-like form, the divine form that is peerless, that has its seat in the middle region (of the body), the transcendent *haṁsa* of the form of the *jñānamudrā*.¹⁷

Unfortunately, there is no detail on what *jñānamudrā* entails. However, it is possible that it mirrors *cinmudrā* and that it is being incorporated into a meditation practice; indeed, it is the embodiment of *haṁsa* itself.

The *Triśikhibrāhmaṇa Upaniṣad* is another southern text which may also belong to the 17th or 18th centuries (Ruff 2012: 104–5). Clearly following Patañjali, the text recommends a model of *aṣṭāṅga* yoga, including the descriptions of seventeen *āsanas*. It is possible to practise *prāṇāyāma* if any of these *āsanas* are adopted with what the text calls “*yogamudrā*” (TŚBU II: 92). Ayyaṅgār considers this to be *cinmudrā* and translates as follows (1938: 105):

Assuming the posture at first, O Brahman! keeping his body erect, (his mind) alert, with his eyes fixed on the tip of his nose, (one row of) teeth not touching the (other row of) teeth, the tongue fixed on to the palate,

¹⁷ BVU 64-6: (*dakṣiṇāmukham āsṛitya jñānamudrāṃ prakalpayet || sadā samādhim kurvīta haṁsamantram anusmaran | nirmalasphaṭikākāraṃ divyarūpam anuttamaṃ || madhyadeśe paraṃ haṁsaṃ jñānamudrātmārūpakam* |) (trans. T. R. Śrīnivāsa Ayyaṅgār 1938: 210).



his mind at ease, showing no distemper, with his head slightly inclined, with his hands bound in the (characteristic) Yoga-Posture (of Cinmudrā), (the Yogin) should practice Prāṇāyāma according to the prescribed rules.¹⁸

Ayyaṅgār has clearly made a creative interpretation here and it is impossible to conclude whether *yogamudrā* is indeed identical to *cinmudrā*. However, it can equally be argued that the Yoga Upaniṣads themselves are creative. The issue here is that the authors, who are unknown, were freely interpreting *haṭhayoga* and tantric texts and yet chose to maintain the same themes and stylistic qualities as the earlier Upaniṣads, which predated them by over a thousand years. It is possible that the authors were writing about practices and ideas current at the time, but by adopting the mantle of an Upaniṣad were seeking a historical basis, and therefore validation, of these practices.

If this is the case, it is noteworthy that *cinmudrā* is associated with meditation in the *Brahmavidyā Upaniṣad*, and with *prāṇāyāma* in the *Trīśikhibrāhmaṇa Upaniṣad*, the exact identifications the gesture has today. It is possible that the very techniques that were recorded in the Yoga Upaniṣads, in an attempt at gaining credence, would prove to be the forerunner to practices and understandings that developed more fully in the 20th century.

Whether this theory is true or not, it is known that the southern Yoga Upaniṣads were heavily influenced by tantric ideas. And considering that the images in fig. 18, 19 and 26 also display tantric elements, such as *cakras*, it is the world of tantra to which we now turn.

4. Tantra

4.1 Textual Records

That hand gestures played a prominent role within tantra is well established. Rituals and visualisation practices frequently involved *mudrās*, often accompanied by the recitation of a *mantra*. The *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* explains:

¹⁸ TŚBU II: 92-4: (*badhvā prāgāsanam vipro rjukāyaḥ samāhitaḥ | nāsāgranyastanayano dantair dantān asaṃsprśan || rasanāṃ tāluni nyasya svasthacitto nirāmayah | ākuñcitaśiraḥ kiṃcin nibadhnan yogamudrayā || hastau yathoktavidhinā prāṇāyāmaṃ samācaret |*) (trans. T. R. Śrīnivāsa Ayyaṅgār 1938: 105).

The *mudrās* are the seals of the *mantras*; and with the *mantras* they are well-sealed. There is no *mantra* without a *mudrā*; devoid of the *mudrā*, there is no seal.¹⁹

However, none of the 108 *mudrās* listed in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* resemble *cinmudrā*; nor is there any reference to holding a *mudrā* while engaging in *prāṇāyāma* or meditation. Indeed, some tantric texts explicitly confirm that *cinmudrā* was *not* involved in meditation. The *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhisūtra* for example, lists over a hundred *mudrās*, and states that for “yoga” the prescribed *mudrā* should involve having the hands in the lap, as textual and material sources have been shown to verify:

The wise one should do as for yoga, and place both of his hands at his navel, as though holding a bowl. This is called the Bowl *Mudrā*.²⁰

There are, however, exceptions, and a gesture resembling *cinmudrā* does feature in Tsong-kha-pa’s *Great Exposition of Secret Mantra 2 & 3*.²¹ The text offers various techniques of visualising oneself as a deity, including the practice of hand gestures or “seals,” each of which is accompanied by a *mantra* and a specific visualisation practice. Included is the “seal of washing the body,” described as having the tips of the index fingers and thumbs together and the palms facing upwards (Hopkins 1981: 128). However, as only one of thirty-eight seals and numerous other practices, there is nothing that indicates that this gesture was considered exceptional.

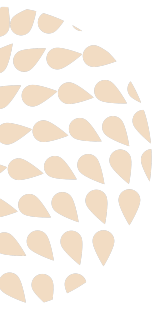
Yoga traditions of the second millennium were not immune to the influence of tantric ideas, and elements of ritual practice such as hand gestures filtered into the realms of yoga and meditation. Hemacandra’s *Yogaśāstra*, for example, mentions nine postures, most of which have little information on the hands. However, the text also includes *rūpasthadhyāna*, the “Meditation on the external characteristics of the Jina.” This practice recommends holding *yogamudrā*, a position involving interlocking the fingers

¹⁹ *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* 34.351.20–1: (*mantrāṇāṃ mudritā mudrā mantraiścāpi mudritā || na mantram mudrahīnaṃ tu na mudrā mudravarjitā*) (trans. Wallis 2002: 41, 232 n.82).

