

## A Study of *Mudrās* of Buddha Images from Philosophical Point of view

Soe Soe Lwin\*

### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to show that the *Mudrās* of Buddha Images in Myanmar are not only religious symbols but also philosophical symbol. *Mudrā* is a hand style of Buddha image or gesture of Buddha image. It can be regarded as symbols of Buddhist art that convey knowledge about the teaching and life of Buddha. This paper is used descriptive and evaluate method to explain and evaluate the meanings of some *Mudrās* of Buddha images. This paper contributes to understanding of Myanmar Philosophical symbol and thought.

### Introduction

Myanmar is a nation, where most people take refuge in *Theravāda* Buddhism as a religion. Buddha images, pagodas and temples are the symbols of the Buddhist faith, created in accordance with Myanmar traditional custom and culture. According to a Myanmar scholar, by observing works of art in Bagan, it can be seen that Myanmar traditional works of art originated in Buddhist art so it is necessary to clearly understand the historical background of Buddha Images, the reason for their creation, and the rules and regulations governing the making of Buddha Images.

A brief survey of the historical background of Buddhist art will show that even before the creation of Buddha images, symbols were used to represent His Teachings. The Buddha in His life time made it clear that He was a human being who through His own efforts had obtained enlightenment, and that others could also obtain such wisdom with right effort. The images were not however considered as copies of the Buddha's actual physical appearance but of the essence of his great wisdom and purity.

Buddha images are not imitation or copies of the real Buddha but are symbolic representations of what the Buddha was and what He taught during His life time. The *Mudrās* of Buddha images are symbolic of the Buddha's teaching, His sermon and life stories. In another aspect it could be said that the *Mudrās* (and the Buddha images) were created as historical evidence that a personage such as the Buddha existed and that He showed the way to liberation from the endless round of suffering. So the main essence of the *Mudrā* is not primarily aesthetic. Its purpose is to convey in simple and picturesque form what the Buddha thought.

Moreover a symbol is a concept by which one can know about something. In this essence the *Mudrā* is a symbol. So this paper aims to show that the *Mudrā* is a symbol which is connected with and has great significance in Buddhism.

### What a Buddha Image is

Buddha image found in Myanmar are in different shapes, sizes and styles depending on his changing ages and background conditions. However the essences of Buddhism, the philosophical views and the aims Buddhist symbols are generally about the same. Buddha is unrivalled and can never be imitated.

A Buddha image is the very spirit of the Buddhist religion that the artist has to convey in human form aesthetically. Accordingly, we are to understand that this form is not intended to be realistic but it is idealized and spiritualized, for otherwise it would not suggest and abstract idea (Cassirer, 1874-1945).

---

\*Dr., Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, Dagon University

Buddha image was carved by inscription, about 500 years after the *Mahāparinibbāna* (passing away). Buddha Images began to be carved at the end of AD 1st century in the *Gandhara* and *Mathura* regions of India. Before Buddha image, Buddha was instead symbolized by His foot prints, or by *Dhammacakrā*-“the wheel of law”, or by a lotus, or by the Banyan tree and Throne.

The Buddhist iconography would not have been made prior to the Indian invasion of Alexander the great in 326-325 BC. When the ideological prohibition to make a human representation of an incomparable person was finally overcome, *Gandhara* and *Mathura* started making the Images and no Images was older than AD 36th. The type and style of the Images vary with time and place (Htun Hmat Win, 1979).

The Images first carved by the *Pyu* and *Mon* had their own characteristic feature.

According to *Uttama Purisa* prevail, they are; (1) The palm of the foot is full. (2) The foot has 108 marks on it. (3) The heel is longer than ordinary. (4) The toes and finger are smooth and soft like that of an infant. (6) All toes and all fingers are of equal length. (7) Prominent lateral malleolus. (8) The hand long enough to touch the Knee. (9) Tender skin. (10) Golden complexion. (11) Each follicle contains only one hair. (12) The soft hair curls clockwise and its brownish in colors. (13) Lion like breast. (14) The thigh shaped like a long smooth seed. (15) Fully sheathed male organ. (16) Straight torso. (17) The neck, shoulders, blades. (19) Proportionate built (no short leg and limb). (20) Broad and square shoulders. (21) No veins (or muscles) showing. (22) Strong jaws like those of a lion. (23) Forty teeth in the mouth. (24) All teeth are equal size. (25) No gap between teeth. (26) All teeth clean and canine teeth are sharp. (27) Long tongue to clean nostrils and ear. (28) Has the voice of a hero. (29) Deep brown eyes. (30) Eyes bright like those of a newly born calf. (31) Hair on the brown ridge called *Urna*. (32) Exuberant hair called *Unisa* right on the top of the head (Than Tun, 2002).

