

Hans Georg Berger

THE MUDRA-SERIES

The photographs of the mudra-Series have been taken in different countries of South-East-Asia, between 1989 and 1992, when I started regular and intensive traveling in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, Burma and Vietnam. They use gestures and physical attitudes, which I first saw on representations of religious meaning. These gestures and attitudes are, in my photographs, expressed by boys and young men. Sometimes there is also the use of gold leaf, put on their busts or on their faces, as the faithful do with sacred statues or objects possessing magic powers.

„Mudra“ is a Sanskrit word meaning „seal“. In Hinduism and Buddhism it defines certain gestures of the arm, hand and fingers, which have precise symbolic and magic meaning. They are used in religious practice, in meditation and spiritual exercise, and it is believed that they create concentration and „call“ the sacred. Monks use them in ritual ceremonies, and they are well known to the laypeople who would use some of them when worshipping and meditating. In Buddhist sculpture and painting, mudras have been represented in countless variations over the centuries, creating an elaborate sign language, which is both sophisticated and full of secrets. The Mahavairochana-sutra, a sacred scripture, in its eleventh chapter draws a list of 31 mudras for the Great Buddha, 57 for the great divinities and 45 for other divinities.

Theravada Buddhism, the form of Buddhism largely practiced in the countries where I have been staying, makes a more limited use of the mudras. Very frequent is the Anjali-mudra, the mudra of veneration, with palms pressed together in front of the body (as in the photographs Lam Pang and Ko Chang). Representations of the Enlightened Buddha would show the Abhaya-mudra, symbolising the absence of fear by using one or two hands, with palms turned towards the spectator (as in the photograph Ra Yong); the gesture of predication, Vitaka-mudra, also a symbol of perfection and eternity; the gesture of compassion and sincerity, Varada-mudra, which is, in India, the mudra of Avalokiteshvara who visits the dead, letting flow from his hand through this gesture the water of life which grants them resurrection; the gesture of predication of the Sacred Doctrine, Dharmachakra-mudra (the photograph Mandalay); or the Buddha's taking the earth as his testimony, Bhumishparsa-mudra.

Learning about the mudras and observing their use in religious practise made me think about earlier studies on the sign-language of the deaf, which I followed in Paris, at the beginning of the 70ies, with Alfredo Corrado's International Visual Theatre. This was certainly the first motivation to use the mudras in photography. Then, in the process of working, I was intrigued seeing how naturally these gestures came to most of the models I wanted to make a portrait of. They didn't always know the complex and somewhat esoteric meaning of the mudras; but they certainly had seen them before and recognized their context. Taking the portrait of a person is sort of a ceremony; in this case, it came quite close to an exercise of meditation.

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