²⁰ VAS 11.12. No Sanskrit manuscript of the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhisūtra* exists; I quote here the translation by Stephen Hodge (1999: 236), taken from Tibetan and Chinese translations.

²¹ I thank Matthew Clark for bringing this text to my attention.





and resting the elbows on the abdomen, a gesture considered to achieve all that is desired (Williams 1963: 191).²²

The interchange of ideas and practices was mutual: tantric texts such as the *Kālikā Purāṇa* resemble a “painting in different colours” in the way that tantric elements and non-tantric yoga practices were presented alongside one another (Kooij 2021: ix, 62–64). The text mentions 108 *mudrās*, fifty-five of which are gestures that “seal” ritual acts; they are recommended for practices such as meditation, *japa* and *yoga*.²³ The text goes on to assert that without *mudrās* such practices are rendered “fruitless.”²⁴ The importance of *mudrās* is made clear:

Worship is based on *mudrās*, contemplation (is based) upon *mudrās*, the *yogas* are based upon *mudrās*. Therefore *mudrās* cause joy. Whenever the hands are not active in acts of worship, contemplation, in the act of meditation, in sacrifice, etc. or while praising, then one should provide both hands with a *mudrā* with a view to religious merit.²⁵

Nothing resembling *cinmudrā* is included, although the *samputamudrā* or “casket” gesture features, which is recommended for use in *yoga* and meditation.²⁶

²² YŚ 9.8–10: “If a pure-minded [person], without [even] blinking, meditates on the nature of an image of the king of Jinās, who is not defiled with the repugnant condition of attachment, aversion and severe delusion, who is endowed with all the auspicious characteristics [of a Jina such as being], who is appeased, endearing, and heart-stealing, who is pleasing the mind with *yogamudrā*, which is unknown to non-Jainas, and from whose eyes an effulgence of marvelous bliss radiates, [then he also] becomes in possession of *rūpasthadhyāna*” (*rāgadveṣamahāmohavikārair akalāṅkitam | śāntaṃ kāntaṃ manohāri sarvalakṣaṇalakṣitam || tīrthikair aparijñātayogamudrāmanoramam | akṣṇor amandam ānandaniḥsyandaṃ dadad adbhutam || jinendrapratimārūpam api nirmalamānasaḥ | nirmimeṣadṛṣā dhyāyan rūpasthadhyānavān bhavet ||*) (trans. O. Qvarnström 2002: 166).

²³ KP 66.34: “O Bhairava! the first fifty-five *mudrās* are prescribed on meditation, *japa*, *yoga*, and contemplation of the goddess” (*devānāṃ cintane yoge dhyāne japye visarjane | ādyās tu pañcapañcāśan mudrā bhairava kīrtitāḥ ||*) (trans. Shastri 2008: 494).

²⁴ KP 66.35: “without a *mudrā*, however, prayer, breath-control, homage to the gods, *yoga*, and also sitting in meditation, are fruitless, O Bhairava” (*mudrāṃ vinā tu yaj japyam prāṇāyāmaḥ surārccanam | yogo dhyānāsane cāpi niṣphalāni ca bhairava ||*) (trans. Kooij 2021: 81).

²⁵ KP 66.110–112: (*mudrāsu saṁsthitā pūjā sarveṣu paricintanam || mudrāsu saṁsthitā yogā mudrā modakarāṣaṭaḥ | yadā yadā pūjaneṣu cintane dhyānakarmaṇi || yajñādau stavane vāpi hastakṛtyaṃ na vidyate | tadā mudrānvitam kuryād iṣṭāpūrte karadvayaṃ ||*) (trans. Kooij 2021: 82).

²⁶ KP 66.39–41: “After joining both hand palms, the tips of all fingers of the hands put together, the two thumbs (put) aside, it is called “casket” by the gods. Now, the “casket” is giving pleasure to all gods. The

The *Agni Purāṇa* is another example of a text bearing the hallmarks of many different traditions. Considered to be a compilation of different chapters written at different times, some sections reveal tantric influences with their inclusion of characteristic practices such as the installation and the consecration of images. In particular, the initiation rite recommends that disciples adopt *jñānamudrā* accompanied by a state of contemplation, although unfortunately there is no description of this position.²⁷ The text contains no further mention of *jñānamudrā*. Chapter 26 describes *mudrās* used in worship but *jñānamudrā* is not included. Chapters 372–76 discuss yoga, roughly following the same format of Patañjali’s *aṅgas*, but *mudrās* do not feature here at all, possibly an indication that the chapters were included in an earlier, pre-tantric period.

The 13th-century *Mudrānighaṇṭu*, which forms part of the *Vāmakeśvaratantra*, also lists *mudrās* that accompany various tantric practices including worship, *japa* and bathing, and can “bring the *sādhaka* nearer to the Deity.”²⁸ A gesture involving joining the index finger and thumb together, done with the right hand only, is included in the *Mudrānighaṇṭu*, known as *vyākhyānamudrā*. No further information is given, although the name clearly designates it as a gesture of teaching.²⁹ *Cinmudrā*, or what seems the closest approximation, is also included, referred to as *jñānamudrā*, and is described as:

The forefinger and thumb of the right hand should be made to touch each other and the rest of the fingers be bent a little. The hand in this position should then be placed over the heart. The left hand should be placed on the left thigh with the palm facing upwards. This is *jñānamudrā* loved by Śrī Rāmacandra.³⁰

“casket” is always recommended in meditation, reflecting upon, yoga, etc.” (*saṃyojya dvau talau sarvāṇy aṅgulyagrāṇi hastayoḥ || saṃyojya pāśvato 'ṅguṣṭhau samputaḥ procyaṭe suraiḥ | sarveṣāṃ atha devānāṃ samputaḥ prītidāyakaḥ || dhyānacintanayogādau samputaḥ śasyate sadā ||*) (trans. Kooij 2021: 85).