Typed is used in the sense that the Image maker conform to the special features given in the above thirty two characteristic of Buddha. Style simply means that details differ with time and place. But other scholar state that, Buddha images were in human form were carved only in the 2nd century BC. Before that time, other symbols such as thrones, Banyan trees, circles, ornamented book, etc; instead of the Buddha images, were created and revered or worshipped.

The Buddha images studied in iconography are inanimate objects. But they are created in various postures and styles, which symbolize different meanings and interpretations and there were rules and regulations in the sculpture of Buddha images that had to be followed. Signs and symbols were not to be used at random for it was important not to make errors in interpretation. Therefore, one needs to make a careful study of the following factors in Buddha images, relief figures, murals found in Buddhist religious art before making value judgments and drawing conclusions. What then are these important factors? They consist of:

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| (1) <i>Mudrā-Hattha</i>          | (Hand Gesture and Poses)                             |
| (2) <i>Āsan –Pallarika</i>       | (Postures, Seats, Pedestals, Dais throne and plinth) |
| (3) <i>Vāhana-Yāna</i>           | (Vehicles)   |
| (4) <i>Sāyana</i>                | (Recumbent)  |
| (5) <i>Thānaka-Bhanga</i>        | (Standing poses and Limb-Flexions)                   |
| (6) <i>Mauli-Kesabandha</i>      | (Head-gear and Hair-do)                              |
| (7) <i>Dhoti-Civara</i>          | (Dress and robes)                                    |
| (8) <i>Bhūsana-alarikāra</i>     | (Ornaments)  |
| (9) <i>Āvudha-parikkhara</i>     | (Weapons, implements, instrument and Requisites)     |
| (10) <i>Siracakka-Pabhāvali</i>  | (Nimbus and Halo stele)                              |
| (11) <i>Naccamutti</i>           | (Flying and Dancing modes)                           |
| (12) <i>Vatthu Kāriya Pamanā</i> | (materials used; and measurements; Iconometry)       |

It is said that the above mentioned twelve factors are important in creating Buddha images.

### ***Mudrā* and its Interpretation**

*Mudrā* either in Sanskrit or *Pali* in the field of Buddhist Art means the gesture or hand style of the Buddha Images. Each *Mudrā* symbol indicates individual meaning, considered seriously, according to the Buddhist literature and its interpretation in the examination of Buddha images, figures, statues and reliefs. *Mudrā* has a significant role. It is an important aspect of Buddhist iconography for they are symbolic and not just pictorial. In Myanmar, various styles of *Mudrā* are found in *Hindu* gods, Brahma and Greek style images.

Some *Mudrā* indicates or illustrates an idea only by one hand, and some by both hands and fingers. Some scholar of iconography have categorize, regarding images and statues, have defined various *Mudrā* and *Hattha*. The ideas and conception put forward are many depending on the position of the arm, armpit, elbow, wrist, palm and fingers and the height, inside or outside, closed or not etc: whether raised or lowered and whether the palms are turned.

In Myanmar, different *Mudrā* were designed and sculpted or carved to symbolize the different events in the Buddha's life and His teaching.

There are only five well known *Mudrā* styles in Myanmar. They are; (1) *Bhūmiphassa* or *Bhūphassa Mudrā* (2) *Abhaya Mudrā* (3) *Cyāna Mudrā* (4) *Dhammacakrā Mudrā* (5) *Varada Mudrā*. Each *Mudrā* has different definitions regarding the Buddha's philosophy, teaching, knowledge, perception and belief.

