The Mudras, Hand Positions of the Buddha

Mudras are a non-verbal mode of communication and self-expression, consisting of hand gestures and finger-postures. They are symbolic sign based finger patterns taking the place, but retaining the efficacy of the spoken word, and are used to evoke in the mind ideas symbolizing divine powers or the deities themselves. The composition of a mudra is based on certain movements of the fingers; in other words, they constitute a highly stylized form of body or hand language. It is an external expression of ‘inner resolve’, suggesting that such non-verbal communications are more powerful than the spoken word. Many such hand positions were used in the Buddhist sculpture and painting of Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, India and Tibet.

Although there is no universal standard for Buddha’s appearance, many texts describe Buddha’s appearance and include lists of distinguished characteristics:

Meditation (Dhyana mudra)

Hands resting together on the lap – The Dhyana mudra are the mudra of meditation, of concentration on the Good law, and one of the attainment of spiritual perfection. According to tradition, this mudra derives from the one assumed by the Buddha when meditating under the pipal tree before his Enlightenment. This gesture was also adopted since time immemorial, by yogis during their meditation and concentration exercises.

Charity (Varada mudra)

This mudra symbolizes charity, compassion and boon-granting. It is the mudra of the accomplishment of the wish to devote oneself to human salvation. It is nearly always made with the left hand, and can be made with the arm hanging naturally at the side of the body, the palm of the open hand facing forward, and the fingers extended.

Absence of Fear (Abhaya mudra)

This mudra symbolizes protection, peace, and the dispelling of fear. It is made with the right hand raised to shoulder height, the arm crooked, the palm of the hand facing outward, and the fingers upright and joined. The left hand hangs down at the side of the body.
Calling the Earth to Witness (Bhumisparsha mudra)

With palm inwards, the right hand touched the ground and “calls the earth to witness” the Buddha’s enlightenment. The gesture symbolizes unshakable faith and resolution and is the most common posture for the Cambodian sculptures.

Debate, Explanation, Story-telling (Virtarka mudra)

Teaching (Dharmachakra mudra)

Buddha Sheltered by the Naga

While the Buddha was meditating close to Muchalinda water-pond, there was a heavy rainfall during which the scared naga appeared, allowing the Buddha to sit on his coils and spreading his head over the Buddha to prevent him from getting wet. This image of Buddha is found frequently in Cambodia.

The Reclining Buddha (Sayana mudra)

Representing the Buddha’s death. The posture symbolizes complete peace and detachment from the world.

Source: When the Buddha smiles... Buddha Exhibition Pamphlet. Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor, Siem Reap.