²⁷ AP 27.72–73: “By means of contemplative mood and the pose of knowledge (*jñānamudrā*) (they) are all purified. When all the principles have been thus purified and the Supreme lord remains as the main, the principles have to be burnt and (the fire) extinguished and the disciples have to be engaged in the service of the Lord” (*śodhayed dhyānayogena sarvato jñānamudrayā | śuddheṣu sarvatattveṣu pradhāne ceśvare sthite || dagdhvā nirvāpayec chiṣyān pade caiśe niyojayet ||*) (trans. Gangadharan 1984: 73–74).

²⁸ MGh 145: “at the time of worship, *japa* and bathing, when exhibited, bring the *sādhaka* nearer to the Deity” (*pūjākāle jape snāne devatāsannidhāyakam*) (trans. Rai 1978: 8).

²⁹ MGh 95: “join the tips of the forefinger and thumb of the right hand; rest of the fingers touching each other be raised upwards” (*dakṣiṇāṅguṣṭhatarjanyāvāgralagne parāṅgulīḥ | prasārya saṃhatottānā eṣā vyākhyānamudrikā ||*) (trans. Rai 1978: 109).

³⁰ MGh 51–52: (*tarjanyāṅguṣṭhakau saktāu vakrato hṛdi vinyaset | vāmahastāmbujaṃ vāmajānumūrdhani vinyaset*

Although there appears to be no reference to yoga or meditation, practical use of the gesture may not have been solely restricted to tantric ritual, as visual and material records suggest.

4.2 Material Evidence

The *Śaktinidhi*, or first volume of the 19th-century *Śrītattvanidhi*, provides a short description of the Nāths, claiming they are “propagators of Yogaśāstra and preceptors of *mantras* to all.”³¹ The text includes an illustration of a Nāth sitting in a meditative posture held together with a *yogapaṭṭa*, holding his hands in *jñānamudrā* exactly as it is described in the *Mudrānighaṇṭu* (fig. 27).

The gesture is included alongside other archetypal features of the Śaiva Nāth tradition such as the *jaṭā*, *rudrākṣa* rosary, and earrings. The illustration does not provide any information on what the gesture was used for, but the context in which it is placed is clearly meditative. Although there are no textual references verifying the gesture’s use within yoga practice at the time of the *Mudrānighaṇṭu*, the painting creates the possibility that *jñānamudrā* could have become a part of Nāth identity, or of meditation practice.

Before interpreting the “yogic” nature of hand gestures in a painting such as that in the *Śaktinidhi*, it is necessary first to consider extant literature on the visual arts that shed light on how *mudrās* were used within painting, sculpture, and iconography. At the outset, it must be acknowledged that this presents problems. Even though there is widespread use of *mudrās* as hand gestures within iconography, *cinmudrā*, or a gesture resembling it, despite being relatively common, is hardly mentioned in iconography texts (Serbaeva 2013: 92). Moreover, Nardi (2006: 2–3) has argued that theories of painting and sculpture that exist in the *citrasūtras* were intended only as suggestive guidelines, rather than prescriptive rules that artists were required to follow. Further, some texts even offer contradictory information. The *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, for example, has chapters dealing with *citra*, but stresses that knowledge of gestures in sculpture can only be understood alongside knowledge of gestures in dance.³² However,

|| *jñānamudrā bhaved eṣā rāmacandrasya priyasī* || (trans. Rai 1978: 101).

³¹ ŚTN *Śaktinidhi* 447: (*tatra nāthāḥ mahādevyāḥ yogaśāstrapravartakāḥ || sarveṣāṃ mantraguravas sarvavidyāmahārṇavāḥ* ||) (trans. M.o.M. Kṛṣṇarāja Vaḍeyara III, et al. 1997: 315).

³² VDhP III. 2.4: “It is very difficult to know the canon of painting without knowing the canon of dance, because, O king! in both, the world is to be imitated (or represented)” (*vinā tu ṛttaśāstreṇa citrasūtram sudurvidam | jagato ’nukriyā kāryā dvayor api yato ṛpa* ||) (trans. Shah 2002: 26).



Fig. 27: A Nāth holding *jñānamudrā*, *Śaktinidhi* 24b. Photograph: Oriental Research Institute, University of Mysore.

the list of dance gestures in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* and other texts do not display any correlation with those used in iconography.

Notwithstanding these issues, there are some texts which do contain information on hand gestures used for iconography. For example, the 16th-century compendium on ritual practices, the *Mantramahodadhi*, lists many *mudrās* to assist the practitioner's visualisation of the deity. Some of the tantric deities are described as holding *jñānamudrā*, described as “the joining of the thumb and index finger.”³³ Other deities are represented holding *vyākhyānamudrā* which is unfortunately not described, but believed to be identical (Bühnemann 2000: 138, 174). Likewise, the *Prapañcasāra* and the *Śāradātilaka* also mention deities holding *jñānamudrā* and *vyākhyānamudrā*, but again, no descriptions are given.³⁴

No direct connection to yoga or meditation exists in these iconography texts, but suggestions of a more “yogic” dimension to the gestures can be found in sculptural records from the Someśvara temple at Pimpri-Dumala. All the figures in the temple are

³³ MM 12.76: (*jñānākhyayā sā cāṅguṣṭhatarjanīyogato matā ||*) (trans. Bühnemann 2000: 196).