#### ***Bhūphassa Mudrā***

*Bhūmipassa* means touching the earth. It is commonly known as the earth witness *Mudrā*. It is called the earth touching posture which can be seen only in the sitting Buddha image only. In this *Mudrā* the left hand lies on the lap with palm upwards. The right hand rests on the right knee with the fingertips are touching the ground. According to Buddha's legend, the lord Buddha was sitting on the *Aparazita* throne under the *Bodhi* tree just before his enlightenment. At that time he was attacked by *Mara* and his flowers. But they could not attack Buddha. At last Buddha called the earth goddess to testify for the meritorious deeds in former existence. The earth goddess *Vasundre* appeared. She created the flooded area to down *Mara* and his followers. Finally Buddha repulsed the army of *Mara*. We can see this *Mudrā* at *Mahamyatmuni* image at Mandalay.

#### ***Abhaya Mudrā***

This *Mudrā* is the posture of dispelling fear or protection from danger. In this posture, the right hand rose in a line up to the shoulder and the palm turned to the front with the fingers directed shoulder and the palm turned to the front with the fingers directed upwards. The left hand hangs down by the side of the body. Sometime the both hand raised in a line up to the shoulder. This *Mudrā* can be seen in the sitting Buddha image and standing Buddha image. By the historical background, one morning, the lord Buddha went around the *Rajagha* for collecting alms. *Devatta* let the toxic led elephant, *Nalagiri* to the path where the Buddha was coming to harm the Buddha. But it could not kill Buddha. Buddha sent loving kindness towards the elephant. The elephant got the loving kindness of the lord Buddha and it become tamed animal, and sat and paid homage to the lord Buddha. This *Mudrā* of Buddha image can be seen at the *Lokha Chantha Abhaya Abhaya Labamuni* in *Mindhama* hill, in Yangon.

### ***Dhammacakrā Mudrā***

This *Mudrā* is the figure of the Buddha preached the first sermon. The first sermon is called *Dhammacakrā Mudrā tayadaw*. It means “The Four Novel Truth”. The *Dhammacakrā Mudrā* can be found in sitting Buddha image. The hand style is showing “the wheel of law in motion” in this *Mudrā*. The left hand is near the heart with the middle finger tip and thumb tip are joined together and the palm of the hand turned to the heart. The right hand, the tip of the index finger and thumb are joined in circle shape. And the other fingers are kept open and the palm is facing to the front. This *Mudrā* has a story of the lord Buddha. On the full moon day of *Waso* in the year 103 *Maha Era*, the lord Buddha delivered his first sermon (wheel of law) to the group of five (*Pyinsa vaggi Ngaoo*), who are *Kondinna*, *Vappa*, *Bhadiya*, *Mahamana*, *Assati* at *Migadhavon* forest (or) Deer park. They were earliest disciple of Buddha. And they became *Arahatta* after the first sermon teaching. So this event became a category of *Ddhammacakrā*. This *Mudra* of Buddha images can be seen at the *Ananda* temple and the Buddha images at *Alotawpyae* pagoda.

### ***Cyāna Mudrā***

It is called the meditation posture or meditation with supernatural power. This *Mudrā* can be found in sitting Buddha images. In this *Mudrā*, the palm of right hand rests on the palm of the left hand together is laid on the crossed legs of the seated image. According to the Buddha legend, before the lord Buddha entered the *Maha Prinibbana*, he took meditation gradually and step by step. Finally, he reached fourth supernatural power and entered *Nibbana*. So Buddha image was carved in meditation with supernatural power. This *Mudrā* style can be seen at *Swetawmyat Chedi* in Yangon.

### ***Varada Mudrā***

This *Mudrā* stands for giving blessing or charity. This *Mudrā* can be found in both standing and sitting Buddha images. In the standing position, the right hand is placed downward, with palm stretched and turned to the front. The left hand hangs down by the side of the body. In the sitting position, the right hand is in front of the chest. Thumb and index fingers are joined and upward, the left hand lies on the lap with palm upward. This *Mudrā* style can be found at *Ayan Chedi* in *Kaba Aye* pagoda in Yangon.

Depending on different groups and belief, there are various meanings of the *Mudrā* are the way to show a certain conception with different styles of the hands. This indicates or illustrates an idea, feeling etc; by hands. Fundamentally, there are two different kinds of *Mudrā*. They are; (a) the symbolic *Mudrā* used in the secret ceremony of exercising mystic power without recourse to evil spirits or making someone or something more potent and (b) the symbolic *Mudrā* used in the style of iconographic images, statues, reliefs, illustrations in *jataka* Buddhist art.