³⁴ See Bühnemann 2001.

Nāth *siddhas*, including a representation of Matsyendranātha sitting in *padmāsana*, holding *jñānamudrā* (fig. 28). Although the meaning of the gesture suggests “knowledge” rather than yoga or meditation, the gesture was clearly not incompatible with Nāth iconography. A parallel can be found here with early representations of Buddha, who was also depicted holding his index finger and thumb together, usually with the right hand only. Referred to as *vitarkamudrā*, the gesture also had nothing to do with meditation, and instead signified the act of teaching (fig. 29).



Fig. 28: Matsyendranātha at Pimpri-Dumala, 14th century. Photograph: Rob Linrothe.



Fig. 29: Buddha, Indonesia, 9th century. Photograph: The Met Museum.

Significant to this discussion is the Mallikārjuna temple at Srisailam. Sculptures of many types of *siddhas* abound on the temple walls, including one example of a *siddha* sitting with his eyes closed, seemingly in meditation, and displaying characteristic features such as a long beard and flowing, matted hair. His hands are placed on top of one another with the palms facing up, a gesture that has been noted earlier; however, the top hand has the index finger and thumb joined together (fig. 30).

In another example, a *siddha*, this time with earrings and a *rudrākṣa* rosary, holds his index finger and thumb together in front of the chest, while so deep in meditation that he is unconcerned by a tiger crouching near him, ready to pounce (fig. 31).³⁵

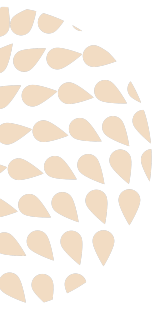


Fig. 30: A *siddha* in meditation with one hand in *cinmudrā*, Srisailam. Photograph: Rob Linrothe.



Fig. 31: A *siddha* meditating while a tiger crouches near him, Srisailam. Photograph: Rob Linrothe.

³⁵ An alternative understanding could be that the animal senses the level of perfection in the *siddha*, and therefore has no fear; instead of viewing him as prey, it offers reverence. I thank Rob Linrothe for bringing this to my attention.



In both examples, the figure appears to be in *siddhāsana*, a posture mentioned in the *Haṭhapradīpikā*, a *haṭhayoga* text most likely composed in the Srisailam area, in the years immediately before the creation of the temple.³⁶ The text, however, does not describe *siddhāsana* as involving any gesture of the hands.³⁷ Equally, iconography texts, as discussed above, are also clear that joining the index finger and thumb together has nothing to do with yoga or meditation; the most common understandings are knowledge or teaching. And whereas features such as long, matted hair and earrings can be interpreted in terms of their established understanding as indicators of *siddha* identity, the hand gesture cannot.

The prevalence of the gesture is therefore confusing. It may simply be that within Indian art, icons are frequently displayed holding attributes or performing actions, and “empty” hands do not tend to appear (Bühnemann 2000: 46). However, this paper argues that it could represent the fluid intermingling of tantric and *haṭhayoga* concepts as seen earlier in certain texts. In the Srisailam sculptures the gesture is not placed on the knees as it would have been in the 20th century, so, clearly, no direct conclusion can be drawn that *cinmudrā* was used to accompany meditation or *prāṇāyāma* at the time. But it is possible that a mutual exchange of tantric and *haṭhayoga* practices was taking place, a dialogue that could have facilitated a shift in understanding from *mudrās* that “seal” *mantras*, to *mudrās* that “seal” meditation.

Exactly what facilitated the emergence of *cinmudrā* into *haṭhayoga* practice in the forthcoming centuries remains unclear. However, that the gesture’s use within meditation and *prāṇāyāma* could have evolved from a tantric milieu is, I believe, a hypothesis worth considering. Of course, it may be possible that the origin of *cinmudrā* within yoga practice could be from an altogether different or even earlier source, a proposition which will now be considered.

³⁶ Personal communication with James Mallinson, 30.08.23.

³⁷ *Siddhāsana* is described in different ways, including HP 1.35: “[The yogi] should put the heel at the perineum, firmly place the [other] foot on the penis, focus the mind, hold the body erect and [remain] motionless, his senses restrained, gazing between the brows with his eyes unmoving. This, which breaks open the door to liberation, is called the adepts’ pose” (*yonisthānakam aṅghrimūlaghaṭitaṃ kṛtvā dṛḍhaṃ vinyasen meḍhre pādān athaikam ekahṛdayo dhṛtvā samān vigrahaṃ | sthānuḥ saṃyamitendriyo’caladṛśā paśyan bhruvor antaraṃ etan mokṣapāṭābhedajanakaṃ siddhāsanaṃ procyate ||*) (trans. Mallinson et al. 2024).

5. Early Representations of *Cinmudrā*

5.1 Dance Literature

One of the most significant usages of hand gestures in ancient India was in the context of dance and the performing arts. The *Nāṭya Śāstra*, probably composed around the beginning of the Common Era, details sixty-seven hand gestures, known as a *hastas*, to be utilised in a dance or theatrical context. For each gesture the text provides information on how it should be executed, as well as what it may be used to signify. As there are separate chapters devoted to movements of other parts of the body, no information is available on how the gestures could be combined with sitting or standing positions.

One such gesture is *arāla*, which is described as having the thumb and index finger bent, but without touching.³⁸ *Sandaṃśa hasta* is described as similar to *arāla* but with the index finger and thumb together to represent a pincer, held over a hollowed palm.³⁹ The text goes on to explain that the gesture can be placed in front of the body, near the mouth or to the side.⁴⁰ It is when placed to the side that *sandaṃśa* most closely resembles *cinmudrā*. The text explains that “[two] such hands should be combined,” and when doing so could then be used to represent many things, including “yoga and meditation.”⁴¹

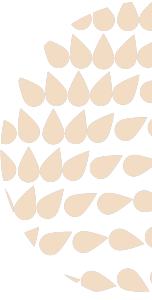
The *Nāṭya Śāstra* is conventionally understood as an instruction manual. However, although the text advises that *sandaṃśa* could represent yoga and meditation in performance, this does not in itself mean that the gesture was used in yoga practice at

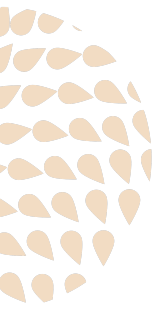
³⁸ NŚ 9.46: “the forefinger curved like a bow, the thumb also curved and the remaining fingers separated and turned upwards” (*ādyā dhanurnatā kāryā kuñcitāṅguṣṭhakas tathā | śeṣā bhinnordhvavalitā hy arāle 'ṅgulayaḥ kare ||*) (trans. Ghosh 1950: 174).

³⁹ NŚ 9.109: “the forefinger and the thumb of the *arāla* hand crossed and the palm a little hollowed” (*tarjanyaṅguṣṭhasandaṃśas tv arālasya yathā bhavet | ābhugnatalamadhyasthaḥ sa sandaṃśa iti smṛtaḥ ||*) (trans. Ghosh 1950: 180).

⁴⁰ NŚ 9.110: “the *sandaṃśa* (hand) according to the sentiments and states, is of three kinds, viz. that [held] in front, that near the mouth and that on one side” (*sandaṃśas trividho jñeya hy agrajo mukhajas tathā | tathā pārśvagataś caiva rasabhāvopabṛṃhitaḥ ||*) (trans. Ghosh 1950: 180).

⁴¹ NŚ 9.113: “to represent the sacred thread, piercing a hole [in pearls and similar objects], bow-string, fineness, arrow, and objects aimed at, yoga, meditation and small quantity [two] such hands should be combined” (*yajñopavītaḥ hāṇavedhanagaṇasūkṣmabāṇalakṣyeṣu | yoge dhyāne stoke saṃyuktakaraṇas tu kartavyaḥ ||*) (trans. Ghosh 1950: 180).





the time. Nevertheless, the similarity with *cinmudrā*, both in form and in meaning, certainly begs the question as to whether the author of the *Nāṭya Śāstra* was associating *sandaṃśa* with yoga and meditation precisely because a similar gesture, possibly known by a different name, was already in use.

The later *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* is widely regarded as having borrowed significantly from the *Nāṭya Śāstra*, and therefore introduces hand gestures that are virtually identical. *Sandaṃśa hasta* is explained in the same manner, again with many possible uses.⁴² The text goes further than the *Nāṭya Śāstra*, explaining to performers that:

Concentration of the mind should be shown by looking down and slightly bending the head. To indicate a smile, meditation or guess, the left hand in the *sandaṃśa* pose should be used.⁴³

The *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* does, however, deviate from the *Nāṭya Śāstra* in that a distinction is made between hand gestures used for dance, which are called *hastas*, and “secret” *rahasya mudrās* for those “desirous of the highest *siddhi*,” which should be performed with *mantra*.⁴⁴ In this section of the text, which was possibly written later and displays a tantric rather than theatrical influence, nothing resembling *cinmudrā* is included.

Later literature, such as the 13th-century *Samgītaratnākara*, includes *sandaṃśa* in its chapter on dance, but omits any reference to yoga or meditation. The text does, however, follow the *Nāṭya Śāstra* in its formulation of *rasa*, although whereas the *Nāṭya Śāstra* lists eight *rasas*, the *Samgītaratnākara* follows the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* with the inclusion of a ninth, *śāntarasa*. The experiences (*anubhāva*) of *śāntarasa* include, among other things, holding *jñānamudrā*. No description of the gesture is given, although the text also recommends looking at the tip of the nose, a feature inspired perhaps from the

⁴² VDhP III.26.49: “when in the *arāla* hand, the fore-finger and the thumb are pressed together in a way to form pincers and the middle of the palm is bent, it is called *sandaṃśa*.” (*tarjanyaṅguṣṭhasandaṃśas tv arālasya yadā bhavet | nirbhugnatalamadhyas ca sa sandaṃśa iti smṛtaḥ ||*) (trans. Shah 2002: 87).

⁴³ VDhP III.28.27: (*ekacitto hy adhodṛṣṭiḥ śiraḥ kiñcinnataṃ bhavet | savyahastaś ca sandaṃśe smite dhyāne vitarkite ||*) (trans. Shah 2002: 97).

⁴⁴ VDhP III.33.124: “the persons desirous of the highest *siddhi* (achievement) should exhibit these *mudrās* in accordance with the mantra, the *deva* and *vidhi*” (*darśayen mantrayuktānāṃ parāṃ siddhim abhīpsatām | yathā mantraṃ yathā devaṃ yathā vidhir atandritaḥ ||*) (trans. Shah 2002: 121).



practice of yoga.⁴⁵ If this is the case, it would not be the only occasion where the author, Śārṅgadeva, demonstrates his familiarity with yoga: he recommends, for example, that dancers practise the *utkaṭa* posture⁴⁶ and the breathing technique *vimukta*;⁴⁷ both, he points out, are also practised in yoga and meditation. *Jñānamudrā* is not mentioned anywhere else in the text and is clearly differentiated from the hand gestures used in performance. While it cannot be certain, it is possible that the gesture refers to *cinmudrā* and that Śārṅgadeva was including it within the context of dance and possibly also in the context of yoga.