### ***Mudrā as a Philosophical Symbol***

Buddha Images are the representations of the Buddha; *Mudrās* are symbols of the reference of Buddha teachings. Therefore *Mudrās* can be defined as the representative art. Each *Mudrā* symbol differs from one another, for the concepts behind them are different. By considering the relevant symbols deeply, people will know the real teachings of Buddha properly. Symbols are art works of the representations of thoughts. They also support to evaluate the works of art. If the work of art indicates the representations of something, such is representative art. Such symbols represent something. For example, in *Bhūmiparsa Mudrā*, the right palm and fingers point downwards, touching the ground or the throne and the symbol means Buddha's glorious victory over *Mara* and his companions, witnessing *Vasondare*, the

goddess. Therefore, hand style of Buddha Image represents something, such can be said a work of art.

*Mudrā* symbols can be considered in accordance with Buddhist literature. Each *Mudrā* is representation of *Jataka* (Buddha's life stories) and Buddha teaching. *Mudrās* of Buddha Images have their respective representation.

A symbol is not the representation of something, but makes people to know about things. Therefore a symbol is not a thing, but knowledge. For example, *Abhaya Mudrā* style means prevention of danger. The meaning and the interpretation of *Abhaya Mudrā* is preventing one from any danger, and it suggest the life of Buddha who is far away from defilements, who has dispelled completely the enemies, defilements, who has also no secluded place to commit evils. A symbol of *Mudrā* has different meanings depending on various religions and thoughts. In Hindu Brahmin culture and Pyu culture, *Abhaya Mudrā* symbol is understand as that the most exalted, revered and glorious words of welcome to visitors, by making hand style.

*Mudrā* symbols cannot cause action, but they can give certain concept and effect. *Mudrā* cannot be defined mere gesture of Buddha; they can give people certain concepts, opinions and general notions concerning Buddha. Aesthetic researcher said that a symbol does not mean a thing, but conceptions. *Mudrā* can give the concepts concerning Buddha for the spectators. Therefore, it can be said as the symbol. Moreover, it is defined with thinking and philosophizing by deeply considering them, for that can be called philosophical symbol.

### Conclusion

Each *Mudrā* symbol has its own essence of features with different meanings so such *Mudrā* has different distinguishing features. Each *Mudrā* features Buddhist concepts and is connected to the Buddhist faith. The *Mudrās* convey to essence of Buddhist concepts realistically. We see therefore there is to something in Buddhism which corresponds to symbolism. Buddhism is thoroughly realistic in the sense that it does not symbolize any particular objects in distinction to something else. Symbolism in Buddhist philosophy may be said to be of a different connotation from what philosophers generally understand by that term.

The fashioning of the *Mudrā* especially stimulated awareness of the Buddha's teaching from religious, ethical and philosophic aspects. For example- the *Dhammacakkā Mudrā* reminds people of the *Four Noble Truths*- that life is full of suffering; there is a cause of this suffering; that there can be causation of suffering and finally that there is a way art of this suffering that is the Eightfold Noble Path. People when paying homage to a Buddha image with the *Dhammacakkā Mudrā* then will go on to think of the Eightfold Noble Path and many in that moment resolve to follow it as best as they can in daily life. So the *Mudrā* may be a simple gesture of the hands but has a wealth of meaning behind it and is guide to people on how to live a good life.

*Abhaya* means fearlessness and symbolizes protection and peace. Then the *Abhaya Mudrā* conveys the meaning that if the Buddha has overcome all dangers through his wisdom and purity and that if ordinary mortals take refuge in his teachings they will also be protected.

The *Chyana Mudrā* is a reminder that it is not enough to know the truth but that one must follow the example set by the Buddha and put into practice what He taught; that we must purify our minds of greed, anger and delusion through meditation. The *Bhūmiphassa* strengthens our faith in the Buddha and his teaching and that the very Earth or universe itself is witness to His enlightenment. These are just a few instance of how the *Mudrā* of Buddha

images can have an impact on those who pay homage and paying homage is more than a ritual. Hence *Mudrās* of Buddha images are important in philosophical study. A certain *Mudrā* is noted for a particular Buddha thought exactly, and various *Mudrās* have their own meanings.