Dance literature therefore provides inconclusive evidence in attempting to determine whether *cinmudrā* had early origins within the context of yoga and meditation. However, archaeological evidence has also yielded potential indications of *cinmudrā*'s historical roots, which will be investigated now.

5.2 Archaeological Evidence

In 2001, human skeletons dating from the 6th century BCE were discovered in Balathal, Rajasthan. The archaeological report noted that a male skeleton was found in a cross-legged “meditation” position, closely resembling a lotus posture (Robbins et al. 2006: 62). The left ankle is crossed over the right, and both hands appear to be on the knees, with the thumb and index finger touching (fig. 32). Another female skeleton was also buried in a carefully placed posture, crouching to one side with a pot near her head.⁴⁸ In complete contrast, all the other skeletons were buried without props, in an unspecific manner (ibid.).

The discovery prompted an enthusiastic reaction from Hindu nationalists, who claim that the apparent *padmāsana* with *cinmudrā* showed clear evidence that yoga and

⁴⁵ SR 7.1508-10: “the eyes directed towards the tip of the nose, showing the *jñānamudrā* [gesture indicating wisdom]; these and others are the consequents” (*nāsāgrānugate netre jñānamudrāpradarśanam || ity ādayo'nubhāvāḥ syur ime tu vyabhicāriṇaḥ ||*) (trans. Raja & Burnier 1976: 224).

⁴⁶ SR 7.1100-1: “when the heels and the hips are on the same level and the feet are on the ground in the natural position, it is *utkaṭa*. [It is used] in yogic posture, in meditation, in chanting [religious songs, etc.,] in the morning or evening, etc.” (*samāsanasamaṇ sprṣṭabhūṭalaṇ caraṇau samau || yadā tadotkaṭaṇ yogadhyānasamdhyaṇapādiṣu ||*) (trans. Raja & Burnier 1976: 169).

⁴⁷ SR 7.479-80: *Vimukta* is stated to be the breath held for a long time and then let out. It is declared by the learned to be indicative of yoga, meditation and breath-control (*prāṇāyāma*)” (*saṃnyamya suciraṇ mukto vimuktaḥ kathyate'nilaḥ || yoge dhyāne ca sa proktaḥ prāṇāyāme ca sūribhiḥ ||*) (trans. Raja & Burnier 1976: 76).

⁴⁸ Personal communication with Gwen Robbins, 14.07.23.

meditation practice originated from the Vedic period. The report, however, concluded that the individual was probably given a *samādhi* burial, a method still used today for *sadhus* and religious figures who, having reached the *saṃnyāsi* or ascetic life stage, are not cremated, but accorded a specific burial (ibid. 61).⁴⁹



Fig. 32: A seated skeleton displaying an apparent *cinmudrā*, Balathal Photograph: Vasant Shinde.

This *samādhi* burial practice is documented in the 6th-century *Vaikhānasagṛhyasūtra*, which details the burial of *yogins* in a seated position:

[T]he Yogin, he who is absorbed in the God, and he who enters another body, these equally are without fires. Taking the body of (one of) these without touching it, between pieces of wood and binding it with ropes, he

⁴⁹ See McLaughlin 2021.

conveys it to a river that flows into the sea and digs a hole on a sandy spot. Here, he lays it down in a sitting posture and covers it with sand.⁵⁰

The *Vaikhānasadharmasūtra* is more specific, saying that the son of the *saṃnyāsin* should place the dead body on grass stalks, a reference perhaps to *darbha* grass, which was one of the traditional materials used for a meditation seat.⁵¹ The funeral rite continues:

Having bathed it with the Gāyatrī verse, and having laid it with this same verse in the pit, either in a lying or sitting posture, he puts into his (ie. the deceased's) right hand the triple staff repeating the mantras addressed to Viṣṇu; into his left hand the string.⁵²

The text continues with more items that need to be placed on different body parts, each with a specific *mantra*.

The use of props and sitting position described here has clear parallels with the Balathal skeletons. Also, the references to a seated position and *darbha* grass certainly do suggest meditation, so ostensibly the *cinmudrā* of the Balathal skeleton does appear to be associated with sitting in meditation, as it would be today. Despite the protestations of countless Hindu nationalists, to me this seems too good to be true. The evidence is only suggestive and no clear confirmation of *cinmudrā*'s early roots can be definitively established. An alternative could be that the gesture was simply an indication that the hands were holding items, as the *Vaikhānasadharmasūtra* prescribes.

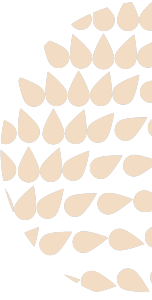
Before speculating on the *cinmudrā* of the Balathal skeleton, it is necessary to consider the role of hand gestures in general during this period, a topic for which there remains considerable ambivalence (Gonda 1980: 48). The hands were largely used to mark rhythm during Vedic *mantra* recitation,⁵³ although some gestures did seem to have had

⁵⁰ VGS 5.8: (*tathā yogī devasāyujyakaḥ parakāyapraveśīty ete 'py anagnayaḥ śarīram eteṣāṃ na spr̥śya kāṣṭhair antarīkṛtya rajjubhir baddhvā samudragāṃ nadīm nītvā vālukapradeśe śvabhraṃ khanati tatrāsayitvā vālukair eva*) (trans. Caland 2002: 140).

⁵¹ VDhS 3.8: “the dead body of a *saṃnyāsin* who had not established his sacred fires, is taken by his son or another person, after it has been deposited on grass stalks, through the help of pure Brahmins or by means of a support; it is laid down near a stream which flows into the sea or on the shore” (*saṃnyāsino 'nāhitāgner dehaṃ mṛtaṃ putro 'nyo vā tṛṇair antarīkṛtya śuddhair brāhmaṇair yantreṇa vā saṃnidhāya samudragāmyāṃ nadyāṃ tīre vā*) (trans. Caland 2002: 220).

⁵² VDhS 3.8: (*gāyatrīyā snāpayitvā tathā tatrāsayitvā śāyayitvā vā dakṣiṇe haste vaiṣṇair mantrais tridaṇḍaṃ saṃnyasya savye yad asya pārerajasa iti śikyam*) (trans. Caland 2002: 220).

⁵³ See Saunders 1960: 205, n. 11.



a more specific meaning. For example, the practice of joining the palms of the hands together in the centre of the chest has a *longue durée*, with evidence of the gesture existing as far back as the time of the Indus Valley civilisation (fig. 33). However, it is unclear what the gesture was known as, or what it would have signified. The same gesture, now named as *añjali*, was employed in Vedic times as a gesture of reverence, prayer, and offering (ibid. 66), and also appeared in early texts with the same associations.⁵⁴ To my knowledge, the first occasion of joining the index finger and thumb together in a gesture resembling *cinmudrā* occurs in the Buddhist *stūpas* at Bharhut (fig. 34), although the figures were possibly worshippers with no connection with yoga or meditation (Cunningham 1879: plate XIV).



Fig. 33: Figure demonstrating a hand gesture, 2700–2100 BCE. Photograph: National Museum, New Delhi.



Fig. 34: Relief from Bharhut, 2nd - 1st century BCE. New Delhi.

It does seem to be the case that hand gestures were used in specific funeral rites, although with a considerable lack of specificity, and no apparent role for *cinmudrā* (Gonda 1980: 69). Given this lack of clarity, it seems impossible to conclude that *cinmudrā* played any part in the *samādhi* burial practice at Balathal. However, it is equally speculative that the hands were placed in this manner because they were holding items. The *Vaikhānasadharmasūtra* was composed a considerable interval after

⁵⁴ For example, *Dīgha Nikāya* 4.9 mentions a respected ascetic is “saluted with joined palms” (*añjaliṃ pañāmetvā*) (trans. Walshe 1995: 129).

the date of the skeleton, and furthermore there were no objects found near the body of the male skeleton.⁵⁵

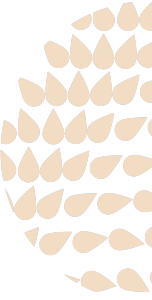
The available evidence from early dance literature and archaeological findings seems to raise more questions than it answers. While uncertainty remains over the role of the hand gesture in the Balathal skeleton, it could be argued that even though *cinmudrā* may not have been part of an established practice, there was at least some association with spiritual realisation. The *samādhi* burial practice was reserved for *yogins* and ascetics. That *cinmudrā* or something resembling it was found in that context suggests some connection with spiritual expression. And equally, in the *Nāṭya Śāstra*, although *sandamśa hasta* cannot be seen as confirmation of *cinmudrā*'s existence in the way it was understood in the 20th century, an association with yoga and meditation is nevertheless clear. So even if holding *cinmudrā* was not part of a living practice at the time, it does seem possible that there may have been some kind of relationship with spirituality, though perhaps not yet fully developed. It cannot be proved but there is a chance that this identification was the kernel for the future evolution of a fully matured practice that still carries on today.

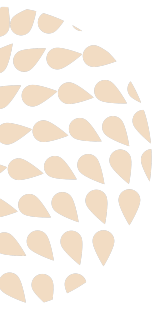
6. Conclusion

The idea that the hands and fingers were associated with spirituality is not exclusive to yoga, as gestures endowed with spiritual significance featured in Brahmanic, Buddhist, Jain, and Christian traditions. Further, modern science is clear that the hands, especially the fingertips, are densely innervated, therefore more effective than other body parts at sending information to the brain (Corniani and Saal 2020: 1234). It is therefore no surprise that yoga, or any practice addressing or stilling the mind, would include a gesture involving the fingertips.

That gesture, for 20th-century yoga practitioners, was *cinmudrā*. This research has shown that its adoption was clearly not without historical antecedence. Textual records from the 18th and 19th centuries reveal that *cinmudrā* was already in use, and pictorial evidence has corroborated that the gesture was gaining traction. However, as has been demonstrated, not all yoga texts of the period incorporated *cinmudrā*, and some unanswered questions remain. For example, there were multiple variations of the gesture, including with the hands upwards or downwards, and it is not clear whether these represented specific differences in meaning. It is equally not clear why gurus such as Sivananda and Mahaprajna chose to include the gesture, as their respective source-

⁵⁵ Personal communication with Gwen Robbins, 28.07.23.





texts did not validate its use. That the gesture was so rife in the 20th century is also unaccountable. This research has shown there was a near-universal adoption of *cinmudrā* by practitioners of the time, who for whatever reason chose not to sit with the hands in the lap, a gesture with over a thousand years of history. While available evidence from the early modern period demonstrates *cinmudrā* was clearly germinating, it does not fully explain why the gesture ascended to such a zenith of popularity.

It is also noteworthy that much of the evidence from the early modern period points to *cinmudrā* accompanying *sukhāsana*. *Sukhāsana* had a dubious reputation as being lower in status than the superlative *padmāsana*. For example, the *Trīśikhibrahmaṇa Upaniṣad* recommends *sukhāsana* for those not strong enough to do other postures.⁵⁶ However, as has been demonstrated, not all 20th-century yoga gurus were specific about recommending *cinmudrā* with *sukhāsana*; rather, most often, *cinmudrā* accompanied *padmāsana*. It may be that by the 20th century, the sense of hierarchy of postures had lessened, or indeed it was *cinmudrā* that was elevated to a position worthy of inclusion in a “superior” posture.