Myanmar Buddhist philosophers have gained much knowledge of the Buddha's teachings and *Abhidhamma* by studying Buddha images, sculpture, relief, handicraft, painting, and architectural works in *Sasanica* structures and building. Myanmar iconography has thus contributed much to the study of Buddhism. It can be said that Buddhist art has been symbolic since its beginning and there is no Buddha art work without any symbols. According to the creators' deep thoughts and feelings, art work has been created for the people to learn religious thoughts and beliefs.

Art work is a connection between artists who create and the audience who considers and gain benefits in mind respectively. Therefore, studying the *Mudrā*, it is a work of art can give valuable knowledge to the people. *Mudrā* is created in accordance with Buddha's thoughts, teachings and life stories in an art work; therefore it should be studied from both the religion and aesthetic aspect. By studying some images in Myanmar, one can learn a lot about Myanmar art and architecture; how it originated and how in the course of its developed Myanmar developed her own technique and criteria.

Every single *Mudrā* describes clearly regarding the Buddha's *Dhamma*. *The Mudrās* are symbols that reflect his teaching and, people gain benefit from them not only as an art work but also helps us to cultivate *sīla*, *samadhi* and *panna*. These *Mudrās* symbols do not represent a particular thing or substance, but show the way to certain knowledge. Therefore, they do not denote substances, but connote knowledge. *Mudrās* simply mean hand postures of Buddha, but styles of the hand have certain meanings regarding the Buddha's thoughts and philosophy. A symbol is a medium which conveys the meaning between the artists creating items and the audience who experience senses.

In the same way the *Mudrā* of Buddha images are works of art, but art is just the medium or tool that lights the way to *Nibbana*. The great value of the *Mudrā* lies in the fact that they embody the essence and vision of the Buddha as both a religion and a philosophy.

### Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Rector Dr. Hla Htay and Pro-rector Dr. Aye Aye Tun (Dagon University) for their suggestions, encouragements and welcome advice. I wish to express my special thanks and gratitude to Professor Dr. San Tun, Head of Department of Philosophy (Dagon University).

### References

- Cassirer, E. (1874-1945). "The Philosophy of Symbolic forms, (The phenomenology of knowledge)", ST Marlin's Press, New York
- Htun Hmat Win, Sao. (1979). "Basis principles of Buddhist and Essentials of Burmese Buddhism", Department of Religious Affairs, Yangon
- Than Tun, Dr. (2002). "Buddhist Art and Architecture", Mone Ywe Publishing House

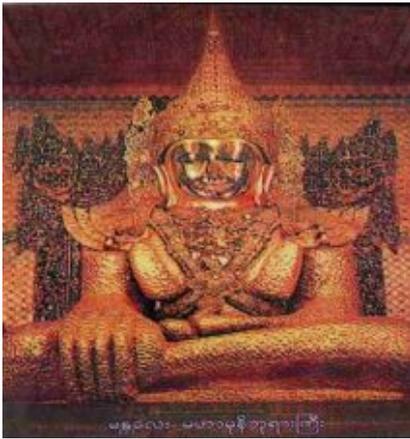


Figure 1 *Bhūmiphassa Mudrā*  
The Gesture of indication to the Earth as witness

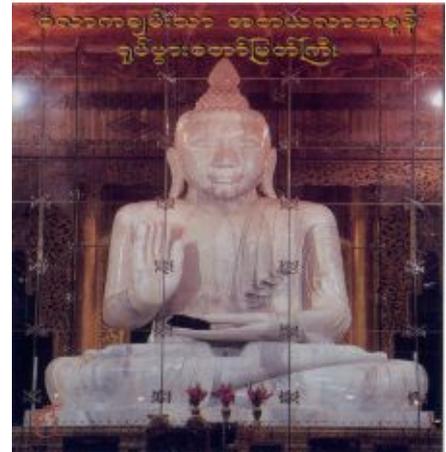


Figure 2 *Abhaya Mudrā*  
The Gesture of protection from danger



Figure 3 *Dhammacakrā Mudrā*  
The Gesture of teaching the first sermon



Figure 4 *Cyāna Mudrā*  
The Gesture of the style of being in meditation



Figure 5 *Varada Mudrā*  
The Gesture of giving blessing or charity