Given that the gesture was clearly practised in the early modern period, the question that then arises is whether it had beginnings deeper in history. Exactly what the source was, if there was one, remains unknown. Hand gestures feature strongly in tantra, so it is possible *cinmudrā*’s emergence into *haṭhayoga* was from the sphere of ritual. However, *mudrās* had clear purposes within tantric ritual, so there must have been a shift in meaning and role. Iyengar’s Vedāntic understanding of *cinmudrā* as uniting the individual and supreme soul, and the modern therapeutic understanding of balancing the body’s elements, are interpretations that may be valid historically. However, if *cinmudrā* migrated from a tantric to a *haṭhayoga* arena, these meanings must have been superimposed onto a gesture with quite different connotations.

Likewise, it is possible that *cinmudrā* originated from iconography. It is not unusual for a deity or an iconic figure like Matsyendranātha to be shown with the index finger and thumb together. It is possible that the icon, an exemplar of yoga, is depicted with a gesture symbolising knowledge (*jñānamudrā*) to indicate an *acquired* knowledge, in recognition of their status. Many 20th-century yoga pioneers who adopted the gesture also referred to it as *jñānamudrā*. It is speculation on my part, but it is possible that as

⁵⁶ TŚBU II:51-2: “That, wherein comfort and steadiness are attained somehow or other, is known as the Sukhāsana. He, who is not strong enough (for the other postures), should adopt this” (*yena kena prakāreṇa sukhaṃ dhāryaṃ ca jāyate || tat sukhāsanam ity uktam aśaktas tat samācaret ||*) (trans. T. R. Śrīnivāsa Ayyaṅgār 1938: 100).

the gesture was recommended for less exalted practitioners, the meaning may have become modified to denote *acquiring* knowledge, the implication being that practicing *padmāsana* with *cinmudrā* assists the practitioner in achieving knowledge.

Of course, the roots of *cinmudrā* may go even deeper. The evidence from pre-modern performance traditions and Vedic funeral rites, both of which to a lesser or greater degree utilised gestures, has opened the possibility that *cinmudrā* may have had early origins. This research has questioned whether the *Nāṭya Śāstra* provides this evidence. However, considering the absence of other, contemporaneous evidence to support this claim, it remains unlikely that *cinmudrā* was practised at this time. Further, the *Nāṭya Śāstra* allows performers a degree of individual freedom when choosing which gesture to adopt, so the association of *sandamśa hasta* with yoga and meditation may not be that clear cut.⁵⁷

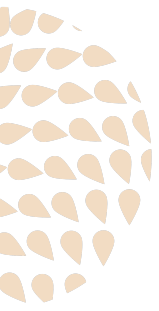
It is not beyond reasonable doubt, however, so it is possible that *cinmudrā* is more ancient than previously thought. Although unlikely, I do not think it is possible to definitively conclude that *cinmudrā* did *not* exist during the time of the Balathal skeleton. Had the gesture existed, however, it would most certainly have had a different symbolism than its 20th-century counterpart. The *Vaikhānasagrhyasūtra* is clear that the fingers relate to deities, which is a theistic understanding far removed from 20th-century interpretations that positioned *cinmudrā* as an aid to meditation.

Not only would *cinmudrā* have had a different meaning, it would also have had a different name. The early meaning of “*mudrā*” had nothing to do with gesture, and instead the term referred to a “seal,” a definition that was subsequently expanded to include the mark created by a seal, a seal ring, or coins struck by a seal (Saunders 1960: 6). Exactly when *mudrā* came to refer to a hand gesture is unknown, but it was most likely in the tantric era (ibid., Serbaeva 2013: 91). And in early dance literature, as has been shown, gestures were known as *hastas*.

However, if the gesture, known by a different name, did have a place in early yoga and meditation, then the question arises of why it completely disappeared from textual records, only to reappear in the 18th and 19th centuries. It is true, of course, that if something is not recorded in texts, that does not mean it did not exist. However, the overwhelming absence of *cinmudrā* in countless *hathayoga* texts certainly does make it difficult to believe it could have had early origins.

⁵⁷ NŚ 9.156: “In acting, hand [gestures] should be selected for their form, movement, significance, and class according to the personal judgement [of the actor]” (*ākṛtyā ceṣṭayā cihnairjātyā vijñāya tatpunah | svayam vitarkya kartavyam hastābhinayanaṁ budhaiḥ ||*) (trans. Ghosh 1950: 185).





So, the genealogy of *cinmudrā* remains a mystery. Of course, hand gestures were often shrouded in mystery, even considered secret, and not uncommonly, concealed from view.⁵⁸ Perhaps the genesis of *cinmudrā* is also a secret, its origins obscure, its full history incomprehensible.

This research has attempted to open the door on this enigmatic subject. By shedding light on a seemingly trivial aspect of yoga, discoveries have been made that enable a reconsidering of the history of gesture within the context of yoga and meditation. While gaps do remain, this research is a step forwards, one that I hope will inspire further exploration, finally solving the mystery that is *cinmudrā*.

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⁵⁸ For example, MGH 145 advises that *mudrās* should be “kept secret and not disclosed to a treacherous person” (*gopyaṃ kuru mahādevi na deyaṃ kitave śaṭhe ||*) (trans. Rai 1978: 113).

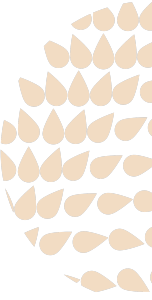
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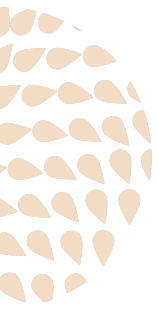
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Images

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